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**When Men Were Men: Masculinity and Memory
in Turn-of-the-Millennium Cinema**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the imbrications of memory and masculinity in screen culture at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Key works in memory studies from this period argue that remembering and forgetting are complex practices informed by psychological discourses (for example, the debates over recovered memory), cultural and media industries (most notably, the news and popular entertainment industries), and commemorative practices (such as the rituals around Remembrance Day). These factors heavily influence how memory shapes both personal and social identity, and this thesis marshals these insights to explain how key film and television texts at the turn of the millennium remember the (imagined) past of masculinity. Many Hollywood productions of the era feature male protagonists beset by problems of memory and identity (including pathologies such as amnesia and post-traumatic stress disorder), and this thesis argues that in these works, nostalgic desires for lost masculinity have been supplanted by more traumatic modes of memory, ones which provide more critical and conflicted perspectives on both memory and masculinity. These more sophisticated representations demonstrate how the much vaunted contemporary crisis of masculinity is in fact a crisis of male reflexivity, as men struggle to come to terms with their loss of a transcendent or universal subjectivity and its replacement with a specific gendered identity that must compete for recognition within an increasingly pluralistic culture.

Declaration

This is to certify that:

- (i) the thesis comprises only my original work to the PhD,
- (ii) due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used,
- (iii) the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

James A. McCormack

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Introduction

Masculinity and Memory at Millennium's End

Throughout *Synecdoche, New York* (Charlie Kaufman, 2008), Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) faces a barrage of dire and baffling affronts to his manhood: his wife Adele Lack (Catherine Keener) leaves him for a woman; his daughter Olive (Sadie Goldstein) mocks him in her diary, claiming that Adele's new lover is a better father than he ever was; his second wife Claire (Michelle Williams) tells him that he smells like he is menstruating; and, finally, Cotard's position as director of the play that synecdochically stands in for his life is usurped by the ageing housecleaner/actress Ellen Bascomb/Millicent Weems (Dianne Wiest), whose final direction for Cotard is the command "Die".

Kaufman's directorial debut develops the surreal tendencies of his earlier screenplays, representing an artist's attempt to stage a theatrical production of his life; it is a play that grows in size and duration until it takes over Cotard's actual life and the line between life and representation is hopelessly blurred. Figures from Cotard's life become actors in his play, and the actors in his play intrude on his (ever-diminishing) life outside the play. Throughout the film, conventional rules of temporality and causality are discarded: a month seems to pass during a single breakfast; a woman lives for years in a house that is on fire; a child moves overseas and leaves behind a diary which somehow is continuously updated with new details of her life. Cotard's attempts to restage the events of his life result not just in baffling or incomplete representations, but ultimately, a loss of authorial control, as the performers of his memories begin directing Cotard, rather than the other way round. Near the film's end, Cotard comes to a realisation about his doomed solipsistic production, and how he can finally turn it around; as he explains, "I know how to do it now ... none of these people is an extra. They're all the leads of their own stories. They have to be given their due."

Cotard's travails and eventual epiphany represent, in a surreal nutshell, the crisis of masculinity in contemporary American culture.¹ Alienated from traditional family roles

¹ Before proceeding, some comments on the terminology used in this thesis are warranted. Firstly, I have resisted the temptation to use scare quotes around the phrases *masculinity in crisis* or *crisis of masculinity*, despite my belief that both phrases are often used in tendentious, alarmist, or imprecise

and plagued by sexual anxiety, Cotard looks back at his life trying to see where it all went wrong and hoping that some meaning can be salvaged from the wreckage. The problem that Cotard encounters is not so much that his memory is unreliable, but that it is partial and incoherent; his recollections distorted by fantasy, guilt and desire, Cotard finds only the meagre redemption of a too-late realisation of the limited and incomplete nature of his perspective. Cotard's belated recognition is what makes him such an emblematic figure for contemporary masculinity; for "like it or not, men today must deal, on some level with [their] gender as a problematic construct rather than as a natural, taken-for-granted reality" (Messner 1997, 2).

This thesis explores the imbrications of memory and masculinity in recent screen culture. Analysing how this newfound gender reflexivity is represented in some seminal screen texts of the period, this project asks how the "old" or non-reflexive masculinity is remembered, the golden age "when men were men." Exploring how contemporaneous crises of memory illuminate the turn-of-the-millennium crisis of masculinity, this thesis ponders the recent cinematic obsession with men's nostalgia and trauma and analyses the ways that changes to our understanding of individual and cultural memory have impacted our understanding of the past, present, and future of masculinity. Consider, for example, an iconic popular study of masculinity in crisis from the end of the twentieth century. The feminist journalist Susan Faludi (1999) begins *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* with a rather saccharine vignette about a special night in the life of a boy from nearly forty years earlier. It is a nostalgic tale from the dawn of America's Space Age, the story of "a boy in bed pretending to sleep, waiting for his father ... [who] has promised to reveal to the son a miraculous inheritance: the transit of an artificial star" (1). The 1960 launch of America's first communication satellite, *The Echo*—massive and luminous, yet incredibly fragile—

ways (see the discussion on pages 10-14 below). My reservations about such term are, I hope, readily inferred without recourse to such punctuation or to descriptors such as "alleged" or "so-called".

In a similar vein, the terms *men* and *masculinity* are almost invariably used in this thesis as descriptions of white, heterosexual, cisgendered men and masculinity, respectively. Even more specifically, as the representations under consideration in this thesis originate from Hollywood, the men and masculinity being discussed are of a notably American character, though some of the insights have relevance for men and masculinity in the Anglosphere and the West more generally.

serves as her metaphor for the destiny of the boys who would be middle-aged men by the century's end (2). Despite the Cold War anxieties that marked their boyhoods, an age of American prosperity and technological primacy was on its way, as *The Echo*,

floating one thousand miles above the earth, became a remote point of triangulation connecting one generation of men to the next, and a visual marker of vaulting technological power and progress to be claimed in the future by every baby boom boy. The men of the fathers' generation had "won" the world and now they were giving it to their sons (Faludi 1999, 4).

Or at least that was the plan, according to Faludi. How did American men end up "stiffed" and "betrayed," as the title and subtitle of Faludi's bestseller described the situation?

Faludi's nostalgic vignette illustrates two key points: first, that masculinity generally only becomes a subject of attention at moments of crisis, and, secondly, the representation of this crisis invariably involves practices of memory, particularly nostalgia for a simpler gender order and/or recollection of an event or development that is perceived to have traumatised men and severed them from what they perceive to be their rightful patrimony. The contrast sketched by Faludi between a lost golden age of endless opportunity and the bitter and jaded present day from which it is recalled provides the perfect example of political nostalgia. In recent years, a number of cultural theorists have represented dominant groups' resistance to social change as a form of political nostalgia or melancholia, signifying a group's postlapsarian yearning for a golden age or a failure to mourn properly and thus work through its real or imagined sense of loss (Brock and Truscott 2012, 318).² Likewise, discussions of the

² In their article, Brock and Truscott (2012) argue that there are significant differences between melancholia and nostalgia, despite the conflation of the two terms in many analyses of "posttransition societies" (318). While Brock and Truscott aim to delineate the divergences between the two terms in their readings of certain cultural expressions of memory in post-apartheid South Africa (which they argue is melancholic) and in post-unification Germany (which they read as nostalgic), I do not draw such a rigid distinction between the two modes and consider both terms as descriptions of states of pathological fixation on the past and withdrawal from present day concerns. In the chapters that follow, the distinctions that I draw between melancholia and nostalgia derive mainly from the vernacular uses of the two terms—melancholia being a more or less pathological reaction by an individual to some form of past loss (cf Freud 1915; Leader 2008), while nostalgia being the fond recollection of lost times, in particular a golden age whose boundaries are drawn by shared (cultural or historical) memory (cf Mannheim 1972; Wilson 2005).

contemporary crisis of masculinity, especially in mainstream journalism, have often defined men's past nostalgically, as a golden age of comfortably fixed gender roles distant from the uncertain ground occupied by men today. A complex and contestable term, nostalgia in its original sense meant "homesickness," and understanding nostalgia in such a way requires understanding what is meant by the "home" (*nostos*) for which the nostalgic subject aches (*algia*). More than just a place of residence, *home* is a site of affection, familiarity, and belonging, a place associated with feelings of emotional security. As Rita Felski (2000) has noted, "home is not just a geographical destination, but a resonant metaphysical symbol" (86). The "home" that the nostalgic aches for is not really a place or a time, but a feeling of stability and belonging. The ultimate object of nostalgic desire is a return to a time when such desire was not necessary. Returning to childhood is so appealing to the nostalgic because in mentally returning to the past, he or she imagines the paradise of having so little past to yearn for, so few failures and regrets to weigh on his or her mind.

Masculinity and memory—two keywords of recent screen and cultural studies debates and two major fascinations of recent Hollywood film—are closely intertwined cultural topoi, then, in part because the contemporary crisis of masculinity is in many ways a conflict over the current state of masculinity versus its (imagined) status in the past. Another way of putting this is that an almost ubiquitous aspect of contemporary masculinity studies is a professed fascination with the strange new era in which today's men find themselves, and a (sometimes nostalgic) look back at how men and masculinity were perceived in earlier eras. John MacInnes (1998), for example, begins his study *The End of Masculinity* with a reconsideration of Simone de Beauvoir's comment that "a man would never set out to write a book on the peculiar situation of the human male" (de Beauvoir 1953, 15). Nearly fifty years later, MacInnes (1998, 1) observes, there is no shortage of men doing just that, and masculinity studies "has emerged as a discipline onto itself" (Traister 2000, 274). The implication is that half a century or so ago, men knew what it meant to be a man, but something, it seems, has changed.

While in recent screen and cultural studies research nostalgia's critical reputation has to some degree been recuperated, by and large it still retains its conventional meaning of uncritical adoration of the past, or of an aspect or era of the past (Boym

2001; Cook 2005; Wilson 2005). It is sometimes said that we look back at the past with rose tinted lenses, but perhaps the best optical analogy for nostalgia is the cinematic soft focus, a framing of the past that blurs details, smooths rough edges, and obscures unsightly blemishes. In fact, both still and moving photography are common metaphors for memory (Draaisma 2000). In his book on childhood memories, Karl Sabbagh (2009) succinctly recaps a common version of this analogy:

When we listen to people's memories, not just from childhood but describing the events of last week or yesterday, the common-sense attitude is to treat them as if the teller was replaying a videotape of the events. It can certainly seem like that, if you are the narrator. You project the pictures and sounds onto an internal screen in your head and describe what you "see" (10).

Yet, as Sabbagh (2009) adds, "all modern research into memory reveals that this idea is wrong" (10).³ Experimental psychologists have for decades demonstrated that individual memory does not work as a sort of recording machine (e.g., a video camera or computer) capturing traces of an individual's past, retrieving a particular childhood memory from its storage place in a particular part of the brain (Sabbagh 2009, 27; Loftus 1988, 27; Clancy 2009, 69). Instead, beginning with the work of Frederic Bartlett and Cyril Burt (1933), psychological researchers have shown that remembering can only take place with the use of certain schemata to aid or structure recollection. Individual memory, therefore, works through a process of reconstruction, that is, a view of the mind that not only unsettles common sense surities about memory, but consequently, conventional wisdom about consciousness and the inviolable singularity of the self or soul (Sabbagh 2009, 27; Clancy 2009, 69).

Even the rosiest views of the past, then, are not examples of nostalgia, but rather, of post-nostalgia, a term in which the prefix *post-* (as in *post-modernism*, *post-feminism*, *post-humanism* or *post-patriarchy*) signifies not a definitive break but "a moment of

³ Similarly, Susannah Radstone (2010) points to a scene from *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber, 2004) in which the paramnesia-stricken protagonist Evan (Ashton Kuchter) undergoes "recovered memory" counselling, and his therapist instructs him that his memory is "like a movie. You can pause, rewind or slow down any details you wish" (325).

historical and conceptual crisis, a moment that calls the hegemony of the governing order into question” (Stacey 1998, 66). The point is not so much that nostalgia blurs the clear photo or video that captures the past, but that all forms of remembering, individual or collective, are acts of bricolage, assembled from other memories and moulded by the memories of others and by the inherited cultural scripts and schemata that structure all narratives. Recognition of the reconstructive character of memory affords us the opportunity to ask how remembering men insert themselves into (screen) narratives about the past, what those narratives omit or forget, and how these narratives help bind men into a shared identity. Recalling long-lived debates in screen studies about the relationship between film and reality, the tension between these tendencies toward either recording or (re)constructing the past makes film an ideal aesthetic form for exploring the crisis moments in which the “natural” experience of masculinity becomes disturbed.

These moments are especially evident in the cinema of the late 1990s and early 2000s, an era in which a number of commercially and critically significant films show a pronounced obsession with memory and masculinity. The millennial combination of postlapsarian malaise and dystopian foreboding are clearly on display in the screen culture of the era. In works such as *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (Jim Jarmusch, 1999), and *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999–2007), protagonists explicitly articulate a sense of dread that a curtain is closing on an era and a fear that nothing secure or promising is poised to take its place. The turn-of-the-millennium period takes in the last years of the so-called “long nineties” (the period from the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 to the terrorist attacks against America in September 2001) and the early years of the War on Terror (Wegner 2009).⁴

There is a broad consensus among political and cultural historians that the 1990s was characterised by the ascendance of identity politics and a consequent backlash by

⁴ Interestingly, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which occur almost exactly in the middle of this historical period, are for the most part absent (at least in explicit form) from the film history of the period. The major Hollywood fiction films about 9/11—*World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006), *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006), and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (Stephen Daldry, 2011)—would not be released until at least five years after the attack. Arguably, the effects of September 11 registered on a symptomatic level in screen texts of the period, especially in the violence and psychological trauma represented in *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) and *Flags of Our Fathers* (Clint Eastwood, 2006).

white men who felt threatened by the demands of feminist, civil rights, and LGBTI activists (Pfeil 1995; Robinson 2000; Cole 2007; Wegner 2009; Shary 2013). At the same time, the post-Cold War consolidation of a post-Fordist globalised economic order dealt a blow to the economic privileges and prospects of both middle-class and working-class American men, who faced stiffer competition for jobs from their female compatriots and from the cheaper factory labour of the developing world (Pfeil 1995; Faludi 1999; Wegner 2009; Rosin 2012; Shary 2013). The spectre of an angry white male backlash haunted the turn of the millennium as men became increasingly aware of their gendered identity and sought recognition of their claims to psychological and/or socioeconomic victimhood (Pfeil 1995; Faludi 1999; Cole 2007).

The films under consideration in this thesis were released between 1997 and 2006 and bear the symptomatic traces of the feelings of male resentment and loss engendered by the upheaval of the 1990s. The turn of the millennium is a period that has already received significant critical attention; most pertinently, two edited collections of scholarly essays focussed on “millennial” screen culture have already appeared—Amresh Sinha and Terence McSweeney’s (2011) *Millennial Cinema: Memory in Global Film* and Timothy Shary’s (2013) *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*. The similarity of these two “millennial” titles underscores the centrality of both masculinity and memory during this recent period, each drawing a significant amount of critical attention but up to now no sustained consideration of the way that the orbits of these two spheres might overlap or intersect. This thesis provides a corrective to this oversight, contributing original research to the field of screen masculinity studies by opening new lines of enquiry with roots in contemporaneous developments in memory studies. Put another way, this thesis asks questions about a perceived crisis of masculinity in American culture and its relation to a cycle of turn-of-the-millennium films conspicuously obsessed with memory. How does cinema offer up this crisis of masculinity to audiences for critical contemplation? How do different films mobilise different modes or practices of memory to contemplate this crisis or crises of masculinity? More specifically, how has the nostalgic mode that has been a perennial characteristic of men’s reckoning with the past—their desire to return to a time “when men were men”—been supplemented or displaced by traumatic modes (a question of particular relevance given the centrality of trauma as a cultural

keyword within the period in question)? Furthermore, given memory's role in binding individuals into shared group identities, how do the representations of memory in these films illuminate men's sense of themselves as men, as members of particular generational cohorts, and as fathers, husbands, sons, and lovers?

Looked At, Looking Within: Sexuality, Reflexivity, and Masculinity in Crisis

Before continuing, however, I should acknowledge the problematic nature of the concept of a "crisis of masculinity," a phrase that rather controversially suggests that men's status as the dominant gender is currently under threat. Some feminist critics have noted that the siege mentality associated with such a "crisis" can for men be a useful strategy for maintaining patriarchy. Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1995), for example, argues that "masculinity, however defined, is like capitalism, *always* in crisis. And the real question is how both [capitalism and masculinity] manage to restructure, refurbish, and resurrect themselves for the next historical turn" (70). Tania Modleski (1991) goes further, emphasising that crisis is in fact integral to patriarchal rule, calling on feminists "to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it" (7). Taking a fairly different approach to the matter, R. W. Connell (2005) argues against the notion of "a crisis of masculinity" in favour of the claim that there are "crisis tendencies ... in the modern gender order" (84). As she explains:

As a theoretical term "crisis" presupposes a coherent system of some kind, which is destroyed or restored by the outcome of the crisis. Masculinity ... is not a crisis in that sense. It is, rather, a configuration of practice *within* a system of gender relations. We cannot logically speak of the crisis of a configuration; rather we might speak of its disruption or its transformation. We can, however, logically speak of the crisis of a gender order as a whole, and of its tendencies toward crisis (84).

Whether we understand this contemporary "crisis in gender" (Magnuson 2016, 2) in the popular sense of a crisis of (or in) masculinity—as well as "a crisis in femininity"

(Magnuson 2016, 19 n. 2)—or in the more academically rigorous sense of a crisis of legitimisation in the gender order, the instability referenced is indicative of a perceived disjuncture between how masculinity is currently experienced and its (perceived) state in the past. Or, to state it somewhat differently, a key symptom of contemporary disruptions to the gender order is a belief that many of the traits that have traditionally and somewhat stereotypically been associated with hegemonic masculinity—aggressiveness, emotional reticence, and rational instrumentality—are increasingly shifting from one side of our culture’s moral ledger to the other, so that “masculine qualities [that] were once seen as normal and good ... are now seen as politically and morally wrong ...” (Craib 1987, 724). In criminology and other social sciences, for example, masculinity is no longer an ineffable natural state, but a problem to be tackled (Walklate 1995; Bhabha 1995; Giroux 2001). Masculinity clearly isn’t what it used to be, back in the days when men were men.

By surveying the ways in which memory and masculinity intersect in turn-of-the-millennium film and television texts, this project aims to bring together insights from both screen studies and masculinity studies. The latter area of enquiry—an interdisciplinary complex encompassing such diverse fields as the humanities (film, literary and cultural studies), the social sciences (sociology and criminology), and public health—grew out of Second Wave feminism, a movement that “not only gave voice to women’s concerns, it challenged all assumptions about the gender system and raised a series of problems about men” (Connell 2000, 3). In response to the struggle for women’s liberation, a number of all-male groups formed organisations whose gender politics ranged across the spectrum from anti-feminist backlash groups to pro-feminist organisations that were formed with the explicit aim of contributing toward the fight for gender equality (Connell 2000, 3).

What distinguished these men’s movements from earlier social mobilisations such as the Victorian era advocacy for “Muscular Christianity” is the explicit ways in which many of the late twentieth-century explorations of masculinity centred on men’s self-conscious investigations of their gendered selves, part of the larger project of reflexivity that is a key facet of late modernity (Giddens 1992). Masculinity had traditionally been:

seen in the larger culture as the unmarked term, that is, the presumably neutral site of authority on the symbolic level. Femininity is symbolically defined and evaluated by absence, as that which does not have masculinity, which does not embody the phallus, which is the other (Magnuson 2016, 19).

This “semiotic definition of masculinity” rejects essentialist and normative models of masculinity in favour of a view of masculinity as a social-symbolic construct in a relational and culturally contingent configuration of genders (Magnuson 2016, 19), a view reflected in the increasing reflexivity of screen masculinity at the turn of the millennium (Greven 2009).

A major reason for this new level of self-consciousness lies in the increased cultural visibility of homosexuality during the period. The high-profile political activism of the Queer Nation organisation (founded in 1990) campaigned against homophobic violence and other forms of discrimination against LGBTI people. Contemporaneously, North American and British independent cinema featured a number of films with gay themes, which became a filmmaking movement that the critic B. Ruby Rich would dub “The New Queer Cinema” (B. Rich 1992). The decade also witnessed the increasing significance of a more “ornamental” (Faludi 1999) mode of masculinity, the consolidation of the identity known as the “metrosexual” (Simpson 1994a).

This self-consciousness, in short, is part and parcel of a cultural movement in which masculinity—which was often assumed to be singular and unchanging—becomes mutable, and therefore, potentially plural. It is now necessary, as R.W. Connell (2000) has pointed out, to speak of a range of *masculinities*, even within a particular culture, rather than a monolithic and trans-historical essence of man (10). In her discussion of masculinities, Connell (2000) cites the range of attitudes toward sex acts between men across eras and cultures as proof of the contingency of definitions of “true” masculinity (10). The example is particularly apt for our purposes, not least because recent idealised or hegemonic masculinities have to varying degrees felt the influence of the increased public visibility of homosexual men since the 1970s.⁵ More than one commentator has

⁵ Connell (2000), who coined the phrase “hegemonic masculinity” to designate the type of masculinity that is most “honoured or desired” within a given culture, explains that while there may be numerous masculinities, they “do not sit side-by-side like dishes on a smorgasbord. There are definite social

observed that the contemporary crisis of masculinity being felt by straight white men is largely due to a more widespread circulation of erotic images of men, visual representations, which, by rendering male bodies as “passive, masochistic and desired” have troubled the “active, sadistic and desiring” foundations of male heterosexuality (Simpson 1994b, 4). My focus on visual culture as a privileged discursive realm where the contemporary crisis of masculinity is worked through stems, in part, from this recognition that this crisis is, as Mark Simpson (1994b) puts it (in a deliberate echo of Laura Mulvey [1975/1989]), “a crisis of looking and looked-at-ness” (6). What Simpson calls the “*undifferentiated*” quality or source of this erotic gaze is particularly threatening to a hegemonic masculinity traditionally buttressed by homophobic disavowal; the admiring gaze turned on this “passive, masochistic and desired” male object “might be female *or* male, hetero *or* homo” (Simpson 1994b, 6). This reversal—or to put it another way, this shift from being the desirer to the desired—is potentially troubling enough to trigger a crisis of masculinity. The 1990s media sensation of the “metrosexual”—an identity category codified by Simpson (1994a)—served as a heuristic for understanding the dissolving boundaries between virility and effeminacy, and between athlete and male sex object. This tendency was crystallised in the figure of English footballer David Beckham—surely the Platonic form of the Nineties celebrity metrosexual—who scored awe-inspiring goals, dabbled in cross-dressing, and welcomed the approving gazes of gay male fans (Simpson 2003).

This rise in “ornamental” masculinity (Faludi 1999) helped bring about a dissipation of the heretofore solid but invisible white male identity, a newfound “identity deficit” that white men experience as a form of “double-consciousness” (131). The phrase “double-consciousness” itself is particularly interesting vis-à-vis memory, as it is an archaic clinical term for the post-traumatic splitting of a subject into multiple personalities; in other words, “double-consciousness” is an earlier term for what clinicians at the end of the twentieth century would call “Multiple Personality” or “Dissociative Identity Disorder”, a syndrome widely held to be triggered by one or more traumatic events (Hacking 1995). In a metaphorical sense, the term “double-

relations between them. Especially, there are relations of hierarchy, for some masculinities are dominant while others are subordinated or marginalised” (10).

consciousness” is most closely associated with the influential writings of African-American intellectual W.E.B. DuBois (1903); double-consciousness would later become a metaphor for the alienation experienced by any social group whose self-representations must vie with externally produced and disseminated representations of themselves (Omi and Winant 1994; Nealon 2000). As DuBois (1903) famously suggested, “double-consciousness” describes the experience of perceiving one’s identity as a social or cultural “problem” for others—“Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question ... How does it feel to be a problem?” (3). The (implicit or explicit) framing of masculinity as a problem begs the question of whether masculinity is or can be anything *besides* a problem? In other words, is there anything redeemable or beneficial about masculinity, or would we be better off without it altogether? Furthermore, is it possible for men to rid themselves of masculinity, and if it is, how would they go about doing so?⁶

In much popular writing on gender, masculinity (if not men themselves) is represented as a sort of toxin or defect, at times with the implication that the social order was running its course and on its way to correcting this blunder of the species. The necessity and desirability of men as intimate partners for women and fathers for women’s children became a high-profile subject of speculation in work such as Hanna Rosin’s (2012) bestseller *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women*, a work which followed earlier academic writing on what sociologists and theorists of gender called “post-patriarchal” societies. Significantly, the term “post-patriarchal” need not refer to an egalitarian gender order, as if the patriarchy had been successfully overthrown (Ehrenreich 1995); instead, the term describes a worldwide crisis for patriarchal order, with men abdicating paternal responsibilities (though not, in most cases, their social privileges) and the growing obsolescence of the father-led household as the default model for family organisation (Kaplan 1998; Stacey 1998). As Barbara Ehrenreich (1995) observes, “for more and more people in the world, this particular kind of relationship is over—a memory, a thing of the past” (285).

⁶ I am leaving aside (for the moment at least) the matter of masculinity in women, a topic insightfully analysed by Judith Halberstam (1998), among others.

The Contemporary Culture of Memory

Yet to speak of either masculinity or patriarchy as memories, we must first clarify what we mean when we speak of memory, a far from straightforward matter. In his book *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, Allan Young (1995) notes that “in everyday usage, the term ‘memory’ has three meanings: the mental *capacity* to retrieve stored information and to perform learned mental operations, such as long division; the semantic, imagistic, or sensory *content* of such recollections; and the *location* where these recollections are stored” (4). Young’s observations indicate how even outside clinical or philosophical contexts memory is an especially complex topic. “Memory” is frequently said to be at work in such diverse activities as learned habits (riding a bicycle is commonly cited as an example of an acquired skill that is never forgotten), recounting significant life events, or “flashing back” to a traumatic event (Bal 1999, vii-viii). Memory is the key to our sense of self, enabling the individual to unify discrete events into a coherent life narrative (Young 1995, 4).

Stefan Collini (1999) has noted a turn-of-the-millennium fascination with collective memory in Western nations:

commemoration fever now seems to be endemic in advanced societies. ... Scarcely a month, let alone a year, passes without our being “reminded” that some round number of years has elapsed since an event or birth or death which we are urged to celebrate. Anxieties about oblivion play a part here, as do the needs of the “culture industries” to create self-justifying activity. But above all, as more and more aspects of our way of life appear to become matters of choice ... so we look to the past for given, inherited connections that can help to provide a sense of identity (38).

Collini’s diagnosis of the cause of this fever is perspicacious, and especially relevant to the concerns of this thesis. Collective remembering seems to play a similar role to personal memory: whereas the latter unifies experiences into the narrative of the self, the former secures national (or other group) identity through an appeal to a shared

past. On the collective as well as the personal level, memory tells us who we were, and in doing so, also tells us who we are. Our cultural fascination with memory at the present stems from anxieties and confusions about contemporary identity, specifically the various (national, cultural, gender) groups we live in, and the proliferation of competing versions of the past at play. As Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (1996) put it, “when memory is not in question, neither is identity” (xxii).

Memory’s influence over us, however, is even more complicated than this, for a culture’s ideas about memory change over time—“like everything else, memory has a history”—and these changes shape our personal memories and therefore our experience of ourselves (Olick et al 2011, 6). For example, studies into hysteria in the nineteenth-century inaugurated a new discourse in which traumatic memories could be involuntarily stored in a person’s psyche and remain there inaccessible to conscious recall—and (perhaps because of this inaccessibility) profoundly damage the sufferer who underwent the traumatic experience (Freud 1896; Young 1995; Hacking 1995). This shift is partly responsible for the exalted status of memory in recent years, for in its elusiveness memory holds an unprecedented sway over contemporary culture. As the historian and philosopher of science Ian Hacking (1995) has noted, in contemporary culture memory has become synonymous with the soul.⁷

We live, then, in what we might call (for lack of a better name) a contemporary *Culture of Memory*, one distinguished firstly by the extent to which memory has become central to understanding our present as well as our past (Miztal 2003, 2). The prevalence of memory in contemporary culture is documented in Kerwin Lee Klein’s (2000) influential article, “On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse.” Opening with a rather arch description of what he calls “the memory industry,” which Klein explains “ranges from the museum trade to the legal battles over repressed memory and on to the market for academic books and articles that invoke *memory* as a key word,” Klein’s survey of significant topoi provides a fitting overview of the major contexts and controversies influencing recent representations of masculinity in screen

⁷ Freud (1899) is especially insightful about the baffling but significant ways that memory defines us, noting how apparently meaningless memories from childhood can be “screen memories” that conceal much more significant events and phantasies from the period. More attention is given to the matter of screen memories in chapter eight of this thesis.

culture (127). Especially interesting in his formulation is his inclusion of the traumatic character of memory discourse as well as memory's commemorative and archival profiles; for another distinctive trait of memory over the last few decades has been a preoccupation with psychical trauma as a privileged mode of knowing and speaking about the past (Seltzer 2013; W. Brown 1995).

The attention given by Klein and others to the centrality of trauma in contemporary understandings of memory is one indicator of the fact that the archive model of memory has largely been superseded. The cultural fixation on trauma, as well as advances in scientific understandings of memory, means that memory is no longer viewed as "a set of static records in cold storage.... a place where dead parts of the past sit passive until recalled to full presence" (Sutton 1998, 1-2). Instead, remembering should be seen as something more than the initial registration and later retrieval of a trace. To the extent that writing is still a model for memory, it is far from a straightforward act of inscription and is more akin to Freud's (1924) "Mystic Writing-Pad". This toy or novelty, still widely available almost a century later, registers memory in such a way as to circumvent the disadvantages of more traditional memory supplements such as pen and paper or chalk and slate. Freud notes that the problem with pen on paper is that while one is able to obtain a permanent record of a trace, there is only a limited amount of "receptive surface" available; while the problem with chalk and slate is that easy erasure means unlimited capacity for registering, but with no "retention of permanent traces" (226). The "Mystic Writing-Pad" gets around these issues through "writing" with a stylus on a joined set of three inscription-ready surfaces: a top-most layer of celluloid, a middle layer of wax-covered paper, and a "slab of brown resin or wax" at the bottom (227). When the user wishes to remove "writing" from the uppermost layer, he or she does so by lifting the top sheets from the bottom slate and the previously made markings disappear, though "the permanent trace of what was written is retained upon the wax slab itself" (229).

For Freud, the "Mystic Writing-Pad" provides an excellent metaphor for the way memory works through an uncanny hybrid of storage and erasure, with "one hand writing upon the surface of the Mystic Writing-Pad while another periodically raises its covering sheets from the wax slab" (231), and the permanent traces of what appear to be lost actually remaining "legible in suitable lights" (229). Memory is uncanny in the

sense that it occupies that vertiginous space that Freud identifies as both familiar and unfamiliar. No longer evident as a trace, or as a record in an archive, memory is now a liminal zone marked by indistinct and shifting borders—a field of fluctuating presence/absence and remembering/forgetting, the apotheosis of which is the contemporary obsession with trauma as the event that returns in memory to wound because it was not (fully) registered when first experienced (J Brooks 2001).

Memory's shifting borders, moreover, are also evident in the uncertain provenance and character of both personal and social memories. We may speak of personal and social memory, but memory is neither *exclusively* the property of individuals nor that of groups. While it seems straightforward that collective memories are the sum or accretion of personal memories, it is also the case that personal memories are structured and completed by the collective entities (family, nation, etc) of which the individual is a member. These indistinct boundaries between remembering and forgetting and between the individual and the social mean that memory is an especially rich site for cultural contestation. Susan Sontag (2003/2013) underscored the contentious character of collective memory when she argued that "strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory"; rather, "all memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds" (76-77).

Memory in Cinema

Our memories, then, are indexes of our values and identity, and are mobilised as rhetorical figures to posit the coherence and viability of a shared collective identity. Sontag's comments were presented in relation to war photojournalism, but they are very relevant to fictional narrative cinema. All types of cinematic "framing" (meaning here not just the actual composition of shots, but the creation, moulding and promotion of cinematic texts from preproduction to release and viewing) can be put at the service of dictating how "the past" (meaning either actually occurring historical events, or temporally anterior events within a purely fictional narrative) is remembered. Indeed, since cinema is an art form whose most characteristic feature is its aptitude at

representing the protean nature of temporality—while watching a film, time passes before our very eyes, in an ever-unfolding “present” in which “the past” can, via flashbacks, at any point intrude—screen narratives seem distinctly suited to representations of memory (Grainge 2003).

The topic of memory in cinema is necessarily dauntingly expansive. An initial distinction, however, can be made between two different types of relationships cinema can have with memory. Roughly speaking, we can distinguish between, on the one hand, films that are in some sense about memory (particularly about collective/historical memory), such as those films that have dealt with such historical episodes as the Holocaust or the U.S. Civil War, and those films that make the representation of the act of individual remembrance central to their narratives through flashbacks or other narrative devices. The first of these groups would include such works as *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989) and *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993). Of course, these two groupings are in no way mutually exclusive—Clint Eastwood's two recent films about World War II, for instance, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (both 2006), both used multiple flashbacks to represent how different aspects of the War in the Pacific were remembered. This thesis, however, takes as its focus the second type of film, especially ones which use one or more flashbacks to represent remembrance within a film's diegesis.

As such, a review of the critical literature on memory and film necessarily begins with Maureen Turim's (1989) study, *Flashbacks in Film*, the first scholarly monograph on the use of analeptic sequences in narrative cinema. Beginning with the flashback's first appearances in the earliest days of silent cinema, Turim traces the history of the flashback's use in cinema, touching on milestones in the development of the technique such as its use in film noir and in the mid-century modernist art cinema of auteurs such as Alain Resnais and Akira Kurosawa. Turim also notes that use of the flashback tended to mark not just individual memory but historical or collective memory as well, as remembrance of shared historical events could be focalised through a particular character within a film's diegesis.

A significant point about Turim's work is that it preceded the academic boom in memory studies, that is, the scholarly fascination with individual and collective memory that began to flourish in the mid to late 1990s. This preoccupation with

memory was triggered by two main phenomena of the period: the fiftieth anniversaries of Second World War events (most notably, the liberation of Auschwitz, the Normandy Invasion, and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) as well as heated media, clinical and academic controversies over the repression and recovery of traumatic memories. In this thesis, I argue that it is significant for contemporary men that both sets of triggers—the World War II anniversaries and the recovered memory controversies—put masculinity at the centre of remembrance's celebrations and controversies.

The impact of the second of these triggers—the controversies over the repression and recovery of traumatic memories—manifested itself in particularly emphatic ways in narrative cinema. In the years since Turim published her study in 1989, the use of flashbacks seems to have become markedly more ornate. Not only did the modernist flashbacks associated with Alain Resnais increasingly become the norm rather than the exception, use of the flashback also seemed increasingly to strain narrative transparency and otherwise complicate the traditionally linear storytelling style of Classic Hollywood. In other words, the cueing of flashbacks through the use of dissolves, anchoring voice-overs and the like was minimised, and temporally anterior sequences seemed to intrude without warning on the “present” of the (involuntarily) remembering focalising character. Moreover, a slew of films since the mid-1990s have featured increasingly complex narrative structures that manipulated *fabula-szuhyet* relations in an attempt to distort narrative temporality, in many cases in an attempt to replicate the partiality and unreliability of individual memory. Films such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenabar, 2001) experimented with achronological plotting and/or twist endings that forced viewers into a major re-evaluation of their previous understandings of the film texts.

Such tendencies were widely commented on in both academic and popular critical writing. Marsha Kinder (2002) argued that films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997) were examples of “database narratives” because of the way they foregrounded the arbitrary processes of selection in their narrative construction, while Allan Cameron (2008) offered the template of the “modular narrative” as a means of explaining the recent proliferation of complex non-linear

narratives within mainstream cinema. In a similar vein, Volker Frenz (2005) cited films such as *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) as cinematic examples of what would be called “unreliable narration” in literary fiction, while Jonathan Eig (2003) and Thomas Elsaesser (2009) saw such films as “mindfuck” and “mind-game” films, respectively.

Psychoanalytical writings on memory have provided another theoretical source for research on memory in film studies. Freud’s essays “Screen Memories” (1899), “Repeating, Remembering, and Working Through” (1914), and “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’” (1924) in particular provide relevant insights into Freud’s ideas on the conscious and unconscious processes of remembering and forgetting. In some ways the most significant of his work on the subject is “Mourning and Melancholia” (1915), in which Freud argues that melancholia was a kind of pathological mourning. Psychoanalytical research into individual experiences of loss has informed much critical work in film studies and gender studies, inspiring work on masculinity in the films of Martin Scorsese (Nicholls 2004) and the performances of Jeremy Irons (Nicholls 2012), while the queer theorist Judith Butler (1999) found in Freud’s work on loss and incorporation an explicatory narrative for how the human subject renounces desire for the same sex parent but incorporates that love in a melancholic process of gender identification.

There is certainly no shortage of melancholia in turn-of-the-millennium cinema. Films such as *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) underscored the numbing apathy at the heart of white-collar men’s lives, while the protagonists of works such as *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne, 1996) and the HBO series *The Sopranos* spoke of hardly anything else besides their feelings of loss. Melancholia is often a symptom of a life crisis, a crisis of identity for middle-aged men (or those approaching middle age) who must reconcile the disappointing present they are experiencing with the bright future they imagined in the past. A perhaps inevitable response to the spiritual and emotional suffering caused by events and forces beyond a subject’s control, melancholia is an apt keynote for representations of masculinity in an era of instability in the gender order and often plays out in melodramatic narratives that foreground male demands for recognition of their suffering.

For these reasons, Nicholls' (2004) work on male melancholia in the cinema of Martin Scorsese is particularly relevant to my thesis. Nicholls' reading of male melancholia as an experience of alienation stemming from an experience of trauma or loss obviously speaks to recent or contemporary models of cinematic masculinity in which male suffering is articulated through representations of memory. Indeed, Nicholls' suggestion—influenced as my own work is by the claims of Modleski (1991)—that the male melancholic's suffering is an appropriation of feminine loss that is weaponised by men for the battle of the sexes closely parallels my own view that male melancholia/nostalgia functions as a protest against a culture that is becoming more progressive and egalitarian in gender relations.⁸

My approach differs from Nicholls', however, in one important respect. While I am also interested in the various ways in which memory functions as an alibi for the more toxic features of masculinity, my project sites its analysis on other disciplinary terrain. Put succinctly, this thesis, though obviously indebted in places to the work of Freud, is not so much a work of psychoanalytical criticism as a study of representations of masculinity, one that is influenced by recent studies on the sociology of gender and in the recent cultural history of applied psychology and psychoanalysis. Inspired by the more-or-less concurrent rise of the fields of masculinity studies and memory studies at the turn of the millennium, this thesis investigates how this melancholic sensibility has found new outlets in recent cinema. In doing so, it asks how memory functions in certain cultural practices and institutions (e.g., religious belief, war commemoration, popular psychology) to help men make sense of their own masculinities and binds them into a shared gendered identity with other men.

Outline of Chapters

A key hypothesis of this thesis is that when filmmakers wrestle with problems of memory they must (even if only on an unconscious level) represent forgetting as well as remembering. The emphatic distinction between remembering and forgetting is

⁸ See pages 9 and 10 of this Introduction.

misleading, for without forgetting there would be no remembering, as selective focus on what should be remembered necessarily obscures at least as much as it illuminates:

the selective recognition of some things rather than others, and the discerning organisation of those elements so that they can be made present, requires forgetting ... Without forgetting there is only an endless present overwhelmed by the flow of everything all at once (Healy 2008, 9).

Indeed, for many filmmakers who make a point of addressing memory in their work (Christopher Nolan and David Cronenberg are especially good examples), forgetting becomes a key preoccupation, as they interrogate the impossibility and/or undesirability of preserving memory from, or rescuing it from, oblivion.

The contrast between remembering and forgetting that I have been sketching roughly corresponds to the distinction that Svetlana Boym (2001) makes between two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. The former, Boym explains, is the province of reactionary nationalist groups such as those of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and, I would add, of contemporary men who wish to reclaim lost masculinity at a time when they perceive masculinity as being in crisis. Restorative nostalgia is the type that comes to mind when people hear the word "nostalgia": a mindset that has its focus locked on the past, not in the hope of understanding it, but in vain hope of one day living it again, notwithstanding the fact that the object of the restorative nostalgic's yearning is more often a past located in myth rather than in history.

The second type of nostalgia that Boym identifies—reflective nostalgia—is a nostalgia attuned to the passage of time, one that recognises and accepts its inevitability and welcomes the way that "lost time" presents opportunities for reflection on loss and change. This reflective nostalgia aligns with forgetting, because it accepts that forgetting is crucial to remembering; reflective nostalgia acknowledges that there has been much lost to time and that which is lost will always be lost. In gender terms, the two impulses—toward restoration on one hand, and reflection on the other—represent differing responses to the changing world men face. Where the restorative nostalgic sees the crisis in masculinity as a potentially fatal wound, or perhaps an opportunity for more firmly re-entrenching male dominance, the reflective nostalgic is

open to the possibility that a crisis in masculinity might provide an opportunity for a more gender-just world.

The argument in this thesis follows a path from identifying the way that memory can be used to invoke sympathy for the plight of men in their contemporary epoch of crisis, to consideration of how various screen texts struggle with the choice between restoration and reflection. Consideration of this range of responses to the topic of masculinity in crisis involves more than identifying how or to what degree various filmmakers embrace or subvert conservative views on masculinity in their films. Instead, influenced by the “historical materialist” reception studies of Janet Staiger (1992), my readings of these films also consider contextual determinants of meaning that are, strictly speaking, beyond the intentions of the filmmakers and the boundaries of the film texts themselves. Such an approach is particularly necessary for understanding *The Passion of the Christ* (chapter one) and *Lolita* (chapter five), as those films’ meanings cannot readily be extricated from the controversial receptions that they faced and which provided frameworks for how these films should be interpreted.

This thesis explores the imbrications of masculinity and memory in films of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Considering these films as artefacts of a contemporary culture of memory, this thesis argues that paying attention to the specific memory practices of this era and their representation in film reveals that contemporary masculinity is fixated on trauma. Where earlier generations of men could face crises of masculinity with a nostalgic yearning for an era of true masculinity (an era in which men were men), men at the turn of the millennium can find no succour in glancing back at the past, despite a compulsive desire to do so. In a hypermediated, culturally reflexive era, filmmakers have turned memory into a trope, a figure for men’s contemplation of their wounded pasts and uncertain futures.

Understanding these new ways of remembering and forgetting and their relation to the turn-of-the-millennium crisis of masculinity requires understanding traditional views on masculinity and memory as the standard from which these film texts deviate. To that end, the first chapter of this thesis investigates the representations of memory and gender at work in *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004). Gibson’s landmark religious epic is notable not only for its graphic representations of the scourging and

crucifixion of Jesus but also for its mobilisation of a traditional model of memory as an “unforgetting” of the past. This view of memory is put at the service of a naïve religious and gender fundamentalism that is problematised by the other films investigated in this thesis. For example, *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), the subject of chapter two of this thesis, provides the most direct rebuttal of the sort of conservative memoropolitics that animate *The Passion of the Christ*. In contrast to Gibson’s emphasis on “unforgetting”, Nolan’s film underscores the central place that forgetting has in the workings of memory. In doing so, Nolan’s film demonstrates how our relationship to the past is contingent and subjectively grounded rather than founded on objective principles, and how remembering and forgetting can be used to enable men’s self-deception about their gender identity.

Continuing in this vein, chapter three considers Svetlana Boym’s ideas about reflective and restorative nostalgia in the context of the ground-breaking TV drama series *The Sopranos*. Premiering at the start of 1999, David Chase’s series about Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), a mafia don whose severe depression compels him to visit a psychiatrist, began with a mixture of anxiety and melancholia tailor-made for the end of the millennium. The only television series analysed in this thesis, *The Sopranos* warrants special attention as a prime example of how notions of masculinity in crisis have influenced the very form of screen narrative at the turn of the millennium. Tony’s psychological and interpersonal crises register on the formal level in his confinement in the small screen form of the dramatic serial, which taunts him with endlessly deferred closure rather than the glamorous narrative arc of Hollywood cinema, which for Tony becomes an object of “displaced nostalgia,” the longing for a time never experienced firsthand (Vanderbilt 1993, 155). Why, Tony asks, can’t people be more like Classic Hollywood actor Gary Cooper—strong and resilient in the face of adversity, rather than taking refuge in today’s hyper-emotional therapy culture? The work of Tony’s therapist is to move Tony from a restorative to a reflective nostalgia, which requires him to recognise that the past was not always a Golden Age, but an era with its own share of trauma and suffering.

Chapter four focuses on cinematic representations of war commemoration, a particularly rich site for exploring the connections between masculinity and memory. This chapter explores how the private “involuntary commemorations” (Stanley 2000,

240) of war trauma are contrasted with official memory in *Flags of Our Fathers* (Clint Eastwood, 2006). Devoted to deconstructing the American mythology around the World War II Battle of Iwo Jima, the contrast between these two modes of memory is mobilised to stage an encounter between two different generations as part of a way of understanding changes in contemporary discourses of fatherhood.

Chapter five investigates Adrian Lyne's 1997 adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's classic novel *Lolita*, focussing on the film's inclusion (in flashback) of the childhood of the paedophile protagonist Humbert Humbert (Jeremy Irons), an aspect of the source novel that is completely missing from Stanley Kubrick's 1962 adaptation. In the novel, Humbert blames the loss of his first love in adolescence for his sexual fixation on young girls. The film's inclusion of this memory—though it excludes other, equally important glimpses into Humbert's character—underscores the importance of memory in the narrative, at the same time that contemporary cultural debates around sexual abuse and recovered memory made Lyne's film about incest untouchable as a commercial venture. My analysis of Lyne's *Lolita* investigates the film's melancholic representations of masculinity alongside the production's infamously hostile reception to delineate the unstable or critical state of male (hetero-)sexuality at the turn of the millennium.

Chapter six continues my exploration of the imbrications of memory and male desire. Part of a cycle of 1999 films about the contemporary crisis of masculinity, *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) is an especially relevant text for its critical representations of all-male groups and its contemplation of men's victimisation in a patriarchal culture. Drawing on the emotional expressivity characteristic of cinematic melodrama, Anderson suggests that men's traditional fear of intimacy has deformed their sexuality, and the director makes a major achievement in screen representations of gender by turning a critical eye on masculinist politics while at the same time showing sympathy for men who have inherited a toxic strain of masculinity.

Arguably the era's most famous contemplation of masculinity in crisis is *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999). Chapter seven of my thesis sheds new light on this much-discussed film through tracing its relation to individual and social memory, principally through investigating the film's use of confessional discourse. The confession and its various related self-help forms (testimony, witnessing) is a memory practice that binds

the individual to a larger group (e.g., a cult or an organised religion) through the recitation of past experiences that resonate with other members of the group in question. As taciturnity and emotional inexpressivity have long been prized as key attributes of traditional Western masculinity, the need for self-disclosure sits uncomfortably with men's newfound attempt to reclaim a gendered identity. This chapter argues that the (self-)deception that runs through the confessional discourses in *Fight Club* is a symptom of these contradictory impulses, one that becomes especially meaningful when viewed through contemporary discourses of traumatic memory.

Chapter eight continues to address many of the issues explored in the preceding chapter, specifically the questions raised about memory's role in men's sexual and emotional lives. The case study for this chapter is *Spider* (David Cronenberg, 2002), another landmark example of the "mindfuck" (Eig 2003) or "mind-game" (Elsaesser 2009) film. This cycle of film is largely associated with the "twist" or "surprise" ending, and while *Spider* in a certain sense is no exception to this rule, the twist in question does not, as is usually the case, reveal the hero's mental pathology, as his disturbed condition has been apparent from the film's first scene. What the narrative builds to instead is discovery of the precise nature and cause of Clegg's "productive pathology" (Elsaesser 2009), that is, his inability to come to terms with mature male sexuality, a mental pathology represented by the film's unorthodox approach to flashback narration.

Chapter nine, the final chapter of this thesis, explores *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), the Hollywood love story most self-consciously engaged with the role that memory plays in the constitution of romantic relationships. If, as discussed earlier in relation to *Fight Club*, "social memory" is a sort of memory that is catalysed through shared communication about the past, then the dominant social form of the sexual/romantic monogamous relationship is a sort of corpus of social memories constituted through the shared recollections of the two members of the pairing. The breaking up, or disassociation of a couple, can in a sense be likened to a sort of anterograde amnesia; even if the two separated individuals might associate in other capacities—as friends, colleagues or parents to offspring, for example—the relationship becomes, like the hero of *Memento*, unable to "make new memories".

Eternal Sunshine effectively asks what if, following a break-up, a sort of *retrograde* amnesia could be enacted—so that a broken-hearted lover could decide to erase the entire relationship from his or her memory. In doing so the film examines the character of both individual and social memory and in the process illuminates how male fears of emotional expression and romantic commitment are readily identifiable symptoms of the contemporary crisis of masculinity. As in Kaufman's film *Synecdoche, New York* (discussed in the opening pages of this thesis), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* works through men's self-absorption and contemplates for men a model of social memory that goes beyond the male-only groups represented in *Magnolia* and *Fight Club*. In doing so, Gondry's and Kaufman's film suggests that the narratives of romantic love offer men glimpses of their real identities, but only if they recognize the key part that women play in making them who they are.

Chapter One

What Manner of Man Is This? Masculinity and “Unforgetting” in The Passion of The Christ

“What manner of man is this,
Who died at Calvary?
What manner of man is this,
Who set the captives free?
You know he walked upon the water
And he calmed the raging sea.
What manner of man is this,
Who gave his life to me?”

—African-American spiritual

“The Bible’s brief mention of Jesus’s flogging—one sentence in three Gospels, nothing in one—becomes [in *The Passion of the Christ*] a ten-minute homoerotic sadistic extravaganza that no human being could have survived, as if the point of the Passion was to show how tough Christ was.”

—Katha Pollitt, *The Nation*

The torture and execution of Jesus Christ has represented the first and last word in male agony; as the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik (1976) noted, Jesus Christ represents the apotheosis of the masochistic fantasy, as his debasement and suffering lead ultimately to spiritual ecstasy. The question repeatedly raised in the spiritual quoted in this chapter’s first epigraph has been a central preoccupation of Christianity since the earliest days of the religion. The question is taken from the Gospel of Matthew, when, on a boat with his disciples, Jesus “rebuked the winds and the sea” to calm the storm threatening them: “... the men marvelled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him!” (Matthew 8: 26-27). In the spiritual (made famous by gospel music luminaries such as Mahalia Jackson and Willie Mae Ford Smith), the matter of Christ’s embodiment and death is brought to the centre: “What manner of man is this / Who died at Calvary?” The song thus recalls the mysteries at the heart of Christianity—how can God become human? Was Jesus in fact both fully divine and fully human, or was his humanity, as some early Christians believed, a mere illusion; or, conversely, was Jesus only a man, though perhaps one with a special or prophetic relation to God?

These are the sort of questions that are inevitably raised by every cinematic portrayal of Christ, including the most famous recent depiction, *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004). In a very real sense, every film about Jesus is a meditation on Christology, the field of Christian theology that “reflects systematically on the person, being, and activity of Jesus of Nazareth” (O’Collins 2009, 1). Every filmmaking decision (in casting, wardrobe, performance, etc) reflects consciously or unconsciously held beliefs about the character of Christ, about His humanity and divinity, His appearance and behaviour, as well as beliefs about the context in which He lived and relations with His contemporaries (both Jewish and Imperial Roman).

As with many other theological questions, for most Christians the answers to such Christological queries are articles of faith that appear to be self-contradictory. Perhaps the central paradoxes at the heart of Christian spirituality are Christ’s dual nature—Jesus is fully human *and* fully divine—and the dual nature of his Passion, in which his brutal suffering and death by crucifixion represent the ultimate victory against sin. This latter article of faith is the theological phenomenon described by various theories of atonement, which provide models for understanding how Jesus’ death and resurrection enabled the salvation of humanity. In *The Passion of the Christ*, the sole voice critical or sceptical of substitutionary atonement is that of Satan (Rosalinda Celentano), who, in the film’s opening scene, tempts Christ (Jim Caviezel) in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Do you really believe that one man can bear the full burden of sin?” Satan asks Jesus. Satan then continues to tempt Jesus to flee from the crucifixion that is his fate: “No man can carry this burden I tell you. It is far too heavy. Saving their souls is too costly. No one. Ever. No. Never.”

Gibson’s film is a work of devotional art, so it is clear with whom our sympathies are meant to lie. Nonetheless, it is worth considering the points Satan makes here—to be quite literally the devil’s advocate about the version of atonement that Gibson reveals in *The Passion of the Christ*. It is worth asking, in other words, the question of how one man can save the world. How can one man’s death redeem all the sins of the world, past, present, and future? How can such a sacrifice transcend time? These are not just questions for non-believers; many devout Christians may similarly find atonement

beyond rational comprehension, or even ethically objectionable.⁹ Still, even if a Christian generally subscribes to atonement theology, there remains considerable scope for variations in belief. For some believers the spiritual and emotional suffering of Christ is as important as his bodily suffering, and for some Christians the whole notion of atoning sacrifice and resurrection should be read as a metaphor rather than a miracle, an act from which believers should take moral inspiration and instruction.

In short, it is far from certain that any particular believer's spiritual imagining of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection should look anything like Mel Gibson's devotional vision. In semiotic terms, a paradigmatic analysis (cf Monaco 2009) of Gibson's version of the Passion seems an especially productive avenue for decoding the religious beliefs motivating his film. Gibson's version of the Passion has a palpable investment in bloodied bodies rather than wounded psyches, in miracles rather than metaphors, and, most pertinently for the purposes of this thesis, in mystical recovery models of memory rather than historical reconstructive understandings of the past. All of these tendencies point to a particular question that Gibson's film seems to be asking and answering: "What manner of *man* is this?"—in other words, what kind of masculinity is Gibson's Jesus modelling for the world today?

Katha Pollitt's (2004) ridiculing of *The Passion of the Christ*'s infamous scourging scene—"the ten-minute homoerotic sadistic extravaganza that no human being could have survived"—strikes at the heart of this issue, bringing to the fore the relationship between violence and masculinity in Gibson's very gory film. Indeed, the aspect that most clearly distinguishes *The Passion of the Christ* from earlier exercises in cinematic Christology is its extreme violence. In the weeks and months following the film's release, it became a critical commonplace to note that the gory violence of the film was on par with works from the slasher or splatter horror subgenres, engendering a number of mocking rechristenings such as "The Jerusalem Chainsaw Massacre" (Matisse 2004) or "The greatest story ever told, as Dario Argento might have told it") (Wieseltier 2004). The blood and gore in Gibson's film are significant, I would argue, not just because they reveal both the machismo and masochism of Gibson's view of Jesus, but because in

⁹ See, for example, Brown and Parker (1995), who offer a critique of the doctrine of atonement based on principles of feminist Christian theology.

doing so they produce the paradoxical effect of de-emphasising Christ's corporeal humanity. In his study of Russian Orthodox iconography, Daniel Rancour-Laferriere (1995) notes that the most graphically violent icons are venerated because they represent Christ's "kenosis" or "self-emptying": the trauma of the moment when Christ fully relinquishes his divinity and is debased to the level of pure humanity, abject and suffering (28). The doctrine of kenosis underlines the import of Christ's suffering: he emptied himself of his God-like qualities to be human (though without sin) by suffering and dying for the sins of humanity. The hysterical excess of the violence in Gibson's film is symptomatic of the crisis of reflexivity faced by men at the turn-of-the-millennium. If the late Eighties and early Nineties, as Greven (2009) has argued, marked the period when masculinity became self-conscious, then Gibson's version of the Passion can be read as a brutal working over of masculinity's new and problematic reflexivity, a violent attempt to disavow the realisation that masculinity is "a problematic construct rather than ... a natural, taken-for-granted reality" (Messner 1997, 2).

Robert Smart (2005) notes that Gibson's film advocates for a certain kind of masculinity, one that requires "absolute submission to authority, and ... unquestioning obedience" (para 6). As Smart argues, the Christian masculinity that Gibson advocates valorises the endurance of physical suffering and vehemently rejects ambiguity. Refusing to submit to the punishment meted out by paternal authority is unmanly, and the unmanly can be recognised in his (or perhaps we should say "her") soft, and unmuscular features—most notable in the other-worldly androgyne Satan and the camp decadent King Herod (Luca De Dominicis) (Smart 2005). Both of these figures attempt to obstruct Christ's self-sacrifice; Satan tries to tempt Jesus that his crucifixion is meaningless, while the ineffectual Herod cannot do what the notably more chiselled and manly Pontius Pilate (Hristo Shopov) manages—to condemn Jesus to his fatal destiny. The utmost in manliness is following the Tennysonian prescription—to choose not to reason why, but to do and die (or at least make sure that others die)—and real men recognise the necessity of this imperative.

Gibson's version of substitutionary atonement thus amplifies the masculinist gender politics inherent in the doctrine, producing a Passion play that is a florid symptom of the turn-of-the-millennium crisis of masculinity. Christ's crucifixion is offered as a way

of working through the trauma of lost male transcendence. To understand this, it is important first to consider how men's "blocked reflexivity" has often been evidenced in a quasi-invisibility of male embodiment. Consider, for example, mainstream cinema's traditional resistance toward purely erotic representations of male bodies, generally preferring the aestheticization of athletic or aggressive male bodies (Mulvey 1981/1989; Neale 1993). The torture and execution of Christ symbolises the kenosis of contemporary men—the traumatic loss of their divinity that is believed to be necessary if men are to resurrect and regain their lost transcendence.

Unforgetting and Re-membering

Gibson's aim is to present Christ's crucifixion in as real and accurate manner as possible, an objective that requires a naïve faith in the straightforward workings of memory. Promoting the film, Gibson commented that watching the film would be like "travelling back in time" (quoted in Thistlethwaite 2004, 139), transporting viewers back two thousand years so they could see "how it went down" (quoted in Boys 2004, 150). It is vital that nothing complicate Gibson's presentation of these ancient events; the vehemence of Gibson and his supporters in rejecting any nuance or qualification put forward by archaeologists, theologians, or biblical scholars implies that any ambiguity in memory is as suspect as any ambiguity in masculinity. Thus, the dynamic of wounding and restoration guiding Gibson's vision is paralleled by a similar dynamic of forgetting and remembering. The discourses of memory at work in and around *The Passion of the Christ*—that is, both represented within the film-text itself and implicated in the controversies around the film as media event—are indispensable for understanding Gibson's Christology, though very little critical attention has been given to this topic. It is a curious oversight given the prominent role of memory within the film's diegesis: there are fourteen brief flashbacks in the course of its 126-minute running time (Webb 2004), an analeptic overdose more characteristic of a neo-noir film than a biblical epic. This combination of graphically violent torture scenes and frequent flashbacks, as well the film's status as a media event implicated in Shoah-related "crises of memory" (Suleiman 2006), demonstrates the centrality of traumatic memory in turn-of-the-millennium culture.

The Passion of the Christ is best known for its antiquity and its violence—that is, for the remoteness of its Biblical setting from most contemporary cinematic fare, and for its unrelentingly graphic representations of the torture and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The relevance of these two points is linked in the filmmaker’s mind—for Gibson, the stomach-churning violence of the film is necessary to show the Passion as it actually was. Potentially equally off-putting was the film’s Aramaic and Latin dialogue, which prior to release apparently caused some financial anxiety for the film’s producer-director. “Obviously nobody wants to touch something filmed in two dead languages,” Gibson said of the film’s Aramaic and Latin dialogue, which he originally wanted to screen without the benefit of subtitles. “People think I’m crazy, and maybe I am,” Gibson explained. “But maybe I’m a genius” (Davies 2002). While the years following this statement would indeed provide many reasons to question Gibson’s sanity, as he made headlines with a series of off-screen scandals involving alcohol, violence, and racial defamation, the director could also no doubt lay some claim to genius status. Whatever one’s view of the film’s artistic or theological merits, the success of *The Passion of the Christ* as an event film undoubtedly showed Gibson’s considerable marketing nous, particularly his ability to orchestrate successful niche marketing campaigns and to spin controversy into box office gold.

In his comments about the film, Gibson showed awareness of the memory work done by his film as both a text and as a media event. In his introduction to a volume of still photography that accompanied the film’s release, Gibson explained:

There is a classical Greek word which best defines what “truth” guided my work, and that of everyone else involved in the project: *alethia*. It simply means “unforgetting.” ... It has unfortunately become part of the ritual of our modern secular existence to forget. The film, in this sense, is not meant as a historical documentary nor does it claim to have assembled all the facts. But it does enumerate those described in Holy Scripture. It is not merely representative or merely expressive. I think of it as contemplative in the sense that one is compelled to remember (unforget) in a spiritual way which cannot be articulated, only experienced (M Gibson 2004, 1).

The attention to memory in a devotional text is not surprising, as religion plays an important role in establishing and consolidating group identity and transmitting

collective memory through the ages (Hervieu-Leger 2000). For Gibson, memory is precious—and endangered. Memory is a guiding light in the contemporary world in danger of being extinguished, and perhaps all the more vulnerable for the way that, according to Gibson, memory resists pure articulation and exists only as a spiritual experience.

The film's investment in memory is perhaps most apparent in its extensive use of flashbacks. Significantly, all the film's flashbacks conform to the pattern that Krin Gabbard and Harvey Greenberg (1999) call the "third wave" flashback: the type of analeptic sequence that New Hollywood inherited from mid-twentieth century art cinema and that is characterised by minimal or no signalling of the transition from present to past (eschewing the use of dissolves, etc.), and which is heavily coded as representing the involuntary recollection of traumatic memories. In the case of *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson's preferred flashback technique is to use an abrupt match-on-action cut from present to past; for example, as Jesus is interrogated by Caiphas (Mattia Sbragia) and the other Jewish high priests, a close-up (from Jesus' POV) of the hands of a carpenter working on a table in the room is followed by a nearly identical close-up of another pair of woodworking hands, which a moment later are revealed to be those of the carpenter Jesus in his pre-ministry days.

This and other flashbacks in the film conform to the logic of "associative memory"—wherein associative triggers reawaken dormant memory traces—that Turim (1989, 19) finds typical of all kinds of flashback, but in Gibson's film they are deployed with what we might characterise as an inside-out approach to trauma. To clarify what is meant here, we can look at more conventional representations of traumatic memory. While such flashbacks are incredibly common in countless recent cinema, a largely forgotten Hollywood film from the 1990s provides perhaps the most fitting comparative case study. In *Dead Presidents* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 1995), an African-American veteran struggles to adapt to life at home after fighting in Vietnam. The returning veteran finds work as a butcher's assistant, and in one scene, his repetitive work cutting through animal carcasses triggers unexpected and horrifying flashbacks to traumatic events from his tour of duty, including visions of the tortured and disembowelled body of a member of his platoon. Here, as in most "third wave" type flashbacks, a triggering

image or experience involuntarily transports the mind of the sufferer from a present-day moment of safety to a traumatic event in the character's past.

Gibson's flashbacks, by contrast, generally work from the opposite direction, transporting the victim of horrifying violent acts (Jesus) from the traumatic present to a safe time in the past. These flashbacks are traumatic scenes in the sense that they centre on an act of trauma, but the recollection of home and safety, as well as the sentimental character of some of the remembered scenes, clearly marks them as nostalgic as well. While the clear majority of the flashbacks—at least ten, perhaps twelve of the fourteen scenes—are from Jesus' point-of-view, there are also two flashbacks from other characters' points-of-view. In the first of these, as Mary Magdalene (Monica Bellucci) wipes up the puddles of blood that are shed by Jesus during his scourging, she flashes back to the prone position she had assumed just before Jesus saved her from stoning. Interestingly, even in this scene, in which Mary Magdalene flashes back from a traumatic present (a scene in which she witnesses violence done to a loved one) to a traumatic past (where she is the one victimised), Gibson leaches out all the menace from the attempted stoning sequence through his overly reverential directorial touch (Gibson films the scene in slow motion) and thus ensures that Jesus' Passion remains the last word in suffering. In the second of these scenes, the sight of Jesus stumbling as he carries his cross triggers in his mother Mary (Maia Morgenstern) a brief and rather saccharine recollection of her running (again presented in slow motion) to the aid of her fallen child Jesus (Andrea Refuto). When the film returns to the present, the adult Jesus tells Mary "See, Mother, I make all things new," a line that underscores Gibson's belief in the restorative capacity of memory.

Though the line "I make all things new" could describe a project of transformation (echoing Ezra Pound's modernist credo to "Make it new"), in the context of the film Christ's words clearly represent a devotion to *alethia*, and a fervent desire to *remember* what is lost—to "unforget" it and bring it back to life again through the atonement offered by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The scene recalls the very beginning of the film, which presents Christ's anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane. Gibson's version of this event varies from the biblical account through the inclusion of a beautiful and androgynous Satan, who tempts Jesus by telling him that his sacrifice would be useless, as there is too much sin in the world for one man to take on. This

temptation in the garden, complete with a serpent that accompanies Satan, deviates from any of the Gospel accounts, but reprises the story from Genesis of the Garden of Eden. Jesus' refusal to be tempted, signalled by his crushing of the Serpent, leads to his crucifixion, which, according to Christian doctrine offers atonement for the sins of the world. Atonement, as John Shelby Spong (2009) puts it, can be seen as the antidote for human alienation. By removing sin, it enables "at-one-ment"—that is, unity with God and relief from existential alienation (262-3).

This last point brings into stark relief what is perhaps most unusual about Gibson's version of the Passion: his emphasis on physical violence, to the point of near total omission of Christ's emotional and spiritual torment. While *The Passion of the Christ* opens with Christ's anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, in which he prays for God to take his cross from him and relieve him of his fate, the level of fear represented in the scene is tempered by Gibson's devotional approach to the scene. Here, as throughout the film, Gibson's direction and Caviezel's performance fail to produce a convincing portrait of a suffering *man* (albeit a man who is God Incarnate); Christ's melodramatically intoned Aramaic (subtitled into very scriptural English dialogue) continually reminds viewers that it is the Son of God and not any ordinary man that they are watching suffer.

The shortcomings of Gibson's devotional approach readily stand out when contrasted with the less observant (indeed, to some Christians, blasphemous) treatment of similar material in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988). Perhaps the most notorious sequence in Scorsese's earlier film (adapted not directly from the Gospels but from Nikos Kazantzakis' controversial novel of the same name) was an extended fantasy sequence in which the dying Jesus (Willem Dafoe) imagines from the cross the life that he never had and never will have—marrying, making love to, and starting a family with the beautiful Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey). At the moment of death, Jesus' life proverbially flashes before his eyes, but in the form of the life that *might have been*. Gibson's dying Christ, in contrast, chooses memory over fantasy. He dies untempted, flashing back to the life that he actually lived, one notable for its lack of regrets and complete absence of Oedipal crisis. Indeed, the extreme Marianism of Gibson's traditionalist Catholic faith puts not the Magdalene but the (m)other Mary at the centre of the Passion narrative, a nostalgic celebration of a pre-

oedipal dyad (one type of at-one-ment) that contradicts the filmmaker's claims of strict scriptural fidelity.

The centrality of Mary in Gibson's Passion narrative is more than a mere testament to his traditional Catholicism. The juxtaposition of the Mother of Christ with the graphic violence inflicted on her son during His scourging and crucifixion underscores the role that abjection plays in the film's implicit masculinist programme. Julia Kristeva (1982) famously argued that what is abject is beyond normal signification:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death.... No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids ... are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being (3).

Gibson's representational strategy echoes this tendency. Critics of the film noted the apparent influence of slasher and splatter horror genres, while commentator Leon Wieseltier (2004) speculated that Gibson would not be fully satisfied until cinema screens somehow managed to bathe filmgoers in real blood. Kristeva's formulation that confronting the abject puts the subject at the border of his or her desubjectification, offering a confronting reminder of the inescapable materiality and mortality of the body. The abject is a force for fascination as well as repulsion, since the dissolution of boundaries that it enacts also enables the reconstruction of the subject, a potentiality that Gibson and his film's supporters are clearly invested in since they view the film as a potential vehicle for religious conversion. Kristeva's insistence that what is ultimately abjected is the mother is relevant here, as Gibson displaces abjection from the mother's body to that of Christ, whose bloodied body became a cinematic "womb" to which normally anti-Hollywood Christian fundamentalists would return upon the film's Ash Wednesday release (Thistlethwaite 2004).

In lieu of the abject maternal body, Gibson offers a view of motherhood that is at one with the sanitising devotion of Catholic Marianism. The safety and security represented by the mother is accessible, but the only road to this salvation is through suffering. By transporting the viewer (in nearly all of the flashbacks through the focalising character of Christ) from an experience of violence to an earlier moment of safety (and, in the

case of Mary's flashback to the toddler Jesus' grazed knee, from the traumatic now to a very sentimentally rendered moment of maternal comforting in the past), these flashbacks point to the filmmaker's anxiety about the security of the past (conceived as "tradition") in the troubled secular present. Read symptomatically, and in the context of the obsessions with memory and masculinity that run through Gibson's oeuvre, *The Passion of the Christ* speaks to the contemporary crisis of masculinity by suggesting that men can regain their lost transcendent position through a masochistic purging sacrifice and through the healing intervention of the Mother. In doing so, the film shows an attachment to wounds in keeping with the contemporary language of trauma, and a belief in the restorative—rather than reconstructive—power of memory.

Un-forgetting through the Epic

Gibson is not alone in lamenting memory's failings, what he regards as the pervasiveness of forgetting in contemporary culture. Indeed, memory has been claimed to be in crisis perhaps as frequently as has masculinity. In different ways, Fredric Jameson (1991), Andreas Huyssen (1995), Pierre Nora (1989), Richard Terdiman (1995) and many others have all suggested that the contemporary world is distinguished by a cataclysmic rupture with the past, as subjects lose an organic relationship with times past and are thus condemned to chase an ersatz or inadequate facsimile of the past via the mausoleal conduits of the archive, the museum, and other commemorative sites and artefacts. As Huyssen (1995) wrote in the mid-1990s:

As we approach the end of the twentieth century and with it the end of the millennium, our gaze turns backwards ever more frequently in an attempt to take stock and to assess where we stand in the course of time. Simultaneously, however, there is a deepening sense of crisis often articulated in the reproach that our culture is terminally ill with amnesia (1).

This paradox—the burning desire to remember, in tandem with the inability to do so—is a quintessential symptom of our contemporary culture. We seek stories of origins, and are dismayed to find that the search turns up not origins *per se*, but (frequently

unconvincing) stories. When we remember, we find not presence, but representation (re-presentation) (Huyssen 1995, 2-3).

Nonetheless, the inherent aporiae of memory need not prevent cultural producers or consumers from creative and meaningful engagement with the past—indeed, Huyssen argues that this “twilight” of memory should be understood “as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity” (Huyssen 1995, 3). In her book *Prosthetic Memories*, Alison Landsberg (2002) argues that even in relatively “low” postmodern cultural forms, such as commercial historical films or experiential museum exhibitions, contemporary subjects can prosthetically incorporate the experiences of people of earlier historical eras. In the field of cinema genre studies, a similarly optimistic take on popular and non-academic engagements with the past marks the work of the philosopher and film studies scholar Vivian Sobchack. In her essay “Surge and Splendor: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic,” Vivian Sobchack (1990) stands up for one of cinema’s most disrespected genres, the Classical Hollywood epic. At first conceding that the genre is plagued by ridiculous excesses (studio wardrobe departments are singled out as particularly egregious offenders against both the historical record and good taste more generally), Sobchack then argues forcefully for the historical relevance of the epic despite its crass deviations from the historical record and from what “we think of as ‘real’ historical interpretation” (26). Her observations on the subject merit quoting at length:

... in that [the Hollywood historical epic] engages human beings of a certain culture at a certain time with the temporally reflexive and transcendent notion that is History, [it] is as “real” and as significant as any other mode of historical interpretation which human beings symbolically constitute to make sense of a human—and social—existence that temporally extends beyond the life and times of any single person. ... [I]n that both the work of academic scholarship and the Hollywood historical epic construct interpretive narratives formulated around and foregrounding past human events as coherent and significant, both are temporally reflexive and both respond—if in different ways and through different experiences—to the same central and philosophical question: *how to comprehend ourselves in time* (Sobchack 1990, 26).

Because its reckoning with the past so starkly differs from the dispassionate and detached encounters favoured by historiography, the epic moves within what we might call the orbit of memory. To adapt Pierre Nora's (1989) taxonomy, we might say that the epic belongs to the *milieux*—not the *lieux—de memoire*. As Hue Tam Ho-Tai (2001) explains, for Nora “history is made necessary when people no longer live in memory, but become conscious of the pastness of the past and need the aid of written documents to recall it. According to him, *lieux de memoire* come into being when *milieux de memoire* disappear” (915). Nora's distinction, then, “comes close to paralleling the distinction between orality and literacy,” a dichotomy that Tai correctly points out opens the door to a host of hoary Eurocentric assumptions about non-Western people living outside of (or before) History (Tai 2001, 915). For the purposes of this study, though, what is important is the affinity between this pre-literate experience of the past and the remembrance experience offered by (historical epic) film viewing. As Sobchack (1990) puts it, “[w]hereas the reticent and opaque work of academic histories is the objectification and projection of *ourselves-now* as *others-then*, the expansive and transparent work of Hollywood's epic histories seems to be the subjectification and projection of *ourselves-now* as *we-then*” (26).

Any discussion of epic cinema since the 1990s requires mention of Mel Gibson, who in various turns as star and/or director has done a considerable amount in reviving the genre. Before then, the Hollywood epic had been in a state of commercial decline, as evidenced by the notorious 1980s flops *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980) and *Reds* (Warren Beatty, 1981) (Sobchack 1990, 43-44). Gibson's most significant contribution to the rejuvenation of the epic would come in the mid-1990s, when the Scottish historical film *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995) became a world-wide box office hit and won five Oscars including Best Picture at the 68th Academy Awards. The release of *Braveheart* marks a crucial moment in which the historical epic becomes an event film, a development that would foreshadow the media profile used by Gibson for *The Passion of the Christ* a decade later. While the epic had long been associated with commercial grandeur—its technological rejuvenation in the 1950s famously represented Hollywood's counterattack on the commercial threat posed by television—*Braveheart*, I would argue, was significant for the ways that the text was co-opted as a

key representation of contemporary Scottishness by tourism marketers, nationalist political parties, and other media players (McArthur 2003). The term “event film,” as formulated in criticism on such diverse texts as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and *Bridget Jones* franchises, describes how a certain film, “independent of its qualities as cinema,” becomes a major cultural phenomenon, usually “because it is an adaptation of an already popular novel, part of a series, based on a historically successful television series, the vehicle for a charismatic star, the re-enactment of a controversial political event, etc” (Radner 2011, 120).

The Passion of the Christ ticks nearly all of these boxes: it harnesses star power (in Gibson’s role as highly visible producer and director); it draws on antecedent cultural sources; and, most importantly, it sits at the volatile intersection of a number of contemporary controversies (on questions of screen violence, interfaith relations, and the place of religion in a largely secular culture). The reason the last of these is most important is that consumption of films such as *The Passion of the Christ* has come to be perceived as a partisan act in contemporary culture wars. Thus, for example, watching and enthusiastically endorsing (or vehemently denouncing) *The Passion of the Christ* becomes a performative act of identity work—“a pilgrimage of self-naming”—within the contemporary public sphere (Ables 2006, 9). When such identity work is put in the service of the reactionary politics of fundamentalist Christianity, the implicit appeals to collective memory are readily apparent. The essence of fundamentalist Christianity lies not (as is often assumed) in its belief in Scriptural inerrancy but in its call for a rejection of secular modernity and a return to (perceived) fundamentals (Riesebrodt 1993, 16). In other words, the fundamentalist, at least implicitly, calls out for the remembering of a basic, pure and forgotten golden age of his or her creed. In this sense, religious fundamentalism can be seen as an example of Mannheimian reflexive traditionalism, the calculated attempt to reassert tradition to push back at political and cultural progressivism (Riesebrodt 1993, 40; Mannheim 1993, 285).

Mel’s Bloody Signature: The Meanings of a Faithful Auteur

Gibson’s version of faith—built upon the promises of an intimate relation with Christ as personal saviour, a mystical communion with the transcendent, and the inerrancy

of scripture—exemplifies religious fundamentalism’s grievance with modernity. By Gibson’s own acknowledgment, *The Passion of the Christ* was created as a vehicle for the expression of his faith, and given Gibson’s extensive control of the film (as producer, director, principal financier, and promoter), even the most strident opponent of auteurist criticism must concede that the film’s meanings only become completely legible with reference to the meanings that adhere to the film’s movie-star-turned-auteur. With a cast made up almost entirely of unknown actors—the roles of Jesus (James Caviezel) and Mary Magdalene (Monica Bellucci) being the only ones played by actors with international reputations—the film relied on Gibson’s celebrity for marketing, and likewise, interpretation of the film was inevitably filtered through the various meanings that have attached to Gibson in the course of his career. Thus, the film was simultaneously epic in scope but intensely personal in focus, a story of God, his son, and ancient history, but promoted and often understood as the singular vision of a divinely inspired “madman” or “genius”.

For example, supporters of the film tended to personalise negative responses to the film, and likened the controversy around it to a “crucifixion” of Mel Gibson (Brennan 2003; Medved 2004). Similarly, detractors of the film pointed to Gibson’s Tridentine Catholicism and his Holocaust-denying father as proof that the film presented an anti-Semitic version of the death of Jesus (Noxon 2003; Rich 2004). The other major controversy attached to the film—the intensity of the graphic violence—was also viewed through the lens of Gibson’s previous work as both filmmaker and actor. Certainly, *The Passion of the Christ*, when considered alongside the two directorial efforts of Gibson that preceded it—*The Man Without a Face* (1993) and *Braveheart* (1995)—confirmed that the wound is his authorial trademark (Luhr 1999). While, as Yvonne Tasker (2012) notes, it is a convention of the action genre to foreground scenes of suffering and torture “as both a set of narrative hurdles to be overcome, tests that the hero must survive, and as a set of aestheticised images to be lovingly dwelt on,” Gibson’s body of work as auteur and star seems to take this level of graphic violence to another level, with the end result being an *oeuvre* distinguished by its commitment to extreme masochism (125). Reading *Braveheart* through the lens of *The Man Without a Face*, a film in which the facial deformities and traditional masculinity of Gibson’s titular protagonist mark his estrangement from the social and cultural upheaval of the world

he lives in (the film is set in the late 1960s), William Luhr (1999) argues that the mutilations in both films seem to promise ultimate victory against the forces allied against masculinity and a return to men's traditional entitlements. In *Braveheart*, William Wallace suffers both psychological and bodily trauma—in the first reel his witnessing of executed soldiers returns to him in a nightmare, while the film's final reel is given over almost entirely to the hero's dismemberment—but in the end he becomes a transcendent force, as the memory of his wounds seems set to inspire his people to reclaim their patrimony (Luhr 1999, 241).

To palpate the wounds of Gibson's star persona, however, we must examine not just his onscreen mutilations but how *offscreen* suffering has played a part in the construction of the Gibson star text.¹⁰ A biographical legend that circulated widely by email in the year 2000 (and again just prior to the release of *The Passion of the Christ*) attests to a particular reading of Mel Gibson that privileges the actor as a winner-against-the-odds and an avatar of traditional piety and morality. According to this story, one night as a young man Gibson suffered such a severe beating at the hands of a gang that the attending medics at first thought he was dead, until he sputtered to life in a morgue wagon. Alive, but horrifically deformed and rejected by society, he joined a circus side show as "the man without a face" (according to this tale, the inspiration for his directorial debut), until his continuing faith in God attracted the attention of a well-connected priest, who introduced him to a distinguished plastic surgeon and thus paved the way for his future success as an actor, director, and sex symbol. The account concludes that Gibson "is to be admired by us all as a God-fearing man, a political conservative, and an example to all as a true man of courage."¹¹

¹⁰ On how offscreen appearances as well as film roles contribute to the star persona, see Dyer and McDonald 1998; Dyer 2004; Hayward 1998; and J. G. Butler 1991.

¹¹ For a full version of this tale, see Mikkelsen 2007. For a description of how a "biographical legend" (the concept comes from the Russian formalist critic Boris Tomashevsky) of a film's *auteur* influences viewers' interpretation of film texts, see Bordwell 1981, 9.

Atonement: The Wound and History

*"He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities
... and with his stripes we are healed."
--Isaiah 53: 5 (epigraph to The Passion of the Christ)*

This utterly baseless urban legend would be of little interest (except to fans of Gibson), if not for the way that it underscores the role of the wound in the articulation of contemporary (in this case, conservative) political beliefs. The wound, whether it is a bloody mark on a body or the less visible phenomenon of psychological trauma, is never just a medical fact; it is also a sign, one that consciously or unconsciously bears meanings to be interpreted by those who witness it. This is particularly the case in contemporary "victim culture," where parables of suffering and redemption (such as the legend from Gibson's biography recounted above) are offered as justification for particular groups' ethical and political claims. As Mark Seltzer (2013) has noted, trauma's ubiquity is such that the contemporary public sphere has become "a wound culture": in the media, in courts, and in a whole range of cultural venues, trauma has become the major trope in representations of identity and in explorations of public memory. Experiences of physical and/or psychological wounding have become for victims a mark of identity, a link to history, and a warrant for social recognition. It is into this terrain of "wounded attachments" (Brown 1995) that Gibson stumbles in his new version of Christ's Passion. As Simon Cooper (2004) very insightfully recognises, despite its antiquated trappings and its fundamentalist desire to distance itself from the contemporary secular zeitgeist, *The Passion of the Christ* is in fact entirely consistent with a contemporary wound culture where trauma becomes the key to legacies of historical suffering and victimisation (51).

Suggesting that his film was first and foremost an expression of his religious belief, Mel Gibson positioned his film as transcending historical concerns. According to Gibson, if it appeared that the film mined a rich vein of anti-Semitic Christian piety, the fault was not really that of the director but of a screenwriter who dwelt beyond the earthly realm. As Gibson put it in an interview with American broadcaster Diane Sawyer, "critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me and this film, they have a problem with the four Gospels," forgetting or not caring that the

Gospels in fact contradict each other in places, and that the veracity and significance of the events represented therein have been debated by generations of biblical scholars (Wieseltier 2004, 256). While the director's claims of divine inspiration attempt to situate his film on what he and his supporters perceive as non-debatable transcendent terrain (Medved 2004, 32), what is evident from watching the film and the enthusiastic reception it drew from conservative quarters is that this desire for transcendence can itself be read as a symptom for contemporary masculinity's fantasies of redemption through suffering. The particularity of its ambitions for transcendence lies in the excessive investment made in Christ's wounds.

With the release of *The Passion of the Christ*, the spectacle of Christ's wounded body rallied conservative Christians to the box office and made Gibson's epic one of the most lucrative R-rated films ever made (Thistlethwaite 2004, 127). That Gibson's combination of extreme violence and ancient languages proved to be unlikely box office assets would seem to confirm that for contemporary viewers memory is increasingly synonymous with trauma. In her study of trauma, narrative and culture, Cathy Caruth (1996) identifies the wound and the voice as the imbricative constituents of trauma: it is the ability of the wound to speak or cry out that provokes the recurrence of the traumatic event. The wound and the voice figure prominently in *The Passion of the Christ* through the protracted scourging and the Aramaic and Latin dialogue, respectively, implying that ancient languages and graphically bloody wounds were necessary to give voice to the message of Christ's atonement on the cross.

On both accounts—the wound and the voice—Gibson's representations are problematic. Neither the historical record nor the Gospels support the duration and severity of the film's infamous scourging scene.¹² With neither history nor scripture on his side, then, how are we to explain Gibson's representational strategies? We can go some way towards answering this question by turning to the problems in Gibson's representation of the Biblical-historical voice. As is evident in its original plans for the Aramaic and Latin dialogue to be unaccompanied by dubbing or subtitles, Gibson

¹² If we are to judge from some of his comments made in the press, Gibson recognises no distinction between scriptural and historical accounts, claiming that the Gospels present eyewitness accounts of Christ's Passion, rather than, as Christian tradition and historical/textual research maintains, second-hand or even third-hand accounts of Christ's life and death; see Boys 2004, 150. On the "verbal constipation" of the Evangelists in their description of the Passion, see Moore 1996, 5.

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intended *The Passion of the Christ* to communicate entirely through its actors' gestures and facial expression, thus purporting to bridge the linguistic chasm separating the film's represented historical figures from its contemporary viewers. Eventually released with subtitles, the film's dialogue, which was celebrated by some as historically authentic (Medved 2004, 31), is in fact at odds with the archaeological record and functions in the film as more of a sign of "ancientness" than as an index of historical veracity. The problem with the voice in the film lies not in the film's use of Aramaic, which was the vernacular dialect of Judea, but in its use of Latin instead of the dialect of Greek that was the actual official language of the Roman colony (Berlin and Magness 2004).

Latin, of course, is the liturgical language of the reactionary Catholic splinter sect to which Mel Gibson belongs, a group that rejects the validity of the papacy and its teachings since the Second Vatican Council (Boys 2004, 160-161). Susan Thistlethwaite (2004) discerns in Gibson's film clear evidence of hostility toward Vatican II, "especially [toward] the document *Nostra Aetate (In Our Time)* that, in the section on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions, states, '[Jesus'] passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today'" (Thistlethwaite 2004, 138). *In Our Time* represents, then, a belated attempt to work through the trauma of Golgotha and to re-remember/re-interpret the crucifixion and the varying meanings it has held for Christians and Jews. *In Our Time* thus recognises that while the spilling of Christ's blood has for Christians promised eternal salvation, throughout European history the Passion has been exploited by Christians as an excuse for anti-Semitic persecution. These traumatic effects are referenced in the infamous "blood curse" lines of the Gospel according to Matthew (27: 24-25)—after Pilate announces that he is washing his hands of guilt over Christ's impending crucifixion, the assembled crowd of Jews responds, "His blood be on us and on our children."¹³

¹³ The "blood curse" has been used throughout history as an alibi for Christian persecution of Jews. In interviews, Gibson claimed that he removed the line from the film in response to criticism prior to the film's release; in fact, the lines appear in Aramaic, and only the translated English subtitles were excised (Tolson and Kulman 2006).

Quickly overtaking the graphic violence as the chief controversy around the film, the issue of the alleged anti-Semitism in *The Passion of the Christ* tended to divide viewers of the film into two camps: defenders of the film, who couched their support for the film in the authority of religious belief, and detractors, who argued that the film's representations ought to be read through the lens of our historical knowledge about the writing of the Gospels and about the defamatory conventions of European religious dramaturgy. Paula Fredriksen's (2004) exegesis of the blood curse is consistent with this latter, historically specific strategy, arguing that the "blood curse" line refers not to a transcendent sanction against the Jewish race for their deicidal culpability, but to a narrower consideration of the then recent political history of Judea. As Frederiksen reminds us, the Gospels were written "after the war with Rome in 66-73 AD ... by authors who placed themselves in the sweep of biblical redemption promised in their own holy scriptures, namely, the Jewish Bible" (43). To the Jewish followers of Christ, whom we now recognise as the Evangelists, Christ's crucifixion was the first in a series of recent historical catastrophes, which culminated in the destruction of the Temple roughly forty years later:

Thus ... the curse that Matthew's crowd invokes—"His blood be upon us and upon our children!"—had *already*, in Matthew's view come true. Jesus' generation of Jerusalem's Jews, and the one following ("our children"), had been consumed by Rome's victory in [the year] 70. This cry was not Matthew's eternal indictment of all Jews everywhere, but his way of placing Jesus' death in relation to the destruction of the Temple. The linkage palliated the trauma of both events (Fredriksen 2004, 43).

Gibson's version of the Passion, on the other hand, collapses temporality from the other direction: while the Gospels maintain that at the moment of Christ's death a curtain is rent, *The Passion of the Christ* goes further, portraying a powerful earthquake that apparently destroys the Temple, thus ascribing a concurrent relation—and, perhaps therefore, a causative one—between the two events: the killing of Christ and the defeat of the Jews, the latter presumably being simply the first of many well-deserved calamities to be visited on the eternally culpable deicidal race.

The difference between Fredriksen's and Gibson's interpretations of these events turns on the distinction between an historically grounded reading and one that seeks its groundings in a transcendent realm, and thus parallels what Marjorie Garber (1998) has identified as the distinction between the cultural symptom and the literary symbol. Citing the poetics of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Garber defines the literary symbol as "characterized by the translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all, by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal" (Garber 1998, 6). In contrast, the symptom, according to Garber, "essentially reverses this dictum, finding in the specificity and oddity of the particular a clue to *fantasies* of the universal, the general, the eternal—all of which ... are made possible by the omission or suppression of context" (Garber 1998, 6).

"Fantasies of the universal, the general, [and] the eternal"—could there be a better description of the representational logic at work in *The Passion of the Christ*? Eschewing history, Gibson retreats into myth, and the historical influences on scripture are overlooked in favour of a belief in these narratives as faithful recordings of the presence of timeless and transcendent divinity. The transcendence of God the Father and Jesus the Son provides the theological corollary to the objective rationalism at the heart of traditional masculinist ideology. In *The Inward Gaze*, Peter Middleton (1992) uses the phrase "blocked reflexivity" to describe how men are incapable of seeing themselves as having a specific gender identity rather than considering themselves to be a non-gendered norm against which women are compared. The male "inward gaze" has been obstructed, perpetuating men's belief in the possibility of a "view from nowhere" (Bordo 1990, 136-7), "the understanding of oneself and one's perspective on things as *locationless*" (Whites 2000, 4). This view is a necessary corrective to the view offered by Simone de Beauvoir (as noted in the Introduction of this thesis) that men feel no need to write about being men. It is more the case, as Middleton explains, that men:

have written plenty about their subjectivity and power, but they have constantly universalised it at the same time, and assumed that the rationality of their approach was the sum total of rationality. Universality and rationalism were built into these concepts to avoid such disturbing self-

examination by men. Men's self-reflection is blocked at various points along the route (3).

Near the turn of the millennium, men's "blocked reflexivity" dissipated and maleness came to be seen less as a norm against which the difference of Woman could be recognised, and more as a specific identity in and of itself (Giroux 2001; Bhabha 1995). At the turn of the millennium, men began to see themselves not as potential or fallen gods, but as men. Their only road to salvation lies in embracing their specific woundedness, and through this rhetorical sacrifice hopefully regaining their transcendent status. In his critique of the mythopoetic men's movement, John Mowitt (2000) argues that the men in these groups are:

mobilized by castration envy, that is, the desire—perhaps even the drive—to take possession of the wound fantasized as that which allowed women to make men answerable for the wound of castration.... they seek the specifically moral authority that is now invested in this injury. To acquire it, another prior and preferably greater injury must be made to belong to men (274).

Gibson's version of Christ's Passion is the perfect picture of wounding—not even the thieves crucified next to him are suffering as much as he is. *The Passion of the Christ* may give Christ the beating that today's men seemingly crave, but ultimately Gibson's representation of sublime agony fails because it is an act of memory constructed on a fantasy—on an impossible desire for the past to re-present itself (ie, to present itself again) rather than on a realisation that what is lost can only ever return in the imperfections of representation, the marks and memories that only give up their meanings through careful and contestable interpretation.

Chapter Two

“Facts, Not Memories”: Tough Masculinity and Memory in *Memento*

The last chapter took as its point of entry the hymn “What Manner of Man Is This?” and argued that this Christological question was key to understanding the memory work done by *The Passion of the Christ*. The turn of the millennium film *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), perhaps the most famous Hollywood film about memory in a generation, likewise turns on a question, this time a query explicitly stated in the film’s voice-over narration. In the film’s first direct address to the viewers, Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) asks a question meant to suture the film’s viewers into his own disoriented and memory-impaired point-of-view. “So, where are you?” Leonard asks, before answering that he is in a motel room, apparently his own, but unsure of how he got there. We soon learn that Leonard is dependent upon notes and photographs to help him function, because of a neurological condition that means that he, in his words, “can’t make new memories.” When his friend Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) cautions him that his notes may be unreliable, Leonard counters that:

Memory’s unreliable. ... No, really, memory’s not perfect. It’s not even that good. Ask the police; eyewitness testimony is unreliable. The cops don’t catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff. They collect facts, make notes, draw conclusions. Facts, not memories: that’s how you investigate. Memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the colour of a car. And memories can be distorted. They’re just an interpretation, they’re not a record, and they’re irrelevant if you have the facts.

Leonard’s critique of personal memory is interesting for the way it undermines conventional wisdom that overstates the accuracy and efficacy of personal recollection.¹⁴ The unexamined point in Leonard’s diatribe, however, is what remembering actually entails. Perhaps, at least some of the time, the work of memory is comprised of the sort of inferential and interpretive work that Leonard prizes as

¹⁴ In this, Leonard’s point-of-view recalls the writings on criminal forensics of pioneering psychologist and early film theorist Hugo Münsterberg (1909).

rational, but which might be as faulty or incomplete as the uncomplicated model of recollection that he scorns as pure subjective interpretation.

Memento appears to be simply the story of a man with a particular type of amnesia, but I want to take a step back and examine the broader picture of Christopher Nolan's breakout film. In fact, I want to argue that Leonard's unusual "condition" (the term he repeatedly uses to describe his anterograde amnesia) bears a striking affinity to the condition faced by contemporary men. While *The Passion of the Christ* was animated by a naïve belief in the recuperative power of memory, one put at the service of defending a masochistic and reactionary masculinity, *Memento* both upholds and subverts common understandings of memory in a manner that reveals the suspect nature of men's appeal to memory as a response to the crisis of masculinity. While memory for Gibson is a straightforward process of "unforgetting," Nolan underscores the vertiginous and interdependent relationship of remembering and forgetting to show how memory, like the very notion of "crisis" itself, can be an alibi for the deficiencies or contradictions at the heart of traditional masculinity. Rosalind Sibielski (2004) has argued that Leonard's faith in rationality to order the chaos of his memory-deficient life (disorder which is symptomatic of the philosophical anti-foundationalism of postmodernity) is misplaced, but the emphatically masculine character of this flight to the rational does not come in for any critical attention in her analysis. Leonard appeals to a quintessentially masculine rationality to attempt to reconstruct the events of the past and their relation to his current identity, seeking in rationality and masculinity two master narratives that have been undermined in postmodernity. Insisting that memory be subordinated to reason, Leonard possesses an irresistible drive to re-inscribe a new identity—and I use the term "inscribe," quite literally, as he tattoos on his own flesh reminders of the narrative at work in the construction of his identity—on the tabula rasa of his contemporary amnesic self.

Memento, then, offers a perfect opportunity to focus on a number of crucial points of interest to this thesis. Firstly, in its representation of an extreme neurological condition, Nolan's film provides a way to explore how individual memory works and what popular understandings of remembering and forgetting get right or wrong about personal mnemonic processes. Moreover, by considering the gendered context of the protagonist's *noir*-esque social alienation we can reach a deeper understanding of how

social interaction (or lack thereof) frames personal memory. Finally, *Memento*'s representations of the difficulties of articulating memory and identity adumbrate the vexing problems that self-reflection poses for men struggling to adapt to a changing gender order.

Out of the Past: *Memento* and Film Noir

Memento, with its psychically wounded hero entrapped in a fragmented narrative and in thrall to a beautiful but untrustworthy woman, clearly belongs on the noir family tree, though the degree to which it problematises memory distinguishes Nolan's film even among other (neo-)noir works. A neo-noir film, *Memento* displays the somewhat contradictory characteristics of the genre. As a *neo-noir*, Nolan's film is marked by a self-consciousness about its genre identity; that is, *Memento* seems aware of its noir aspects (in plot, setting, characterisation, etc) to a degree that original noir works never were; the genre/cycle/style appellation of "noir" only bestowed upon them after the fact (Conard 2007; Keesey 2010). While neo-noir *texts* tend to show a great deal of reflexivity, the protagonists within these films typically are even more at sea about their lives and identities than were their classic noir forebears. It may have been true that, in its first cinematic incarnation, "amnesia was noir's version of the common cold" (Server 2006, 149), but the protagonists of neo-noir films take this self-opacity to another level, and *Memento* may exemplify this tendency better than any other film of the neo-noir cycle. While a typical noir (anti-) hero finds himself lost in a bewildering situation over which he has no control, the neo-noir man is besieged by doubts about his very identity (Zizek 1993).

Leonard's comments about memory are not limited to the scepticism about eyewitness recollection recounted at the start of this chapter. In another important scene, Leonard explains to the motel receptionist Burt (Mark Boone Junior) that his "condition" is not really amnesia and in the process comments on the link between memory and identity:

It's different [from amnesia]. I have no short-term memory. I know who I am and all about myself, but since my injury I can't make any new

memories. Everything fades. If we talk too long, I'll forget how we started. I don't know if we've ever met before, and the next time I see you I won't remember this conversation.

This is the first time in the film that the details of Leonard's memory deficiency are explicitly discussed, and the emphasis on the particular nature of his pathology effectively distinguishes him from the protagonists of most cinematic amnesia narratives. In most of these films, the protagonist suffers from a more complete loss of memory, generally due to an injury sustained in an accident or act of violence—as in, for example, the roughly contemporaneous amnesia film *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001)—or because of psychological trauma, as in *Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945), or because of “shell shock” suffered in war, as in *Random Harvest* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1942). The thrust of such a film's narrative, therefore, moves toward rectifying the amnesiac protagonist's ignorance about his or her own identity. Narrative closure occurs when memory and identity are restored (often through assisting the protagonist's recollection of the event that caused the amnesia, as in *Spellbound*). Leonard Shelby, on the other hand, claims from the start to have no questions about his identity (“I know who I am and all about myself ...”). Instead, he claims to be confounded only by the problem of mentally retaining experiences that have occurred since the traumatic impairing event, and to be unable to successfully process such information and integrate it in a coherent manner into the ostensibly secure autobiographical narrative that was abruptly terminated the night that he and his wife were attacked (“... but since my injury I can't make any new memories”).¹⁵

Leonard's anterograde amnesia means, at least in one sense, that he is forced to live in a perpetual present. Not being able to “feel time,” as he puts it at one point, means he has a very limited ability to extend his consciousness into the past or future. Indeed,

¹⁵ Leonard's anterograde amnesia also distinguishes him from most cinematic action/thriller heroes—notably Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) of the Bourne series of films (2002 - 2016)—who tend to suffer from retrograde amnesia but without the difficulty in processing new information or learning new skills that is typical of real life retrograde amnesia patients. The symptoms displayed by Bourne and others lend themselves well to action and thriller film scripts, as the lost identity of the protagonist provides an enigma to be solved, but the amnesiac hero(ine) is still equipped with the mental facilities and physical skills (martial arts proficiency, etc) to make answering that question relatively straightforward (Baxendale 2004).

without the sort of mediated memory prostheses he avails himself of (his Polaroid photographs, the notes he writes on paper or tattoos on his body), Leonard would be completely unable to make sense of his recent past—that is, unable to recall people he had met or events that had occurred more than a few minutes before the present. Moreover, as more and more of his past becomes inaccessible, Leonard’s future would become increasingly unpredictable, as he would be unable to bring to mind events of the past and to infer likely future consequences from them.

Leonard’s temporal alienation finds its formal correlative in writer-director Nolan’s intricate and disorienting manipulations of conventional *fabula-sujet* relations. The film’s idiosyncratic storytelling style becomes apparent from its opening sequence. Known for the reverse chronology that characterises a substantial portion of the film’s narration, *Memento* begins with a sequence actually filmed in reverse motion, and one that has the staggering effect of using a photograph to problematise rather than support truth claims. As Leonard Shelby shakes the Polaroid photograph, the image on it disappears, fading to an undeveloped grey. Then the tempo of this reverse action sequence accelerates: a pistol leaps from the ground into Leonard’s hand, and the sequence culminates in a freshly intact gunshot victim screaming the final words of his life: “Leonard, no!” This reversal synecdochically stands in for the film in its entirety, suggesting that conventional expectations of memory will be unsettled, to the extent that the act of remembering might seem more akin to obscuring rather than clarifying the past. Indeed, from this scene on, the final destination of memory seems to be violence and death.

The use of reverse motion filming and Polaroid photography in the film’s opening minutes is consistent with a long history of theories of remembering based on the technologies of image reproduction. The Dutch historian of psychology Douwe Draaisma (2000) argues that from laypersons to philosophers and scientists, our conceptions of memory are deeply metaphorical, and that “our views of the operation of memory are fuelled by the procedures and techniques we have invented for the preservation and reproduction of memory” (3). In other words, the technologies we invent as external supplements to our memories, from the writing tablet to the personal computer, in turn become the models or heuristics we use to understand our own cognitive capacities for recalling the past. This likewise applies to procedures or

processes devoted to the study of the past, so that historical and archaeological research has facilitated our understanding of the intangible notion of memory as being something like the concrete settings of the historical archive or the archaeological excavation site.

For the last two centuries, the photograph has been a very common metaphor for memory, and in cinema, photographs have stood in for personal memories in a number of films, notably in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Proof* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1991). As an imaging technology intimately linked with post-Enlightenment positivism, photography has been accorded a privileged epistemological status, unrivalled in the truth claims about the past that it enables (Robins 1996; Sibielski 2004). In his writings on memory, the philosopher Henri Bergson was among the first to link the process of individual memory with that of the medium of photography. As Bergson (1911) put it, when we recollect:

some period of our history ... we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves first in the past in general, then in a certain region of the past—a work of adjustment something like the focusing of a camera. ... Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud; from the virtual state it passes into the actual; and as its outlines become more distinct and its surface takes on colour, it tends to imitate perception” (171).

Bergson’s formulation is rather curious. His description of the act of recollection has a certain dynamism about it, which makes it seem more analogous to the technology of cinema than to still photography. Moreover, his choice of words is striking; the picture becomes clearer, he writes: “like a condensing cloud.” What comes into view is not a solid entity, but a vapour—a phenomenon more commonly observed to obscure rather than to aid recognition. The implicit contradictions here seem to cast doubt on the accuracy of what is remembered. If Bergson’s description is accurate, when we remember what we first see is a cloud, raising the possibility that what we perceive might at some level be out of focus or a haze obscuring what is really important.

Memory, Masculinity, Narrative

Whenever we watch films, our ability to interpret the most straightforward narrative—the causally linked chain of events typical of the Classical Hollywood style—is entirely dependent upon the effective functioning of our memories. However, memory only becomes an especial subject for filmmakers when memory becomes problematic. While Krin Gabbard and Harvey Greenberg (1999) have suggested that even the most straightforward flashback is a problematic representation of remembrance, it is only when a filmmaker underscores a focalising character's deficiencies or deceptiveness as a remembering subject that we as viewers become aware of the attenuated or polluted mnemonic air that we normally breathe so unreflectingly.

This may be why, as novelist Jonathan Lethem (2000) notes in his introduction to *The Vintage Book of Amnesia*, amnesia is a malady much more common in fiction than in real life. From Victorian novels to David Lynch films and contemporary soap operas, the protagonist in search of a past lost after a blow to the cranium or a psychologically shocking episode has been a well-worn plot device. The Canadian philosopher of science Ian Hacking (1994) has observed that amnesia plots begin to proliferate alongside the rise of what he calls the “sciences of memory” and appear as early as Wilkie Collins' 1859 novel *The Woman in White*. Lethem's observation about the greater fictional incidence of amnesia suggests that artists and audiences find something very compelling about what is in fact a relatively obscure neurological ailment.

The unconventional narrational strategies of *Memento* provide clear examples of how amnesia can motivate formal experimentation in filmmaking. The film's narrative is split into two roughly equal segments, one filmed in black and white, the other in colour. The black and white sequences consist almost entirely of a phone conversation between Leonard Shelby and an unknown interlocutor. During this phone call, Leonard explains his “condition” (his short-term memory loss), describes the different routines and techniques he uses to function despite his impaired memory, and recounts the story of Sammy Jenkis (Stephen Tobolowsky), a man Leonard met before his impairment who suffered from the same condition Leonard would later contract. In

contrast to these expositional segments, the sequences in colour are much more dynamic, devoted mostly to the steps Leonard takes to find and take vengeance upon his wife's killer. Where structurally the film becomes interesting is that while chronologically the black and white sequences precede the colour ones (with the exception of a few colour flashbacks, a matter that I will return to later), the *sujet* of *Memento* presents these two types of sequences (the colour and the black-in-white / the investigation and the phone call) in a braided or alternating pattern. Moreover, the narrative is even more disorienting in that the two segments unfold in different temporal directions: that is, while the phone call unfolds in straight linear time (again, with the exception of a number of flashbacks), the investigation unfolds in reverse chronological order, with the last event of the *fabula* (Leonard's murder of Teddy) being the first event shown in the film. Thus, the chronologically last colour sequence is followed by the chronologically first black-and-white sequence. This is in turn followed by the (chronologically) penultimate colour sequence, which is then followed by the chronologically second black-and-white sequence, and so on, until—at the end of the film's running time, the chronologically last black and white sequence is followed by the chronologically first colour sequence.

Viewers are able to make some sort of sense of the reversely ordered colour sequences due to skilful editing that repeats the beginning of the antecedent colour sequence (which presents action that actually transpires later in story time) at the end of the next colour sequence. Consider, for example, the following series of actions:

- (1) Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss) and Leonard talk at her house, where she tricks Leonard into pursuing Dodd (Callum Keith Rennie).
- (2) Leonard then leaves her house, climbs into his car, which is parked out front, where he is surprised by Teddy, who had been hiding there while Leonard talked with Natalie.
- (3) Teddy and Leonard engage in a conversation in which the former warns the latter that Natalie cannot be trusted and that she is manipulating Leonard for her own purposes.

Conventionally, these actions would be plotted in a straightforward manner: 1 followed by 2 followed by 3. In the case of *Memento*, however, the order is not only

reversed but is modified in a couple of important ways. First, actions 2 and 3 are shown on screen, which are then followed by a black-and-white sequence (part of Leonard's telephone call, which occurred chronologically much earlier than any of the three events listed above). Then, another colour sequence occurs, which begins by showing action 1 (Natalie and Leonard's talk) and ends with action 2 (Teddy surprising Leonard). Thus, when comparing conventional plotting (A) with *Memento's* idiosyncratic scheme (B), we can see the stark contrast between the two styles and the reversals, repetitions and modifications that characterise *Memento*:

A: Action 1 → Action 2 → Action 3

B: Action 2 → Action 3 → Interpolated B&W sequence → Action 1 → Action 2 repeated

With the exception of a few inserted flashback sequences, which represent much earlier events (the traumatic attack in which Leonard lost his wife and his short-term memory; Leonard's investigation of Sammy; Leonard and his wife before the attack), the narrative continues to unfold in this unusual manner, with repetition of bridging sequence-shots (such as Teddy surprising Leonard) put at the service of informing viewers of the temporal and causal connections obscured by the film's idiosyncratic narrative organization.

Leonard himself comes close to explaining the method to this madness. In one of the black-and-white phone conversation sequences, he recounts how Sammy Jenkins, who also suffered from Leonard's condition, did not have sufficient short-term memory to understand any film or television text longer or more complicated than a commercial. Leonard mockingly dismisses Sammy as "this guy who couldn't follow the plot of *Green Acres*." Director-screenwriter Nolan's narrative manipulations force viewers into as close an identification with Sammy and Leonard as possible, by making any stretch of the story over a few minutes' duration too difficult to quickly comprehend.

Stuck in a perpetual present, Leonard lives the mnemonic contradictions inherent in mourning. At least since Freud (1915), who in "Mourning and Melancholia" argued that the end goal of mourning was "to detach the survivor's hopes and memories from the dead," the clinical view of bereavement has stressed that its aim was a detachment from

the deceased and, eventually, attachment to a new love object (Walter 1996, 7-8). The implication is that the mourner is stuck in the past, unable to accept the beloved's passing by clearly demarcating between a past when the love object was alive and a present when he or she is dead.

Since Freud, this has become a common view of mourners: to mourn is to be hostage to the past, and that successful mourning requires detachment from the lost love object and the past he/she is part of, a process that often requires "working through" ambivalences the mourner has about his or her loss of the deceased (Walter 1996, 8). In fact, the mourner's relationship to the past is more complex. While on one level, the pathological mourner is, as Freud suggests, marooned in the past, it is perhaps more apt to describe him or her as caught in a wounded present. In Leonard's case, the pain of the past is felt very much in the present, and, in a scene in which he burns his dead wife's possessions, he talks about his inability to feel time and, consequently, to heal:

I don't even know how long she's been gone. It's like I've woken up in bed and she's not here ... because she's gone to the bathroom or something. But somehow, I know she's never going to come back to bed. If I could just ... reach over and touch ... her side of the bed, I would know that it was cold, but I can't. I know I can't have her back ... but I don't want to wake up in the morning, thinking she's still here. I lie here not knowing ... how long I've been alone. So how ... how can I heal? How am I supposed to heal if I can't ... feel time?

Leonard's "condition" as he calls it—his inability to "feel time"—suggests an inability to compartmentalise time and consign his wife's existence to the past. What is not clear, however, is whether this is actually what prevents him from healing. In "A New Model of Grief: Bereavement and Biography," Tony Walter (1996) notes that the classic psychological studies of grief since "Mourning and Melancholia" have stressed that success in mourning entails "detachment achieved through the working through of feelings" (8). This is the case, despite the acknowledgement in some studies, such as John Bowlby's (2005) *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*, that perhaps a majority of widows and widowers "retain a strong sense of the continuing presence of their partner" and that this may in fact be a healthy adaptation to the loss of the beloved

(96); or, as Tony Walter incisively puts it, such communion with the dead “may be a healthy way in which the survivor preserves a sense of identity” (8).

The problem, then, is not that Leonard cannot feel time, but that he is unable to foster any meaningful communion with his deceased wife (Jorja Fox), a fact that is far from surprising considering flashbacks to their time together show nothing resembling marital bliss. What Leonard really misses, in fact, is not his beloved wife, nor even a recollection of the incident in which she was assaulted and killed. Leonard misses not what he has lost, but what he never had. He yearns for an ego ideal constructed in the image of hegemonic masculinity, especially in its over-determined commitment to instrumental rationality and its disavowal of emotional investments. What has really wounded Leonard is not the violent attack against his wife and himself, but his delusional belief that he can successfully reconstruct the event in question and somehow regain coherence through a retributive act of violence.

The complex narrative structure of *Memento* of course frustrates any straightforward rendering of Leonard’s relentless drive to uncover the truth behind his violent assault. In this way, *Memento* certainly fits in with the film noir tendency in which the “complex frustrations” of the narrative, as Richard Dyer (2002) explains, undermine the phallic drive that propels the active male protagonist towards a narrative climax in a manner that unconsciously reflects patriarchal ideology’s valorisation of hegemonic male sexuality (98). The crisis logic of film noir reaches its apotheosis in *Memento*. The drive toward an epiphanic climax, in which typically the investigator uncovers the truth about the *femme fatale* and how she has ensnared him, is not merely frustrated or impeded in Nolan’s film: it is ultimately made incoherent. Unpleasant truths are not eventually brought into a harsh and unforgiving light—instead, the narrative circles vertiginously around a murky centre point of self-deception and wilful masquerade.

The sequence I discussed above, in which Leonard leaves Natalie’s house and is then surprised and confronted by Teddy, underscores Leonard’s self-deception in a revealing bit of dialogue in which Leonard once again takes pains to claim that he is not an amnesiac:

TEDDY

You haven’t got a clue, have you? You don’t even know who you are.

LEONARD

Yes, I do. I don't have amnesia. I remember everything about myself up until the incident. I'm Leonard Shelby, I'm from San Fran—

TEDDY

That's who you *were*, Lenny. You don't know who you *are*, who you've become since the incident. You're wandering around, playing detective ... and you don't even know how long ago it was.

Teddy drives home the fact of Leonard's ignorance by turning the conversation to the subject of the former insurance investigator's fashion choices. Looking at the label inside the jacket of his linen suit, Teddy continues his grilling of Leonard:

TEDDY

Put it this way. Were you wearing designer suits when you sold insurance?

LEONARD

I didn't sell ...

TEDDY

I know—you investigated. Maybe you need to apply some of your investigative skills to yourself.

It seems fitting that in one of Teddy's most biting attacks against Leonard's self-perception he calls attention to the fact that Leonard is wearing someone else's clothes—specifically, the designer suit of the drug dealer Jimmy (Larry Holden). Leonard's murder of Jimmy occurs at the end of the film's running time—at the point where the two distinct narrative threads of the film (the black-and-white, chronologically ordered sequences and the colour reverse-ordered sequences) meet. When watching the film in chronological order (an option on the Collector's Edition of the DVD), the viewer becomes aware that it is just after the murder of Jimmy that the black-and-white sequences give way to the colour ones—as if Leonard has crossed a threshold or undergone an initiatory rite that transforms him. Just afterwards, Leonard dons

Jimmy's suit and seizes Jimmy's Jaguar sedan, and the former insurance investigator's strange transformation is complete. Leonard's criminal accoutrements—the gun, the flash suit and the luxury car—work as a type of intra-gender drag, a “cross-dressing” that allows the castrated and traumatised Leonard to “man” up. Like the more familiar cross-gender drag, the intra-gender drag Leonard performs—in other words, the exaggerated masculinity he dons to cover the wounded masculinity beneath—exposes both of Leonard's masculinities as ontologically (and epistemologically) unstable. As Judith Butler (1998) famously observed in *Gender Trouble*, drag exposes the contradictions at the heart of the distinction between the “original” and the “imitation,” and exposes the performative character of gender, and in, doing so, “displace[s] the entire enactment of gender signification from the discourse of truth and falsity” (137).

In *Memento*, then, identity resists closure in any “real” or foundational sense: its artificiality and contingency expose conventional discourses of identity as nonsense. When Leonard first threatens to kill Teddy, the latter laughs off the threat, relishing the sort of ontological paradox characteristic of Leonard's “condition”: “You're not a killer, Lenny. [Teddy pinches Leonard's cheek] That's why you're so good at it.” Leonard's self-deception is perfect and complete: it extends far beyond the impossibility of him ever knowing who attacked his wife, whether she survived the attack, or even whether he has (as Teddy claims) already killed the assailant responsible. His self-deception even extends beyond the question of who Leonard Shelby really was and who he now is. Leonard is at his most opaque to himself when he believes that all these mysteries can be solved, despite recognising—at least on some level—that Teddy, for all the ways that he appears to deceive and exploit him, knows a great deal more about Leonard's “condition” than he himself does. “You just wander around playing detective,” Teddy complains to Leonard. “You're living a dream, kid. A dead wife to pine for and a sense of purpose to your life. A romantic quest which you wouldn't end even if I wasn't in the picture.”

This is the basic inner conflict that Leonard's memory “condition” brings about: the refusal to give up his belief in a transcendent and instrumental rationality capable of making himself (and the world around him) transparent to himself, despite the evidence that such security will remain forever elusive. In this sense, Leonard's plight is a perfect symptom of a contemporary hegemonic masculinity aware of its state of

crisis but completely unaware of the specific causes and contexts of that crisis. Leonard's experience of this crisis—the dissipation of the “blocked reflexivity” (Middleton 1992) that allowed men to mistake their masculine point-of-view as a genderless transcendent perspective—is most directly addressed by the two questions in voice-over that bookend the film, two versions of what are really the same question, phrased differently. In the film's first black and white sequence, we begin with Leonard's voice-over explaining how an individual feels when experiencing anterograde amnesia. “So, where are you?” he asks. In the film's final sequence, as Leonard's stolen car screeches to a halt, he ends his voice-over musings on solipsism and the nature of truth with the rhetorical question “Where was I?” The change in the object of his address—from the “you” at the film's opening to the “I” at the end—points to the disidentification of the spectator with Leonard, an indication that Leonard's memory is not only unreliable, but that he has wilfully ensured that it remains so. In the brilliance of its narrative structure, *Memento* recognises that men's quest for self-knowledge has conventionally been obstructed, tortuous, and ultimately fruitless, and that seems to be the way that men like it. It is a journey that both begins and ends with questions, with no real answers to be found, only a desperate search for a view within, and an even more desperate refusal to see what really might be there.

Chapter Three

“The Best Is Over”: Nostalgia, Melancholia and Reflexivity in *The Sopranos*

The focus in *Memento* on what Leonard calls his “condition”—the neurological impairment that means that he “can’t make new memories”—brings into stark relief how memory can be (mis)used by men, but at the expense of less focus on the particular acts or modes of remembrance mobilised in response to masculinity in crisis. An obvious starting point for such a discussion is the familiar disorder/emotion/sentiment/memory practice known as nostalgia. In popular usage, the term simply describes a rose-coloured view of the past. “Nostalgia ... is essentially history without guilt,” as one memory scholar puts it (Kammen 1991, 688; Boym 2001, xiv). This is true enough, but does not fully captures the many meanings and uses of nostalgia, for nostalgia can also provide insights into how people think about the past. This is particularly true with respect to the emotional dimensions of their memories—that is, nostalgia can tell us how people think about the forces that bind them together and provide them with a sense of identity, and what sort of circumstances enable (or, conversely, prevent) those feelings of security and solidarity. In short, nostalgia may be a faulty, incomplete or incorrect picture of the past, but its distortions or omissions tell us some very important things about the emotional and social dimensions of memory.

As a concept, nostalgia has a long history in studies of masculinity in cinema, often used as a description for men’s yearning for a pre-Oedipal era of narcissism and imaginary omnipotence (Mulvey 1981/1989; Neale 1993; Rutherford 1992). In wider cultural discussions, masculinity is often perceived as in crisis because men are confused about their social roles/expectations, and because there has been something of an erosion of male privilege in the last decades of the twentieth century. The prevalence of nostalgia within this discourse is evident in several popular formations: when people talk of a time “when men were men” or speak of a man who is “retro-sexual” (the other end of the masculinity spectrum from the more famous “metrosexual” stereotype first identified by Mark Simpson [1994]), we catch a glimpse of how earlier times are viewed as golden years for (white straight) men, as times of stability and security for men, and nostalgia is the word that is usually given to describe

a belief in and attachment to such (allegedly) more secure and stable time (Simpson 1994a, 2003).

At the turn of the millennium, this masculinist nostalgia achieved its fullest expression not in any particular film narrative, but in a television drama series. As befitting a TV series premiering at the end of the twentieth century, the pilot episode of *The Sopranos* (S1E01 “Pilot” / “The Sopranos”) was marked by tension between nostalgia and dread. In keeping with the broader American culture at the turn of the millennium, the pilot began with a melodramatic look back at a golden past that has slipped away as an ominous new age appeared on the horizon. Some of the first words spoken by the Mob boss protagonist, Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), accurately captured the zeitgeist:

The morning I got sick, I'd been thinking: it's good to be in something from the ground floor. And I came in too late for that, I know. But lately, I'm getting the feeling I came in at the end. The best is over.

These words are spoken during his first session with psychiatrist Dr Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), who sympathetically concurs: “Many Americans, I think, feel that way.” Tony then continues:

I think about my father. Now, he never reached the heights like me, but in a lot of ways he had it better. He had his people, they had their standards, they had pride. Today, what do we got?

While Tony's identity as a major organised crime figure means that he is far from a typical patient, the complaints that bring him to Dr Melfi's office—depression and anxiety—are two of the most common health problems of Americans of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The feelings of loss and dread that Tony identifies—the sensation of “coming in at the end”—would for many Americans likely increase in the first decade of the new millennium, as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Global Financial Crisis provided ever more reasons for Americans to believe that “the best is over.”

The Sopranos provides some very important insights on these matters, because from the pilot episode on, David Chase's series is awash with nostalgia. Indeed, even the very form that Tony's story takes—the serial television drama—seems a diminished narrative vehicle in comparison to the fondly recalled big screen grandeur of *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) or *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931), productions which Chase's film buff protagonist nostalgically consumes (Creeber 2002). The series seems to self-consciously sport an ambivalent formal identity as both a regeneration and a self-conscious degeneration of the gangster genre. Echoing the author John Barth's (1967/1984) manifesto for metafiction "The Literature of Exhaustion," *The Sopranos* arrived at the end of the twentieth century as the standard bearer of what we might call "The Mob Picture of Exhaustion," a TV series that operates as a tacit admission that the gangster genre's dominant paradigm had run its course. For the contemporary screen gangster, there was no longer any possibility of meeting the darkly glamorous fate of the American "tragic hero" (as famously described in Robert Warshow's [1962] canonical piece of genre criticism); instead, Tony Soprano's fate is to live within the more restrictive dimensions of the television screen, with the added curse that his soap opera-esque emotional and interpersonal conflicts are never to be rewarded with the narrative closure typical of Hollywood (Creeber 2002; Gorton 2009).

The double-faceted reflexivity at the heart of *The Sopranos*—the "promiscuous" intertextuality of its cultural references (Lavery 2002, 267) and its representation of a protagonist's open-ended quest for self-knowledge through psychotherapy—renders the series an important document of the turn-of-the-millennium crisis of masculinity. By beginning the series with Tony in the midst of a psychological/emotional crisis, *The Sopranos* throws into relief the longing for home (*nostalgia*) that is often perceived as the antidote to any crisis, especially the contemporary crisis of masculinity. This chapter analyses the way that nostalgia informs the mindset of Tony and some of the other men in *The Sopranos* in an effort to determine what "home" (*nostos*) they ache (*algia*) for, and what it is about the contemporary crisis of masculinity that compels them to long for this imagined cure. To do this, this chapter first details how nostalgia has been defined and theorised since the term was coined in the late seventeenth

century, before surveying the more particular case of masculinist nostalgia as it has been theorised in both screen studies and gender studies scholarship.

Finally, the chief assertion of this chapter is that the true “crisis” dramatized in *The Sopranos* is a crisis of nostalgia. Nostalgia in the series is signified chiefly through elements of mise-en-scene (casting, performances, and iconography) that reflexively engage with earlier mob films and—most significantly—through Tony Soprano’s diatribes against the present day and his expressions of yearning for a simpler and more stable world of the past.¹⁶ Tony’s rebuttal of his daughter Meadow’s (Jamie-Lynn Sigler) claim that in the 1990s parents should discuss sex with their children—“Out there it’s the 1990s, but in this house it’s 1954” (S1E11 “Nobody Knows Anything”)—might be the clearest expression of his Sisyphean urge to resist the present. The impossibility of living as if it were 1954 at the turn of the millennium generates an enormous amount of anxiety and dread in Tony Soprano, turning nostalgia into an ailment of the mind and spirit. As the series progresses, Tony begins to realise that his efforts are doubly fruitless—not only is it impossible to live in the 1950s (here more an idyllic time than a precise historical decade), but the goal is perhaps not worth the pursuit after all. Through the course of Tony’s psychotherapy, it becomes apparent that the world/era of his father had its own horrors, some of which still haunt Tony in the present. The aim of Tony’s therapist is to get him to come to terms with his past and, in doing so, gain truer insight into himself. This very atypical psychotherapy patient suffers from a very emblematic disorder for our time—men’s dawning realisation that simplistic nostalgia is no longer a viable way of considering the past and offers them nothing that will help them in their present-day lives. Such a project requires moving

¹⁶ Chase’s most significant casting decision for the series is his hiring of Lorraine Bracco, who played Karen Hill, the wife of Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) in *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990). In that film, as Henry’s life spirals out of control, his voice-over narration is taken over by Karen, who as mobster’s wife provides a supplementary/revisionary account of Henry’s Mafia world. The casting of the same actor to play Dr Melfi underscores how the psychotherapist (and the world she represents) plays a similar role vis-à-vis Tony Soprano. The influence of *Goodfellas* can also be seen in the role of Christopher Moltisanti, played by Michael Imperioli, who appeared as the minor character Spider in Scorsese’s film (and whose fate is pointedly referenced in an episode during the first season). The celluloid mythology of the mob is also celebrated throughout the series, with characters quoting famous lines from *The Godfather* films and drawing on the performances of such screen gangsters as blueprints for success as criminals and tough guys.

men from a vain wish to restore the past, so that they might learn to engage in a more reflective view of the past and of their place in the world.

The Homecoming of Nostalgia: On and Off Screen

Among the more notable achievements of *The Sopranos* is the way that the series represents what we might call the homecoming of nostalgia. In David Chase's series, nostalgia is no longer merely a simple "emotion of wistful longing for the past," but something more akin to a disease or affliction, which, like melancholia, is an acute response to loss (Wilson 2005, 22). Tony is the series' chief nostalgic, though it is a condition that also afflicts Christopher Moltisanti (Michael Imperioli) and some of Tony's other henchmen as well. Fittingly, these mobsters frequently self-identify as Mafia "soldiers", a claim that on some level aligns them with history's first nostalgics, the seventeenth century Swiss mercenaries whose homesickness inspired Hofer to coin the term (from the Greek words *nostos* "home" and *algia* "ache") (Boym 2001, 3-4; Wilson 2005, 21; Bellelli and Amatulli 1997, 210). The problem dramatized in *The Sopranos*, a stumbling block that becomes increasingly obvious through the series' six seasons, is that the temporal "home" that Tony and the others yearn for is not only impossible to regain (a condition common to all objects of nostalgic longing) but also is an *unheimlich* or haunted home that is debilitating or even traumatic rather than nurturing (Freud 1919).¹⁷

The series' characteristic admixture of nostalgia and dread is also on display in another scene from the pilot episode. In a set piece drenched in blood and the glamorous trappings of Classical Hollywood, twenty-something Mafia capo Christopher Moltisanti—who has already given the forty-something Tony occasion to complain about the extravagant spending and poor discipline of the younger generation—commits his first murder (or in Mafia slang, "gets his bones"). On the pretext of peacefully settling a dispute between the Soprano crime family and a group of Czech gangsters, Christopher arranges a meeting with Emil Kolar (Bruce Smolanoff),

¹⁷ Tony's actual home is a similarly uncanny place—the site of much anxiety and dread for the mobster, it is where most of his panic attacks and blackouts occur.

a junior member of the rival syndicate, at the butcher's shop that doubles as an after-hours hangout for Tony and his men. Smoking a cigarette and wearing a white singlet, Christopher welcomes Kolar into a trap with the offer of a cocaine deal. As the Czech gangster bends down to snort a sample of the product, Christopher produces a pistol from a hiding place and shoots Kolar in the back of the head at point blank range.¹⁸ As the music in the scene—Bo Diddley's classic macho anthem "I'm a Man"—increases in volume, Christopher shoots him twice more, the shots ringing out while a succession of jump cuts (from Christopher's POV) shows blood splattering against photographs of Humphrey Bogart, Dean Martin and Edward G. Robinson: images of cool, tough, and outsider masculinity from a bygone era. The scene abruptly ends with a shot of Christopher turning away from this scene of carnage and these icons of machismo, and then flinching as he catches a glimpse at pigs' heads in a butcher's display case staring back at him, as if to mock his narcissistic fantasy of stylised violence.

The highly reflexive nostalgic touches on display during Christopher's murder of Emil Kolar recall Bainbridge and Yates' (2005) suggestion that the rampant recycling of images of machismo in 1990s cinema (the films of Quentin Tarantino are the standard bearer here) is a symptom of the fragile state of contemporary masculinity (302). Such recycling constitutes a sort of nostalgia with a wink, a conjuring of images of the past but with an ironic or self-conscious touch that lays bare the artificial or constructed character of more sentimental acts of remembrance. Late twentieth-century literature provides numerous examples of such representational strategies, with one of the most notable exponents of the tendency being the American novelist E. L. Doctorow (Hutcheon 1988; Jameson 1991). The first chapter of his novel *Ragtime* contains a remarkably arch reworking of the saccharine official memory of early 20th century America:

Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900s. Teddy Roosevelt was President. The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outing, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theatres, operas, ballrooms. ... Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols.

¹⁸ Chase composes the murder as a visual echo of the scene in *Goodfellas* in which Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci) shoots Stacks Edwards (Samuel L. Jackson); the resemblance attests to the mediated reflexivity of the series as a whole, and Moltisant's cinephilia in particular.

Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants (Doctorow 1975, 3-4).

The exaggerated sentimentality of this sketch underscores the extent to which our knowledge of ages that preceded our own lives is comprised of hackneyed media images of the past. Nostalgia for such times is only possible through ignoring the particular conflicts, repressions, and privations of the desired era (“There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants.”). This simplistic and sanitised view of the past has been concisely captured in the definition of nostalgia as “history without guilt” (Kammen 1991, 688).

It is important to stress that this sort of sentimental view of the past is not a natural bedfellow of the gangster film. While nostalgia’s dominant flavour is sweetness, or perhaps bittersweetness (a mixture of sweet feelings of remembered happiness and bitter recognition that those times are permanently lost), the gangster genre has conventionally functioned as a corrective to all manifestations of uncomplicated cheerfulness. In Robert Warshow’s (1962) famous formulation, the Hollywood gangster “is the ‘no’ to that great American ‘yes’ which is stamped so big over our official culture and yet has so little to do with the way we really feel about our lives” (106). Instead of optimistic American bromides, the gangster speaks in cynical wisecracks; in place of the tunnel-visioned nativist recollection satirised by Doctorow, the gangster film elevates the immigrant experience (especially Italian, Jewish, and Irish) to the level of modern day mythology. The cultural clash at the heart of *The Sopranos* is this collision between the nihilistic rebellion of the gangster and the American pursuit of happiness represented by the contemporary dominance of psychotherapeutic discourses.

Tony’s yearning for a lost era of mob life—a life that perhaps only ever existed in Hollywood films, and at any rate was shot through with an air of tragedy and nihilism—highlights some of the contradictory aspects of nostalgia in contemporary culture. A number of recent critics have sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of nostalgia to counter the typical view that nostalgia is nothing more than reactionary sentimentality (Boym 2001; Wilson 2005). In film studies, Pam Cook (2005) has lauded the way that nostalgic films can illuminate our “affective responses” to the past

and to its influence on the present (2-3). As in Boym's work, Cook emphasises the potential that nostalgia has for facilitating reflection on the past and for making possible "knowledge and insight [about the past], even though these may be of a different order from those produced by conventional historical analysis, and may be experienced in different ways" (4). The definition that Cook offers of nostalgia—"a state of longing for something that is known to be irretrievable, but is sought anyway" (3)—also works as an apt summation for the pressure many men feel about living up to a masculine ideal that was probably always illusory and that feels especially unattainable in a world where male privilege feels increasingly under threat.

Despite its pervasive cynicism, then, the gangster genre constitutes a rich site for analysis of the imbrications of nostalgia and masculinity. Indeed, a brief review of film history suggests that even this most hard-bitten of genres has looked at the past through rose-tinted lenses. Since at least the dawning of the New Hollywood, the gangster genre has featured a number of epic productions marked by lavish period detail (as in *The Godfather* [Francis Coppola, 1972] and *Once Upon a Time in America* [Sergio Leone, 1986]) and has frequently referenced nostalgia through narratives centred on searches for origins, often in the form of flashbacks to boyhood fascination with, and criminal initiation into, lives of organised crime.¹⁹ Finally, in many ways the gangster hero's nostalgia is most acutely felt in his ever-shifting sense of displacement and dissatisfaction. Conventionally tracing the rise and tragic fall of the gangster from humble (if not severely deprived) origins to ostentatious levels of power and wealth, the genre often features dissatisfied protagonists who realise that the price of their grasping ambition has been the loss of a (real or imagined) moment in which more modest levels of success were accompanied by lower levels of risk and harm and greater levels of stability and intragroup solidarity (the mythic ideal of honour among thieves).²⁰

¹⁹ The first line of voice-over narration from *Goodfellas* provides perhaps the best example here: "For as long as I remember, all I ever wanted to be was a gangster."

²⁰ With respect to the first point, the relative modesty of Tony's home and other possessions is consistent with the diminished status that he has as a contemporary TV mobster (rather than as a cinematic Scarface or Corleone). In short, the Soprano family is solidly upper-middle class, rather than extravagantly wealthy. As for the matter of a (mythical) era in which there was honour and solidarity among thieves, this lament has become a leitmotif in TV crime dramas such as *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*.

As a highly reflexive and intertextual narrative—from the pilot episode on, mobsters repeatedly make explicit comparisons between their own experiences and the lives of crime idealised on celluloid—*The Sopranos* frequently relies on culturally mediated nostalgia as a narrative and thematic resource. As evident in the scene in which Christopher guns down Emil Kolar, icons of the silver screen make ideal objects for nostalgic longing, in that, more than any individual from the nostalgic's past, such charismatic figures can readily serve as ego-ideals that provide the stability and security which he or she craves (Kleiner 1977, 11; Bellelli & Amatulli 1997, 209). Foregrounding the narcissistic identification at work in much male spectatorship, *The Sopranos* depicts a kind of masculinist nostalgia for the (imagined) stability of earlier times. Tony's nostalgia is highly gendered in its avowed yearning for the stability of his father's world, though his own enchantment with film icons such as Gary Cooper suggests that at some level he recognises that the age of John "Johnny Boy" Soprano (Tony's late father, who is played in flashbacks to Tony's childhood by Joseph Siravo) and his crew was less golden than it might now appear. As is often the case with masculinist nostalgia—the yearning for a time “when men were men”—the object of desire is not a “real” memory, but a fantasised one, a version of the past gleaned from popular culture (Coontz 1992). When forced to confront his actual boyhood, rather than a mythical mid-century idyll, Tony actually comes face to face with his anxiety and dread, as his childhood provided no shelter from the brutal violence of the criminal underworld his father inhabited.

The pervasive violence of Tony's mob upbringing is an issue broached a number of times during his therapy sessions, but it is most clearly addressed in scenes from the ironically titled episode “Fortunate Son” (S3E03). Discussing a recent blackout—after a stressful day, Tony faints while snacking on capocollo in his kitchen—Tony tells Dr Melfi the story of his first blackout when he was eleven years old. A flashback shows the young Tony (Mark Damiano II) witnessing his father cut off Francis Satriale's (Lou Bonacki) finger after the butcher failed to repay gambling debts. Tony's father comforts his horrified son, who comes to term with what he has seen but then faints after witnessing his mother and father canoodling while cutting the roast for dinner. Dr Melfi views this revelation as a breakthrough in Tony's therapy. She suggests to Tony that he frequently has panic attacks while cooking or eating meat because of this childhood

trauma. The capocollo is to Tony, she explains, what the madeleine was to Marcel Proust—a sensory trigger that prompts the involuntary remembrance of things past. Tony is wary of Melfi’s interpretation—he remarks that the Proustian scenario “sounds very gay”—and there is in fact an important distinction between Proust’s and Tony’s situations. While Proust’s madeleine is the precursor to a famous nostalgic reverie, Tony’s cold cuts awaken a dormant trauma; and while the gay Frenchman responds by generating seven volumes of reminiscences, the macho Italian-American is rendered mute, at times even unconscious, by his past.²¹

Rather than facing the real events of his boyhood, Tony prefers to seek refuge in “displaced nostalgia” (Vanderbilt 1993, 155), the longing for a time “not known ... firsthand” (Wilson 2005, 32), a mode of memory that takes the form of a fascination with mass media images of historical events and cultural figures who are iconic markers of the desired era and the generation who lived through it. Thus, Tony Soprano’s real nostalgia is for the popular culture fantasies of a bygone era. Tony begins the first episode by invoking the world of his father, but by episode’s end the object of his nostalgic desire is the emotionally self-possessed masculinity of Gary Cooper. In Tony’s personal history we can see the entire evolution of nostalgia, which at various points in history has been seen as a disease like melancholia (Tony’s depression is what brings him to Dr Melfi’s office); as Proustian recollection (though with a pronounced traumatic aspect); and, finally, as the highly commodified and mediated representations of a “memory industry” (K Klein 2000, 127). Tony’s mass-mediated displaced nostalgia takes as its most desired object Gary Cooper, an icon of the mid-twentieth century’s fantasy of taciturn and dutiful masculinity. Near the end of his first therapy session, Tony angrily decries the increasingly confessional character of contemporary American culture:

Nowadays everybody's gotta go to shrinks, and counsellors, and go on *Sally Jessy Raphael* and talk about their problems. What happened to Gary Cooper? The strong, silent type—*that* was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do (S1E01).

²¹ The fact that Satriale’s Pork Store is taken over by Tony’s father and in subsequent decades becomes the main daytime hangout for Tony and his crew underscores how Tony is never far from a reminder of the brutal primal scene that continually haunts him.

What Tony is mourning here is the loss of a single-minded instrumentality that is stereotypically masculine. From Tony's point of view, a real man is not emotional—or at least is not prone to reflecting upon or discussing his emotions. Instead, a real man is bound by the expectations of honour and hierarchy to the unquestioning fulfilment of his duties. The gangster life promises and to some extent delivers abundant glamour (in the form of easy money, mistresses, etc), but for Tony nothing can fully compensate for the restrictiveness of this suffocating moral code, and the strain of containing his dissatisfaction manifests itself in Tony's symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The severity of Tony's symptoms indicates that his feelings of loss are both acutely felt and of obscure origin. In other words, Tony is aware that he is feeling something beyond garden-variety nostalgia; he knows that he is depressed, but he is not sure why. As Freud (1924) famously noted, melancholia is a kind of failed mourning, a pathological and protracted sensation of loss in which the sufferer endures a sort of spiritual death as he or she retreats from human company and experiences a severe diminishment in self-regard. Melancholia thus becomes the cause of—or at the very least is an expression of—alienation from social groups or from society more generally (Freud 1924; Nicholls 2004). Recently, both melancholia and nostalgia (sometimes used interchangeably) have been mobilised to describe particular social groups' resistance to political change—evident, for example, in the way that a certain self-parodic nostalgia for “*zef*” (“white trash”) culture has arisen among certain Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa (Brock & Truscott 2012). The loss (or perceived or threatened loss) of a (formerly) dominant group's privilege triggers nostalgia in the sense that the “home” that nostalgia takes as its object of yearning is not so much any particular place or time but a feeling of belonging (Felski 1999); the time or place that one longs for in nostalgia is the time or place free of the pain or sickness (*algia*) of such yearning or alienation. If nostalgia is a “periodizing emotion” (Boym 2001, 24) that separates a postlapsarian present from a prelapsarian past, masculinist nostalgia quite readily maps onto this scheme, as those who believe that masculinity is in crisis look back at an (imagined) untroubled past—a moment when male identity seemed blissfully free of contradiction and patriarchal rule was assured (Tannock 1995, 454; Boym 2001, 24). Another way of putting this is that the nostalgic yearns to return to his

or her childhood, to a period of primary narcissism free of conflict and desire.²² The boyhood that men yearn for may be the actual boyhood of their youth (or an idealised version thereof) or an earlier stage in the “imagined community” (B. Anderson 1983/2006) of which they are a part.

Such nostalgia is the keynote to late twentieth-century writing about masculinity in crisis, as exemplified in the works of bestselling authors Robert Bly (1992) and Sam Keen (1991), though for a number of reasons this nostalgia is a more complicated affair than initial impressions might suggest (Connell 2000, 5). In the wake of the second wave feminist movement, men have undoubtedly experienced a loss of some of their gender privilege, though of course rather than perceived as men’s “loss” this might instead be welcomed as a righting of the historical wrongs suffered by women. Moreover, such wistful gazes at the past rather fancifully presume that there once was a time when all men possessed a coherent and secure male identity, when in fact the benefits of male privilege have never been equally distributed. A further problem for those men looking nostalgically to a prelapsarian historical moment is that while masculinity has undoubtedly provided men with certain benefits, it has also traditionally (at least potentially) come with considerable costs. Allowing sanctioned codes of masculinity to dictate social behaviour can leave men vulnerable to violence, deprived of sexual and emotional intimacy, and stunted in personal development. Tony Soprano’s plight is illustrative here: while “his gangster persona provides him with constant excitement and action, a sense of power and control” that is an indispensable part of his male identity, it conflicts with his sense of himself as a “benevolent husband and father” (Willis 2002, 6). The strain needed to manage these conflicting identities causes Tony’s hysterical loss of consciousness, a state in which he finds blessed relief from the pressures that his two families—his crime family and his actual family—exert on his masculinity/masculinities (Abbott 2002, Pfeil 1995).

²² See Mulvey (1981/1989) and Neale (1993) for examples of how representations of screen masculinity often turn on such celebrations of narcissistic self-sufficiency.

Nostalgia, Gangsters, and Social Memory

The fifth episode of the first season of *The Sopranos* would prove to be a watershed point in the series, especially with respect to the characterisation of Tony Soprano. The plot of “College” (S1E05) revolves around Tony accompanying his daughter Meadow as she tours prospective colleges in New England. Earlier episodes had already established that the maturing Meadow is no longer naïve about her father’s criminal activities, and the lengthy interstate drive affords Meadow and Tony an opportunity to talk candidly about their lives. Under pressure from Meadow, Tony reluctantly admits that illegal activities account for some of his income, though a chance encounter in this episode underscores what an understatement this confession is. While driving, Tony spots an old Mafia associate, Febby Petrullio (Tony Ray Rossi), who has turned police informant and entered the FBI’s Witness Protection Program. Leaving Meadow at a college recruitment function, Tony tracks down Petrullio and brutally strangles him to death with a wire. Later, at Bowdoin College, Tony notices that a wall of the Admissions Office is inscribed with a slogan from Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the school’s most famous graduates: “No man can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which one may be true.”

This maxim clearly strikes a chord with Tony, whose detour into cold-blooded murder during his tour of elite New England colleges clearly underscores the competing demands made upon him by his two “families”. The dilemma sketched by Hawthorne is, a century and a half later, one that is felt ever more acutely at the turn-of-the-millennium. The British social theorist Anthony Giddens (1991) has suggested that the “reflexive” character of late modernity is evident in a basic indeterminacy within contemporary subjects. As part of his argument, Giddens cites the work of the psychiatrist Erik Erikson, who observed that the analysand of his day:

suffers most under the problem of what he should believe in and who he should—or indeed, might—be or become; while the patient of early psychoanalysis suffered most under inhibitions which prevented him from being what and who he thought he knew he was (Erikson 1950/1995, 253; qtd. in Giddens 1991, 69).

As part of his broader project investigating the reflexivity of contemporary culture, Giddens suggests that personal self-reflection (using insights from psychotherapeutic institutions, including self-help books and daytime talk shows) is a key aspect of everyday life at the end of the twentieth century. For Giddens, self-help books are emblematic of our era because the questions such works presume to be on readers' minds—"What to do? How to act? Who to be?"—are the "focal questions for everyone living in late modernity" (Giddens 1991, 70).

Tony's Mafia boss identity is a nostalgic throwback in that it strenuously rejects the self-investigation that contemporary culture prescribes as key to individual happiness. His praise of the stoic Gary Cooper (dead for nearly forty years at the turn of the millennium) epitomises his disdain for the more emotionally reflective and expressive times in which he finds himself. Indeed, there is a paradox at the heart of Tony's gangster identity that gives his plight a particularly melancholic air. While Tony feels ever more drawn to the Mafia life that he was born into as a conformation of his social identity—his father's heyday is invoked as a nostalgic ideal—the organisation's traditional code of silence prevents him from being able to come to terms (literally) with his feelings of loss. The "male bonding" of the Mafia's code of masculinity binds him to a particular social identity which, he increasingly realises, stands in the way of his individual happiness. *Omerta*—from the Italian '*uomo*' ('man')—is the Mafia's code of masculinity, which famously proscribes the divulgence of criminal secrets and severely punishes "rats" or informers (Nicholls 2004, 173 n. 12). For Tony, *omerta* is both an object of nostalgia—his longing for the coherent masculinity of his father's age, in which honourable criminals lived by "standards" and with "pride"—and the unseen spiritual cancer standing in the way of redemptive self-knowledge. To succeed as a professional criminal, Tony's first priority is eluding arrest and prosecution, a demand complicated by the RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) statute's facility at breaking the silence and solidarity that generally protect criminal organisations. The hermetic reticence produced by such culture helps protect the mythical glamour of the Mafia lifestyle, but, as becomes increasingly clear in *The Sopranos*, at the cost of intense repression and self-deception. Later in the series, Tony learns that his late father suffered from the same type of blackout panic attacks that would later plague his son. Thus, Tony's nostalgia is at least partially misplaced. Not

only did his father fail to obtain the level of material success that Tony and his crew have, but also he likely suffered from the same sort of emotional or spiritual distress that would afflict the later generation.

While Tony and his men would probably describe their relation to the past with words such as “nostalgia” or “tradition”, a better descriptor might be “traumatic”. Tony’s nephew Christopher again provides an illustration of this tendency at work. By the sixth episode of the series (“The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti” [S1E06]), the nostalgic music and iconography that marked Christopher’s execution of Emil Kolar in the pilot by episode 6 have been replaced with traumatic nightmares in which the murdered Czech haunts Christopher. This trauma also marks Christopher’s descent into a painful self-consciousness, a suspicion that his life in the Mafia might fall short of his expectations, and that who he *really* is, remains a mystery to everyone, including himself. Unable to find fame as either a gangster or as a screenwriter trading on his Mafia knowledge, Christopher worries that his life lacks the narrative trajectory required in reflexive modernity (Giddens 1991). “What’s my [story] arc?” the emotionally tormented young mobster and wannabe screenwriter continually asks.

In this same episode, Tony, having noticed his nephew’s distress, attempts to engage Christopher in a conversation about mental health. Christopher quickly dismisses Tony’s very tentative questions about depression—the older mobster claims his knowledge on the subject comes from television news reports—in a manner that makes it clear that he adheres to the Mob view of mental illness and emotional sensitivity as signs of weakness. The tenseness of this exchange underscores the untenable nature of Tony’s plight—there can be no cure for his depression and anxiety without seeing a psychiatrist, but doing so places his life in perhaps greater danger, as the Mafia, as “a secret, exclusive and rigorously masculine organization of a ‘totalizing’ or all-enveloping kind ... accepts no distinctions between public and private spheres” (Siebert 1996, 74). When Tony confesses to his wife Carmela (Edie Falco) that he has been seeing a psychiatrist, he warns her to keep this information secret, as the only psychiatric intervention the Mob generally allows is a “steel-jacketed anti-depressant in the back of the head” (“Pilot: The Sopranos” [S1E01]). It is a line repeated almost verbatim forty-eight episodes later, when Tony warns the heroin-addicted Christopher that he is fortunate to be allowed to enter rehab, instead of receiving his “intervention”

in the back of his head (“The Strong Silent Type” [S4E04]). The parallel between the two scenes indicates the degree to which Tony has made concessions to a contemporary emotionally expressive culture that defies his nostalgia for traditional gangster *omerta*.

The possession of this type of “emotional habitus”—that is, a predisposition to emotional self-reflection and interpersonal psychological intimacy—has become increasingly desirable in contemporary culture, especially in business management discourses (Illouz 2008, 214). Just as any legitimate business manager would, Tony recognises the strategic advantages of such emotional competence, despite its incompatibility with *omerta*. The adoption of such strategies, however, is not without risks, and not just for the fictional gangsters of *The Sopranos*. “Emotional habitus” can be seen as either precipitating or symptomising a crisis in masculinity through discriminating between male subjects—those men whose possession of this sort of emotional predisposition marks themselves off as of a different (and in general social terms a higher) economic/professional class and as “New Men” who have shrugged off the emotional reticence and repressiveness of traditional masculinity (Illouz 2008, 227).

For Tony, the benefits—both strategic and spiritual—of this new masculinity are tempered by the perceived risks presented by this more emotionally attuned contemporary era. His anxiety about self-reflection triggers a delusional longing for a bygone era, his nostalgia representing what Janelle Wilson (2005) calls a “sanctuary of meaning” for those experiencing crisis. The question for Tony, as for every nostalgic, is not just what the past means, but how in fact it makes its meaning. Is the meaning simply *there*—for the remembering subject in the present to access its traces—or must the past be reconstructed and its meanings interpreted, so that it is at least in part the desire and memory of the nostalgic which gives the past its meaning?

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym (2001) distinguishes between two types of nostalgia—two different ways of “giving shape and meaning to longing”—the restorative and the reflective (41). The restorative tendency is characterised by the belief that one can go home again, that memory can be restored. As Janelle Wilson (2005) explains, “those who experience restorative nostalgia do not think of themselves as nostalgic. Rather, they believe that they are pursuing truth” (41). By contrast, in reflective nostalgia, the emphasis “is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an

absolute truth but on the meditation of history and the passage of time” (Boym 2001, 49). Boym’s distinction makes clear that memory, as represented in *The Sopranos* and in the broader culture is not so much *nostalgic* as *postnostalgic* (as I noted in the Introduction). This post-nostalgia describes a contemporary mode of men’s thinking about the past in which men can no longer be innocently nostalgic about a time “when men were men”—no longer able to practice the “history without guilt” (Kammen 1991, 688) often considered intrinsic to nostalgia. When Tony first presents to Dr Melfi, his yearnings seem typical of restorative nostalgia: the principal goal of Dr Melfi’s therapeutic regimen is to help Tony come to self-understanding through moving from a debilitating restorative case of nostalgia to a more reflective outlook on his past, and on the present that it has helped to create. Such insight need not be in any way ethically transformational—indeed, much of what Tony takes away from his self-reflection seems to only help make him a more efficient criminal and thug—but it inevitably contributes to a fuller understanding of the particular crisis facing contemporary men.

Chapter Four

Flags of Our Fathers: World War II, Collective Memory and the Disappearing Frontier of American Paternity

“... the traumatized subject becomes a camera which belatedly and repeatedly takes the same photograph—the event as missed and the very missing of the event.”
—Jodi Brooks (2001)

“A Single Shot Can End the War”
—Promotional tagline, *Flags of Our Fathers*

Todd M Kuchta (1994) begins his study of the narrative frames of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Coppola, 1979) by noting that while narrative frames may both structurally organise and aesthetically augment their enclosed tales, conventionally their ultimate purpose is to disappear. Ultimately, “frames are meant to be forgotten” (Matthews 1985, 25; quoted in Kuchta 1994, 45). Kuchta goes on to argue that in *Apocalypse Now* it is not the centre, but the frame that cannot hold; in Coppola’s Vietnam-set adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, there is “none of the apparent safety or stability which the frame provides in Conrad’s novel” (46). The ambiguity of the narrator-protagonist Willard’s (Martin Sheen) spatial and temporal location “causes a breakdown in the epistemological foundations of the very narrative which the film recounts” (46). Narrator and viewer alike are no longer able to distinguish between the beginning and the end or between home and jungle, as frame and contents overrun each other in a particular type of traumatic madness that in American collective memory remains emblematic of the Vietnam War.

Matthew’s description of frames as “meant to be forgotten” is telling. There is a fragility to frames both actual (narrative/pictorial) and metaphoric (contextual) that means that decay begins at the edges of a memory. Without “the safety or stability” of such frames, the past remains elusive, a point that is key to understanding the World War II biopic *Flags of Our Fathers* (Clint Eastwood, 2006). For decades, the primary mnemonic frame at work in representations of World War II has been nostalgia, and a particularly masculine nostalgia at that. As David Hoogland Noon (2004) observes, at

the turn of the millennium, World War II is remembered in a quintessentially nostalgic fashion, as American history's "good war" and the "default symbol of national virtue" (343). In turn, the American soldiers who fought World War II are remembered as "the greatest generation" (Brokaw 1998), and commemoration of the war invariably involves implicit or explicit admonishment that their contemporary descendants honour these veterans' sacrifices (Noon 2004; Biesecker 2008).

A logic of debt and degeneration underpins these demands, and these are traits that, as we saw in the last chapter, are readily evident in a certain type of contemporary masculinist nostalgia. In this view, the prelapsarian world is unified and resolute; the postlapsarian, fractious and timid. It is this indictment of the contemporary world that mobster and film buff Tony Soprano evocatively condemns at his first therapy session:

Nowadays everybody's gotta go to shrinks, and counsellors, and go on *Sally Jessy Raphael* and talk about their problems. What happened to Gary Cooper? The strong, silent type—*that* was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do (S1E01).

While Tony's characterisation of Cooper as an icon of a certain type of masculinity—dutiful and courageous, stoic and taciturn—could derive from any number of the Hollywood legend's screen roles, these celebrated manly virtues are perhaps especially evident in *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941), the patriotic war film that helped mobilise American support for the Second World War. Its first theatrical run coinciding with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawks' classic film told the true story of a pacifist farmer who became a decorated war hero during World War I. The "reconciliatory pattern" on display here—that is, the way that the eponymous hero played by Cooper in *Sergeant York* possesses the dichotomous identities of pacifist and warrior—has been identified by Robert Ray (1985) as Hollywood's "thematic paradigm," a reiteration of the American myth that the frontier afforded (white) men a unique opportunity for self-creation (58). This way of "overcom[ing] dichotomies" (Ray 1985, 58) is likely what Tony Soprano finds most appealing: Cooper seems to make the embodiment of contradictory states not just a possibility, but a hegemonic ideal. One way of reading Tony's complaint about contemporary men is that emotional

reflection (getting “in touch with [their] feelings”) prevents men from discharging their duties, especially the duty to commit violence.

As such, the contemporary crisis of masculinity is actually a crisis of nostalgia, a recognition that conventional models of masculinity are not just lost forever, but that they may have been impossible (and perhaps even undesirable) fantasies in the first place. To fortify against this crisis, new modes of memory must be marshalled. While simple nostalgia used to be enough to preserve the image of World War II heroism, the turn-of-the-millennium crisis of masculinity means another mode of memory—trauma—is necessary to continue this ideological work. In a way this means returning to some of the earliest cinematic depictions of the Second World War. Some of the films immediately following the conflict, such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), showed trauma’s effects on soldiers after the conflict (Silverman 1992), before temporal/generational distance from the 1940s meant that many World War II films would portray the war through the lens of period-inflected nostalgia and patriotic commemoration.

Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers*, however, works against this more recent tendency, mobilising trauma to underscore the necessarily reflexive character of nostalgic and commemorative framings of World War II. Recounting the true story behind one of the most famous photographs of the conflict, Joe Rosenthal’s *Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima*, Eastwood’s film circles carefully around the battle and its most famous representation, providing glimpses of both but withholding sustained attention until the film’s second act. It is a strategy of estrangement, as Eastwood wrenches the historical event in question from both the familiar nostalgic aura around Rosenthal’s photograph and the vérité trappings of more recent representations of World War II such as *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998). To this end, traumatic memory is mobilised as both a corrective to more sanitised forms of commemoration as well as a means of speaking across generations, from the men who fought the war to the sons that they fathered after returning. In spanning this chasm of collective memory, *Flags of Our Fathers* becomes an important contemplation not just of war and image-making, but also of paternity in an era in which masculinity is in crisis.

The Second World War and American Memory

The Hollywood film most famous for war commemoration at the turn-of-the-millennium provides an excellent example of Kuchta's and Matthews' observations about disappearing narrative frames. There seems to be a curious case of critical amnesia in much of the academic and popular writing on *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), as much writing on the film seems to forget the narrative frame that structures Spielberg's celebrated blockbuster D-Day film. A review in *The Journal of Military History*, for example, states "*Saving Private Ryan* may be the only war movie that begins with the climax—its recreation of the [American military] landing at Omaha Beach—a truly remarkable achievement in film history" (Vandervort 1998, 894). Another commentator likewise refers to the Omaha Beach battle scene as the "opening scene" or "the first half hour" of the film, a misapprehension that is understandable given the overwhelming duration and violent intensity of what was widely lauded as filmmaking that broke new ground in the depiction of military combat (Cohen 1999, 82).

What such comments overlook, as Barbara A. Biesecker (2008) points out in her study of contemporary commemoration of World War II, is the brief framing scene that precedes the famous Omaha Beach sequence: "Much of the enthusiasm for the movie is attributed to what is typically, albeit mistakenly, referred to by reviewers as its 'opening scene,' Spielberg's recreation of the U.S. invasion of Normandy" (160). In fact, the World War II narrative presented in Spielberg's film is framed by a "multigenerational journey to the gravesite of Captain John Miller in France," and the film closes with the now-elderly Ryan asking—Miller, his family, and the viewers as well—to "Tell me I have lived a good life. ... Tell me I'm a good man" (Biesecker 2008, 160-61). Private Ryan must be saved, in the past from Nazi shells and bullets, and in the present from the looming obscurity in the memories of his descendants. The film makes it clear that Miller's words were meant not just for Ryan, but for the film's viewers as well, "the callow inheritors of the sacrifice of wartime generations, Spielberg Boomers and [Matt] Damon Gen-Xers alike" (Doherty 1998). *Saving Private Ryan*, then, accentuates the narrative of intergenerational debt (specifically, the debt of Baby Boomers to the wartime sacrifices of their "Greatest Generation" forebears) by

foregrounding an act of commemoration that flows seamlessly into the invasion sequence's visual excess, structured around what Biesecker (2008) calls the wartime "white male body in pain" (159).

Saving Private Ryan was just one particularly high-profile example of the outbreak of "commemoration fever" that marked the mid-1990s (Collini 1999, 38). The year 1995 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, and there were high-profile observations of a number of significant events and milestones, such as the Allied Invasion of Normandy (D-Day) and the liberation of Auschwitz. As would be expected, practices of war commemoration have received much attention in memory studies (Ashplant *et al* 2000; Marwick 2003; Gregory 2014; Sherman 1994; Winter 1998), with prominent focus on the ways in which acts of commemoration strive to replace the trauma and chaos of war with meaning and order (Koureas 2007, 3). Rosenthal's iconic image of Iwo Jima—and its official reproductions—exemplifies this tendency in important ways. In the way that it apparently captures the very moment of battlefield victory—with soldiers straining together triumphantly to plant the American flag—it seems to capture the mythic instant at which order is regained and chaos vanquished. In contrast to an image showing a more thoroughly realised victory, the tense yet successful exertion of Rosenthal's flag-raisers solicits feelings of awe and reverence for their solidarity and sacrifice. As is often the case with war commemoration, the rationale behind such war commemoration is a civic religious elevation of the commemorated era or event beyond the conflicting interpretations of history and into a more transcendent realm of official memory. This erasure of historical complexity is likewise extended into the present; writing shortly after the turn of the millennium, Barbara Biesecker (2008) pointed out "the pivotal ideological role [that] WWII has begun to play in U.S. public culture in the present," specifically as an object of nostalgic longing by (senior) citizens made anxious by an increasingly fractured polity (158).

Biesecker's observation goes some way toward explaining the furore some American conservatives felt when in 2008 *Time* magazine altered *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* for the cover illustration of its "Special Environment Issue." Appearing with the caption "How to Win the War on Global Warming," the *Time* cover image retains the monochrome soldiers of the iconic original, but in this image the soldiers are planting

an evergreen tree rather than an American flag. The change to the photograph drew the ire of some conservative military veterans, with one calling the cover image “an absolute disgrace. Whoever did it is going to hell. That’s a mortal sin. God forbid he runs into a Marine [who is] an Iwo Jima survivor” (“Controversy Over *Time*” 2008).

Barely a month later, the memory of Iwo Jima was a site of conflict again, this time in a dispute over cinematic representations of history, as American auteurs Clint Eastwood and Spike Lee were locked in an “acrimonious feud” over the representation (or lack thereof) of African American soldiers in Eastwood’s 2006 suite of World War II films, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (Wainwright 2008, A18). Lee’s complaint, in Wainwright’s words, was that “black US troops, who fought in a munitions company at Iwo Jima, had not been given a second of the [running time of] four hours in Eastwood’s two films” (A18). In an earlier story in *The Guardian*, Eastwood responded to Lee’s statements by claiming that the younger director was ignorant of history and that Lee “should shut his face” (Dawson 2008). Responding to Eastwood’s statements, Lee countered that “First of all, the man is not my father and we’re not on a plantation either,” and that the legendary actor and director “sounds like an angry old man” on the brink of “a *Dirty Harry* flashback” (Wainwright 2008, A18).

The spat between Eastwood and Lee underscores the inter-generational antagonism at the heart of disputes over the commemoration and appropriation of Rosenthal’s iconic memento of the Iwo Jima campaign. Such disputes are a cultural symptom of contemporary anxieties about paternity, specifically about the sacrifice of fathers (or father figures) and the legacy inherited by their real or symbolic sons. More pronounced in the Eastwood-Lee slanging match, thanks to the younger director’s accusation of racist paternalism, this tension is also on display in the controversy over the *Time* cover illustration, as fears over global warming are often read as an anxiety about the state of the world that will be bequeathed to future generations—due in this scenario to a lack of sacrifice on the part of the fathers and mothers alive today.

The first of two Eastwood films about the Battle of Iwo Jima to appear in 2006—the second, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, tells the story of the battle from the point-of-view of Japanese soldiers—*Flags of Our Fathers* aimed to broaden the scope of representations about the War in the Pacific. In comments on the DVD release of *Flags of Our Fathers*, screenwriter Paul Haggis suggested that the project was conceived as

an antidote to earlier jingoistic representations: “From the beginning Clint said that he didn’t want some sort of John Wayne ‘Rah-rah, let’s go kill some more Asians’ kind of film” (*Words on the Page*). The mention of John Wayne here is relevant not only because of the iconic actor’s role in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949), but also because of his status as an icon of machismo, a position in many respects inherited by Eastwood, at least in his acting career.²³ While Dwan’s film culminated in a reproduction of Rosenthal’s photograph—re-enacted by some of the actual flag-raisers, as if to guarantee the film’s connection to the (recent) past it represented—Eastwood makes the iconic image the very premise of his film, seeking to unearth mystery or complexity from one of the world’s most familiar images. In short, *Flags of Our Fathers* is an exploration not of the battle itself, but of its representation and its survival in individual and social memory.

Trauma and Masculinity in Memories of World War II

Susan Faludi’s (1999) description in *Stiffed* of the mid-century, post-war American man as a barely domesticated beast, caged in suburbia but dreaming of the heavens, strikes a familiar chord to consumers of screen texts from classic *film noir* to *Mad Men*. One of Hollywood’s most famous World War II combat films, produced and released just a few years after the conflict, *The Sands of Iwo Jima* seems in large measure devoted to exploring what kind of man the postwar era needs. Viewed through the prism of Halbwachsian collective memory—“a reconstruction of the past [that] adapts the image of old facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present” (Paez, Basabe, and Gonzalez 1997, 157)—Dwan’s film is an investigation of that era’s crisis of masculinity, specifically the tension between warrior and father identities. The film’s father-and-son conflict is played out between Sgt. Stryker (John Wayne) and the most rebellious member of his squad, Pfc. Peter Conway (John Agar), whose deceased father had been Stryker’s commanding officer and father figure before being killed on the

²³ The major difference between Wayne and Eastwood, however, is the degree to which a level of ambiguity or ambivalence is built into the latter’s performance of a tough or macho masculinity, in such a way that “the construction of masculinity” in many of his films “offer[s] the tools for its own deconstruction” (Knee 1993, 87).

battlefield. While Stryker's submission to the warrior code and the paternal Law is evident in his own rites of paternity—he names his son “Sam” after his mentor, Col. Conway—Private Conway proclaims his apostasy for Stryker and the rest of his comrades-in-arms to hear. Of his newborn son, Conway vows:

I won't insist that he be tough. I'll try to make him intelligent. And I won't insist that he read the Marine Corps manual. I'll get him Shakespeare. I don't want him to be a Colonel Conway or Sergeant Stryker. I want him to be intelligent, considerate, cultured, and a gentleman.

Interestingly, these subtleties and ambivalences in the film's representations of masculinity have often been overlooked by viewers seduced by the simplistic macho bluster embodied in the mythic figure of John Wayne. In his Vietnam War memoir, for example, Philip Caputo (1977) recalls how Dwan's film aided the efforts of his U.S. Marine Corp recruiters:

Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest. The recruiters started giving me the usual sales pitch, but I hardly needed to be persuaded. I decided to enlist (6).

As any less impressionable viewer could point out, Stryker/John Wayne does not come home with medals at the end of Dwan's film; Caputo “seems to have forgotten that John Wayne dies at the end of the film and in any case had no home awaiting his return” (Kinney 2000, 20). Other gung-ho viewers, such as Ron Kovic (2016), may have noticed that Wayne dies, but recall a more courageous and glorious death, rather than the tragic and rather pointless circumstances of Stryker's actual death, killed by a sniper's random bullet after the battle has been declared won.

Where Dwan's film culminates in a recreation of Rosenthal's photograph, that famous image becomes the starting point of *Flags of Our Fathers*. Accordingly, Eastwood's film becomes a study of (photographic, cinematic, discursive) framing, with the pullback and the “third wave flashback” (Gabbard and Greenberg 1999) the film's cinematic and narrative signatures. *Flags of Our Fathers* begins with a nightmare, as we see the younger John “Doc” Bradley (Ryan Phillippe), a US Navy medic running

along an empty cratered landscape with anguished cries of “Corpsman!” sounding all around him. The film cuts abruptly to Bradley roughly fifty years later, now an old man waking in fright, as he relives his service on Iwo Jima in the form of nightmares, a classic re-experiencing symptom of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (American Psychological Association [APA] 2013; Appelbaum et al 1997, 225).

Still calling out for the wounded comrade he was not able to save decades earlier, the now elderly John Bradley (George Grizzard) collapses and is rushed to hospital. The film’s voiceover track also begins at this point, with an elderly Joe Rosenthal (Ned Eisenberg) discussing the nature of war and its representation. According to the photographer, non-combatants can never fully comprehend the cruelty and horror of war, hence the public’s desire, perhaps even need, to distil the meaning of a particular conflict into a single image. Shots of Rosenthal speaking are intercut with a montage representing how his most famous photograph entered the American collective memory: from an Associated Press darkroom, to a printing press, and to the front pages of newspapers at newsstands and on doorsteps across the country.

Eastwood next focuses on two different groups consuming the image. First, on a Texas farm, housewife Belle Block (Judith Ivey) glances at the front page of a local newspaper and excitedly informs her family that she recognises her son Harlon in the flag-raising photograph, even though only his back is facing the camera. When Harlon’s younger brother complains that “all you can see [of the figure] is his behind,” Belle replies, “And that’s his [behind]. I powdered and diapered it, I know my son. That’s him.” In the next scene, US Treasury Department officials study a newspaper front page and decide that Rosenthal’s photo would be the perfect advertisement centrepiece for the Seventh War Bond Drive. The juxtaposition of the two scenes—the mother’s intimate memories of nurturing versus the (male) bureaucrats’ exploitative machinations—neatly sketches the primary conflict of the film, the antagonism between, on the one hand, the personal lives (and deaths) of soldiers as recalled through the memories of their loved ones, and, on the other, the production of a myth or legend for political ends.

Pulling back the curtain to show how Rosenthal’s image was transformed into myth, Eastwood first focuses on the circumstances in which the image was created and popularised before fleshing out the biographies of the flag-raisers. Along with Bradley,

who would buy a funeral home after the war, the group included Rene Gagnon (Jesse Bradford), who discovered after the war that the jobs that he was promised as a war hero would never eventuate; and Ira Hayes (Adam Beach), a Native American whose traumatic combat experiences and discomfort with fame drove him to alcoholism and an early death. By turns tragic, disappointing or simply mundane, the postwar lives of all three men, like that of the eponymous protagonist of *Saving Private Ryan*, were far from heroic.

Remembering Iwo Jima and Vietnam

Eastwood's preoccupation with ageing and with the fate of World War II veterans after the war indicates that the crisis of memory suggested by Eastwood's decision to take on the Iwo Jima legend is informed by contemporary cultural concerns about masculinity and paternity. These anxieties parallel the rhetorical use of World War II as a symbol of a particular vision of American national identity that is at risk of being forgotten with the passing of generations. *Flags of Our Fathers* clearly sits within this trend, as is clear from one of the comments that the elderly Rosenthal makes about wartime photojournalism. When describing how "the right photograph can win or lose a war," Rosenthal offers as an example not his own work, but an image from a later war. "Look at Vietnam," he explains. "The picture of that South Vietnamese officer blowing that fella's brains out the side of his head? ... That was it; the war was lost. We just hung around for a while pretending it wasn't." The photograph referred to here (*General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon*, by Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams), as well as the war it stands for, signifies in American collective memory nearly the exact opposite meaning that Rosenthal's image and World War II do. In American historical and political discourse, the Second World War and *Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima* have become shorthand for a vision of America as a virtuous power, with its citizens striving for victory and united by dedication to a moral cause. The Vietnam War, by contrast, especially as represented by confronting images such as Eddie Adams' photograph, has come to connote social division, mass protest, and widespread scepticism about the morality of the conflict.

The element that these two otherwise antithetical entities have in common is that each conflict/icon is heavily coded as representative of a particular generation. These wars, in other words, “made” their respective generations. As Karl Mannheim (1972) argued, generational cohorts are determined not so much by the age range of their members, but by the social memories held by a significant number (though not all) of those individuals. In other words, generational identity is founded on the recollection of significant shared experiences—primarily, the collected memories of events that occurred in late adolescence or early adulthood, the same period of life at which men are sent to fight in wars. As Barbara A. Misztal (2003) explains, “in order to share generational location in a sociologically meaningful sense an individual must be born within the same historical and cultural context and be exposed to experiences that occur during their formative adult years” (85). Furthermore, as Misztal explains, Mannheim makes an important distinction between “appropriated and personally acquired memories,” the latter consisting of:

the memories we acquire for ourselves in the process of personal development [that is, in late adolescence and early adulthood] are real memories which we really possess and which are the basis of our generational identity, since this type of knowledge is generally better preserved in our memory and has real binding power (Misztal 2003, 85).

In *Flags of Our Fathers*, the generational differences connoted by the Second World War and the Vietnam War are, in a sense, reconciled by the film’s invocation of trauma (through the representation of the elder Bradley’s nightmare of Iwo Jima). In other words, the differences in meanings between the two sets of images/conflicts/generations collapse into an identical and possibly ahistorical experience of traumatic memory. Allan Young (1995) and Ian Hacking (1995) have both argued against the presumed universality of traumatic memory, suggesting instead that traumatic memory is a feature of modernity, arising with the industrial and railway accidents of the late nineteenth century and then becoming a major object of psychiatric study during World War I. More specifically, and more relevant to our discussion of *Flags of Our Fathers*, the contemporary diagnosis of PTSD originates in the post-war experiences of American veterans of the Vietnam War, whose high rates

of mental illness led to the disorder's definition and inclusion in the Third Edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA 1980; Young 1995, 107-8). While earlier psychiatric diagnoses of "stress disorders"—variously referred to as "shock", "shell shock", "battle fatigue" or "combat neurosis"—assumed that symptoms would disappear following the removal of the patient from the stressful experience, PTSD was a new type of trauma disorder in that it posited that wartime events could have debilitating effects years or even decades after the traumatic experience. The "re-experiencing" of a long-ago distressing event, in the form of nightmares (such as Bradley's in *Flags of Our Fathers*) or flashbacks, is an emblematic symptom of PTSD and a familiar component of the media stereotype of the Vietnam veteran who is driven to psychotic despair by traumatic memories from his service in America's notoriously unnecessary, divisive, and unjust war (Young 1995, 109).

Trauma accounts for the most notable difference between Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* and Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. While the earlier film uses a solitary flashback sequence (embedded within the narrative cornice of an ageing veteran's return to Normandy), the opening of *Flags of Our Fathers* unfolds as a disorienting complex of narrative frames that fluctuate between revealing and concealing the flag-planting event at the centre of the film. In other words, since the subject of Eastwood's film is not a specific event *per se* but its representation—that is, because the film is on its most basic level about Rosenthal's photograph *Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima* rather than the Battle of Iwo Jima itself—*Flags of Our Fathers* is structured through the use of modernist-inspired sequences in which the security of remembrance is called into question through formal strategies that more tentatively suture the spectator into the film's diegesis.

These paratextual and intertextual/generic cues, moreover, are supplemented by the text's deft formal organisation, which, as in Eastwood's earlier *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), utilises homodiegetic voiceover narration (from relatively minor or marginal characters rather than the protagonists) to span potential gaps in comprehension. While James Bradley (Tom McCarthy), the adult son of "Doc" Bradley, eventually fills this role in *Flags of Our Fathers*, a similar function is initially taken by the elderly Joe Rosenthal himself. For nearly the entirety of the first reel, from the film's second scene,

Rosenthal's voice (at first unidentified) accompanies a visual track that flows from the present day to the 1940s, returning to shots that establish the present day narrational frame (Joe Rosenthal being interviewed by James Bradley) before returning to the World War II era yet again, in a montage of shots (from the Associated Press dark room where Rosenthal's photo is being developed, to newsstands, lounge rooms and eventually the Oval Office) that economically sketches the progress of Rosenthal's image from the moment of exposure to its ascendance to iconic status in American collective memory.

The "personally acquired memories" that are the generational fingerprint of "the greatest generation" are, of course, the memories of warfare that these soldiers experienced in their late teens or early twenties. The project that Spielberg's and Brokaw's works begin, and which *Flags of Our Fathers* to some degree continues, is the transmission of these real "personally acquired memories" to younger generations, so that a particular hegemonic narrative of World War II becomes the appropriated or "prosthetic" (Landsberg 2002) memory of their descendants. My specific concern with this articulation of memory is its masculine character—how do the "flags of our fathers" show the sons how to be men? The way in which Eastwood answers this question is, for a number of reasons, very interesting, not least because the way that he adds trauma to the prevailing modes or practices of memory (commemoration, mourning, nostalgia) that already take America's experience in the Second World War as its object. In an era of masculine "double-consciousness"—a splitting of identity between the self as perceived and as how it is reflected back in the vision of others—traumatic memory becomes the means by which the men of "the greatest generation" become comprehensible to the sons who never understood them.

Thus, Eastwood's film underscores what Spielberg had, in *Saving Private Ryan*, alluded to: the centrality of generational exchange to World War II commemorative discourses. Here (the real life) James Bradley's comments are illuminating, as, in a DVD extra documentary about his book's adaptation, he explains how he never set out to write *Flags of Our Fathers*, the account of the Rosenthal's photograph that became the basis for Eastwood's film. Instead, his research began as an investigation into the reasons why his father, John Bradley, who his family and community knew was one of the famous flag-raisers of Iwo Jima, refused during his lifetime to ever talk about the

war. Remembering a particular incident from his boyhood, when a schoolteacher called his father a war hero, James Bradley recalls his disappointment when his father refuses to tell him any “juicy stories” about his exploits on Iwo Jima (*Words on the Page*). The elder Bradley’s silence on these matters conforms to the pattern Susan Faludi (1999) noted in *Stiffed*, her much-publicised account of the recent American crisis of masculinity. For boys of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Faludi observes, a fascination about wartime prevailed, and their playtime and masculine identity often revolved around the perceived romance of military adventure, a sentiment able to flourish despite (or, more likely, because of) the reticence that marked many of their fathers’ wartime recollections.

Dead and Dying Fathers: Contemporary Male Melodramas

It is easy to see why the story behind *Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima* would appeal to Clint Eastwood. As an actor and director whose work is so thoroughly informed by the thematic concerns of the Western, he has inherited that genre’s preoccupation with the tension between the glamour of myth or legend and the cold hard facts of reality. This tendency is especially evident in the later part of career, where it has played out in tandem with contemplations of the effects of ageing on masculinity. Since his turn as director/star of *Unforgiven* (1993), a revisionist Western in which he plays a gunfighter who comes out of retirement, Eastwood has returned again and again to representations of waning virility. The trend became especially pronounced at the turn of the millennium, as he joined a crew of elderly astronauts in *Space Cowboys* (Clint Eastwood, 2000), while in the crime thriller *Blood Work* (Clint Eastwood, 2002) he starred as a late career detective with a serious heart condition. More specifically, the problem of ageing in many of Eastwood’s later films is very closely related to problems in family relations, as long buried secrets come back to haunt fathers in *Mystic River* (Clint Eastwood, 2003), while older men who are estranged from biological family find surrogate objects for their paternal affection in *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004) and *Gran Torino* (Clint Eastwood, 2008). These last two films are especially significant for dramatizing these bonds of affection after the occupational and civic spaces of white American men have been intruded upon by women and racial

minorities. At the turn of the millennium, the *oeuvre* of America's greatest living icon of dominant culture machismo was most distinguished by a sustained and at times sophisticated contemplation of the contemporary crisis of white masculinity.

In *Flags of Our Fathers*, as in *Gran Torino*, this concern takes the form of the melodramatic demise of a member of the older generation. In the denouement of the former film, as John Bradley lies on his deathbed, still calling out in panic and confusion for Iggy, his son James brings his father back to the present and reminds him that his friend died at Iwo Jima long ago. The elder Bradley replies that he had not thought of Iggy for years, and tells his son, "I wasn't looking for Iggy, I was looking for you. I wanted to tell you—I'm sorry I wasn't a better father ... talk to you more ... I just ... I'm sorry." Choking back tears, his son responds, "Sorry? You were the best father a man could have." The two men embrace, and soon after, the Iwo Jima veteran dies.

In his review in *Sight and Sound*, Ali Jaafar (2007) criticises the film's final act for being "bogged down by tedious exposition about the post-war fate of the three central characters" (58). Jaafar is most damning of the film's final two scenes, the aforementioned deathbed conversation, which is followed by a final brief flashback to the island of Iwo Jima. This "coda," as Richard Combs (2007), terms it, dramatises the final words of the elder Bradley, the final memory of the war that he imparts to his son James. After the two men embrace, John Bradley recalls how at Iwo Jima the commanding officers took the soldiers swimming. "After we planted the flag, we came down off the mountain and they let us swim. ... It was the funniest thing, all this fighting and we were all jumping around in the water like kids. That's the way I remember Iggy." Immediately following this reminiscence, the elderly veteran takes his last breath, and from that point his recollection plays out in black-and-white images of the soldiers stripping off their uniforms and frolicking in the waves, as Bradley's son comments on the voiceover track:

I finally came to the conclusion that maybe he was right. Maybe there's no such thing as heroes. Maybe there are just people like my dad. I finally came to understand why they were so uncomfortable being called heroes. Heroes are something we create, something we need. It's a way for us to understand what is almost incomprehensible: how people could sacrifice so much for us. But for my dad and these men, the risks they took, the wounds they suffered, they did that for their buddies. They may have

fought for their country, but they died for their friends—the man in front, and the man beside them. And if we wish to truly honour these men, we should remember them the way they really were, the way my dad remembered them.

Writing in *Sight and Sound*, Combs (2007) points out that the scene has the same aim as Steven Spielberg's (Eastwood's co-producer for *Flags of Our Fathers*) film *Saving Private Ryan*; that is, the final scene of *Flags of Our Fathers* is "an attempt to bridge the generations, to understand those who fought the war and what fighting it might have meant" (40). Such rapprochement, Combs argues, seems unnecessary given that, unlike Spielberg, Eastwood is not a baby-boomer and thus has no need to honour "a greatest generation" (Brokaw 1998) forebear as Spielberg had done by dedicating *Saving Private Ryan* to his father (Combs 2007, 40).

Combs puts his finger on an important issue regarding *Flags of Our Fathers*, but even the glancing attention he pays to the issue of father-son relations draws the wrong conclusions about these scenes. To fault these scenes for their emphasis on the bond between John and James Bradley is to ignore the paternal themes which, while in many ways are undeveloped, are still central to Eastwood's film (and to a certain extent have been a preoccupation with most if not all of Eastwood's later films). Both Combs and Jaafar see the *flags* but not the *fathers*—the domestic and melodramatic context of these memories of World War II illustrate the contemporary crisis of masculinity is in many ways a crisis of memory: a series of problems or controversies regarding how men remember and represent their past and their forefathers. Masculinity, like the past itself, is forever being remembered (or re-remembered) and recuperated, traumatised and forgotten; it is a gender identity being worked through in much the same way that the hysteric who "suffers mainly from reminiscences" must come to terms with a problematic past (Freud and Breuer 2000).

To take a closer look at the film's penultimate scene, the elder Bradley's deathbed apology—his remorse for what he perceives as inadequate emotional intimacy with his son—is refused as unnecessary by his son, who replies that the veteran had been "the best father a man could have." The question I want to answer is what motivates James Bradley's response, other than a perfectly understandable desire to avoid speaking ill of (and to) the dying. The answer, according to his voiceover, is that his and the other

men's fathers did "the almost incomprehensible" by risking their lives for them. The fact that James Bradley was not yet born lends special significance to this statement, though we might stop short of Steven Spielberg's rather bizarre and self-interested view that the war was "the turning point of the entire century" because Allied victory allowed the baby-boomer generation to be born (Noon 2004, 351).

"Almost Incomprehensible" Fathers: The Paternal Sublime

James Bradley's awe at the "almost incomprehensible" sacrifice of his generation's fathers situates the film squarely in the realm of a discourse we might call "the paternal sublime". In his introduction to Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, Bill Beckley (1999) cites an iconic masculinity-in-crisis text to illustrate the prevalence of the sublime in contemporary cinema. Beckley recounts the narrative of *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), wherein the middle-aged protagonist Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey):

falls in love with his daughter's best friend, a teenage cheerleader, and goes on to find his death. His narration from the grave somehow usurps beauty from an upper-class suburban existence. ... The narrator tries like Aschenbach, in *Death in Venice*, to make himself beautiful so that he can attract the beauty he wants, and like Aschenbach, he dies because of beauty before surrendering to the sublime. It is not coincidence that a panoramic shot of a vast sky, so often and traditionally a symbol of the sublime, is the last thing you see before the film cuts to black (Beckley 1999, x-xi).

The narrative of Mendes' film thus follows a general trajectory from the aspirations to beauty of a single embodied male protagonist to the transcendent point-of-view of a dead man's reminiscence. He moves beyond the beautiful into the sublime, because, as Beckley suggests, such movement epitomises the Burkean aesthetic taxonomy in which "the beautiful is human in scale, the sublime out of scale and threatening" (Beckley 1999, xi).

What Beckley might also have noted about his example is how *American Beauty* also dovetails with Burke's gendering of the sublime as a masculine and paternal mode in opposition to the feminine and maternal mode of the beautiful; as Ban Wang (1997)

explains, for Burke “the father is sublime because he is authoritative, distant, intimidating, inspiring awe, respect, and admiration. The mother is beautiful because she is tender, loving, and personal, arousing love and intimacy” (101). Burke bases his observation on the lived relationships between parent and children (at least in traditional Western cultures), though the sublimity of fatherhood has deeper roots, evident in the notion of patrilineal descent itself. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud sketches the parallels between the historical rise of monotheistic religion and paternity’s consequent elevation over maternity. The “Moses religion’s” prohibition of visual representations of the deity, in Freud’s words, “means that a sensory perception was given second place to what might be called an abstract idea ... a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality ... or strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation” (Freud 1939, 113-4). Thus, paternity can only be inferred, while maternity, as Thomas Laqueur (1990) puts it, “like the old gods, is based on evidence of the senses alone” (210). Thus, paternity, because of its comparatively disembodied character compared to motherhood, is sublime in that it can be *conceived* by the mind yet not be *perceived* by the senses (Kant 1987).

John Bradley’s regret at not having enough emotional intimacy with his son hints that perhaps it was more than the risks he took on the battlefield that made him incomprehensible to his son. If Bradley is in any way representative of his co-combatants, as his son’s voiceover suggests, then the fathers referenced in the film are fighters, not talkers. Their claim to “greatest generation” status resides in their ability to live the requisite scripts of warrior masculinity, to fight and put their lives on the line so that some of them might author the future with their generative powers. For Immanuel Kant, as Genevieve Lloyd (1986) has pointed out, there is something sublime about war, in the way that it makes men abandon the rational self-interest of self-preservation and face death, that which Ronald Paulson (1983) calls, the “ultimate sublime, the real father” (Lloyd 1986, 64; Paulson 1983, 68).

Despite, then, a more sophisticated understanding of how social memory is produced and disseminated, *Flags of Our Fathers* turns on a very similar thematic fulcrum to the one at work in *The Passion of the Christ* (chapter one)—a (re)negotiation of the imagined oppositions of corporeality versus transcendence, and of emotional engagement versus detached sacrifice. The first scene from the film’s present-day

timeframe—in which the elderly Bradley, while in a traumatic fugue, searches for the friend he lost on the battlefield half a century ago—sets the stage for his son’s later epiphany, his recognition that his father and men like him suffered and sacrificed not for an abstract patriotism but for the defence and love of their comrades in arms. This realisation represents an effort to relocate memories of his father’s (greatest) generation from the archives of the State to the lived experience of their sons, a reorientation facilitated through the mobilisation of trauma as a way of remembering what had once been forgotten.

Chapter Five

“Poison in the Wound”: Masculinity and (Recovered) Memories of *Lolita* at the Turn-of-the-Millennium

As a film about the lasting significance of World War II in American cultural memory and an interrogation of military myth-making, *Flags of Our Fathers* is firmly situated at the nexus of the two crises investigated in this thesis. Little more than a half century separates World War II from the turn-of-the-millennium, but there are vast differences between the two eras. Much of Clint Eastwood's later directorial work has been preoccupied with traditional masculinity's negotiations with a changing social order, and, as the last chapter argued, *Flags of Our Father* addresses this subject through its investigation of the traumatic memories of an earlier generation of soldiers. While Eastwood's war film wrenches a popular memory of World War II away from its familiar gung-ho trappings, in the end his film works as a sort of re-mythologising of Iwo Jima and a re-sanctification of manly military virtues of courage, solidarity, and sacrifice.

Kirby Farrell (1998) suggests that trauma is a key trope of contemporary culture, a metaphor that helps us make sense of an incomprehensible world. The ascendance of trauma at the turn of the millennium is evident in two principal mnemonic sites: the battlefield memories of the combat veteran and the recovered memories of the adult victim of child sexual abuse. Both of these sites clearly implicate masculinity because of the emphatically gendered narratives of victimisation associated with each of these causes. As the mythic proving ground of masculinity, the battlefield is a place where men risk horrible physical and psychological wounds, with the latter becoming more socially visible in American culture since the Vietnam War. Cultural scripts about childhood sexual abuse and trauma, on the other hand, typically hinge on a story of girls' victimisation by fathers or other male authority figures. The psychological wounds inflicted by these acts of sexual violence, like the traumatic memories of returning soldiers, became more socially visible in the final decades of the twentieth century.

A key date for understanding this development is 1988, the year in which a best-selling self-help book was released, one that would have a tremendous effect on popular knowledge about the imbrications of memory and gender. In *The Courage to Heal*, Ellen Bass and Laura Davis (1988) claimed not only that sexual abuse was endemic in contemporary culture, but also that its psychologically traumatic after-effects were so pervasively felt that they were wreaking havoc even on the lives of women who had no conscious recollection of their own abuse. A subchapter of the book titled “But I Don’t Have Any Memories” begins with the claim “If you don’t remember your abuse, you are not alone. Many women don’t have memories, and some never get memories. This doesn’t mean that they weren’t abused” (Bass and Davis 1988, 81).

The recovery of repressed memories of sexual abuse became a cultural phenomenon in the America of the early to mid-1990s. In 1990, a Californian man named George Franklin was convicted of a 1969 murder due to his daughter’s alleged recovery of the memory of witnessing the crime 20 years later (Sturken 1998). In 1991 the popular comedian and sitcom star Roseanne Arnold revealed that she was an incest survivor who had recently recovered memories of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of both of her parents, including a memory of her mother attempting to smother her in her crib when she was 2 years old. When entertainment gossip magazine *People* ran the story a few days after Arnold’s disclosure, the publication also included an interview with clinical psychiatrist Dr Judith Lewis Herman, who explained that many children who are sexually abused “learn to create a secret compartment in their minds where memories are stored but not readily accessed until later. The trigger is often a specific reminder of the abuse. Once the memories are released they can come in a flood” (LaFleche 1991).

This chapter is about this deluge of cultural memories of abuse and the controversial text located downstream from them. Produced during this era of heightened awareness of childhood sexual abuse, *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne, 1997) was commercially doomed even before its release. This chapter focusses on Lyne’s *Lolita* as an adaptation—a partial or subjective remembering—of Vladimir Nabokov’s classic novel. Perhaps most famous for its scandalous depiction of the narrator-protagonist’s affair with the twelve-year-old titular heroine, the novel is also widely admired for its playful and ironic style of narration, which creates a radical disjuncture between subject matter and tone and

facilitates a multitude of possible interpretations. Consequently, filmmakers adapting *Lolita* must decide what, in their view, is the “correct” way to read the novel? Is it a grim comedy—or, alternatively, a cautionary tale—about the sexual predations of middle-aged men? Is it a glimpse into the self-deceiving mind of a sexual monster? Perhaps it is a melancholy story about the destructive man that a damaged boy can become, or a portrait of the delinquency of minors in a sex-obsessed culture. Could it be a modern story of courtly love (Trilling 1958), or even an artfully crafted apologia for the despicable crime of father-daughter incest (Herman and Hirschman 1981)?

These questions are in fact about much more than Nabokov’s novel or any film adaptation of it. *Lolita* is that rare example of a fictional character (like Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” or the monster from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*) who has transcended its original literary origins to flourish in the collective consciousness of readers and non-readers alike. Referenced in pop music, fashion, and many other cultural forms, “*Lolita*” has thus become a fitting subject for analysis by students of social memory and gender as well as by literary and film critics.²⁴ The long intertextual afterlife of “*Lolita*” throws into sharp relief the ways that Nabokov’s novel has been (mis)remembered in our culture. In this sense, “*Lolita*” has an existence beyond the pages of Nabokov’s novel or the films of Stanley Kubrick or Adrian Lyne; “*Lolita*” functions as a floating signifier, or, from a memory studies perspective, as an ambiguous “cultural memory” (Sturken 1997, 1999) about the moral and legal propriety of such relationships, the culpability of each of the two parties in such a relationship, the respective characters of adult male and pubescent female sexualities, and any number of other vexatious cultural issues. For these reasons, Adrian Lyne’s *Lolita*, a film both heavily influenced but ultimately ruined by the contemporary age of memory, especially lends itself to analysis of the imbrications of memory and masculinity in turn-of-the-millennium cinema, as the filmmaker’s representation of male melancholia is countered by the critique of male sexual desire that is embedded in the contemporary popular discourse of recovered memory.

²⁴ In the pages that follow, *Lolita* (italicised) references the novel by Nabokov or one of its film adaptations, while “*Lolita*” (in quotation marks) represents the myth or cultural memory of a sexually precocious girl, and *Lolita* (without italics or question marks) denotes the character of the novel and films.

Humbert's Fatal Attraction

Interest in a second adaptation of Nabokov's *Lolita* began in the early 1990s, with veteran director Nicholas Roeg taking a strong interest in the project and approaching esteemed playwright and screenwriter Harold Pinter to write the script for the production (Gale 2003, 350). The job of director would eventually fall to Adrian Lyne, whose rather tawdry earlier films such as *9½ Weeks* (1986), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), and *Indecent Proposal* (1993) suggested an affinity with the controversial subject matter of Nabokov's novel, if not an inclination towards celebrating literary classics. That Lyne and the producers of the film (Mario Kassar and Joel B. Michaels) did in fact have loftier intentions than might first be assumed is evident in the number and calibre of screenwriters courted during the film's lengthy pre-production. The director and producers approached in turn Harold Pinter, David Mamet, and the British director and screenwriter James Dearden, before settling on the work of critic and first-time screenwriter Stephen Schiff (Gale 2003, 350-52).

Passing through four screenwriters, it should come as no surprise that the script for Lyne's *Lolita* changed considerably from first conception to final draft. In the two most well-known versions, however—Pinter's unfilmed screenplay and the shooting script authored by Schiff—there is one significant point in common: the inclusion of the childhood memory that in the novel Humbert offers as an explanation for his obsession with Lolita. In the version that makes it to the screen, the flashback is preceded by shots of a car weaving down a country road. The camera then moves in, first taking in the 1940s station wagon and then, behind the wheel, the dazed driver Humbert Humbert (Jeremy Irons). In one hand, he holds a hairpin like a sacred relic, while a revolver slides across the back seat. As the camera settles on Humbert's face, his voice-over explains:

She was Lo, plain Lo in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. Light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lolita.

One of the most striking aspects of this opening is Humbert's bloodied appearance—if not familiar with Vladimir Nabokov's classic source novel, a viewer might assume that we are witnessing the final minutes of a mortally injured Humbert. The narrator-protagonist in Lyne's version does indeed begin to speak of a serious wound he has suffered—not, however, in a recent conflict, but in a traumatic event that occurred decades beforehand. As the camera frames Humbert's melancholic stare, he begins to explain the roots of his obsession with Lolita (Dominique Swain). Via a dissolve, Lyne segues to a flashback of Humbert's European childhood, as Humbert explains how if it were not for a doomed first love, "There might have been no Lolita at all." Over a brief montage, Humbert recalls his first love Annabel Leigh (Emma Griffiths-Malin), whose untimely death he never stopped mourning. "We were both fourteen," the adult Humbert explains. "And whatever happens to a boy the summer he turns fourteen can mark him for life."

Sally Robinson (2000) has argued that white men in late twentieth-century American culture have, in various ways, strategically embraced the "marking" that is synonymous with their newfound reflexivity. Humbert's claim that his early experience of sexual desire and traumatic loss "mark[ed] him for life" is particularly striking in the context of Robinson's remarks on masculinity. In his adaptation, Lyne attempts to normalise the perverse story of the sexually deviant Humbert, and the flashback to this childhood memory is indispensable to his domestication of Nabokov's scandalous narrative. The melancholic tone established in this flashback becomes the dominant mood of this new *Lolita*. From the first notes of Ennio Morricone's elegiac score (the artful musical analogue for Humbert's lost Europe, in contrast to the tawdry pop music soundscape of Lolita's America [Stam 2007, 119-20]) and the first sombre utterances of Jeremy Irons (a cinematic icon of melancholia), the tone seldom rises above the plaintive or wistful (Nicholls 2004 and 2012). Visually, the crepuscular palette of the opening scene (the dim azure tones will recur throughout the film) dissolves into a flashback sequence so gauzily lensed that cinematographer Howard Atherton's

compositions verge on the pointillist, as from behind the wheel of his careening car, the doomed adult Humbert recalls a much sunnier youth. The particular memories of Annabel within the flashback are separated by rapid cuts to brilliant white, mimicking photographic flashbulbs and thus evoking a common metaphor for memories of unforgettable events. The term “flashbulb memory” is generally used to refer to an event so monumental that the moment is captured permanently in the mind in the same way that an image is captured on film (Brown and Kulik 1977). The memory in question is usually of a traumatic nature, if only in a remote or proxy sense; in the American context, the textbook example of a flashbulb memory is the recollection of hearing about the assassination of John F. Kennedy (Brown and Kulik 1977). As his light-filled reverie continues, the adult Humbert fills in the background of the images from his boyhood:

That hotel you see—the Murano—that belonged to us. She wanted to be a nurse; I wanted to be a spy. All at once, we were madly, hopelessly in love. Four months later, she died of typhus. The shock of her death froze something in me. The child I loved was gone. But I kept looking for her. Long after I'd left my own childhood behind. The poison was in the wound, you see... and the wound wouldn't heal. I probably should have joined the priesthood. Instead, I accepted a teaching post at Beardsley College in America.

Humbert's voice-over here underscores his melancholic fixation on his first love, whose death “froze” his sexual maturation and precipitated his fetishistic interest in pubescent girls.

Lyne's choice to include this flashback to Humbert's European boyhood is problematic in many respects (a matter that I will return to later in this chapter), but it is certainly of interest if for no other reason than it indicates the prevailing cultural obsession with memory at the time of the novel's second adaptation (Kubrick, by way of contrast, omits all of the source novel's European scenes). The prominence that Lyne gives to this flashback, presenting it as a sort of mitigating trauma that helps to explain Humbert's monstrosity, underscores the adaptation's status as an artefact of turn-of-the-millennium memory culture, the “memory industry” that includes such disparate phenomena as museum culture and the cultural and legal controversies over repressed

memory (K Klein 2000, 127). While Kubrick's Humbert (James Mason) is presented as a normal man who transgresses simply because he is entranced by the charms of a comely hula-hooping adolescent, Lyne's Humbert seems to be a long-suffering melancholic, one who is, in quintessentially turn-of-the-millennium style, exiled by trauma from "the magic circle of everyday life" (K Farrell 1998, p. xii). Humbert's description of his melancholy fate after the death of Annabel parallels comments that Freud (1916) made about patients who:

give us an impression of having been "fixated" to a particular portion of their past, as though they could not manage to free themselves from it and were for that reason alienated from the present and the future. They then remained lodged in their illness in the sort of way in which in earlier days people retreated into a monastery in order to bear the burden there of their ill-fated lives (272).

The psychoanalyst Darian Leader (2008) succinctly summarises the differences between mourning and melancholia: "In mourning, we grieve the dead; in melancholia, we die with them" (8). When the teenaged Humbert's young love Annabel Leigh dies, Humbert effectively dies with her. Or at least a part of him (his heart? his libido?) does. Unable to move past this pubescent affair, he feels condemned to try to re-stage this love drama again and again. His chance meeting of Dolores "Lolita" Haze triggers his memory of his childhood love, but his memory and his desire remain, in a sense, irreconcilable. As much as Humbert recognises the lost Annabel in the figure of Lolita, his violation of Lolita betrays the memory of Annabel, because the original desire was an unfulfilled one. In other words, the memory of Annabel provokes the desire for Lolita, but the satisfaction of that desire fails to recapture that memory, because it is the desire itself—and its attendant sorrows (which explains why the Haze girl must be named Dolores)—that Humbert yearns for.

Desire is the real subject of *Lolita*, whose titular character exists only as an object of Humbert's desire—the infamous light of Humbert's life and the fire of his loins. In his afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov (1955/1980) claimed that the basic inspiration for his novel came from a newspaper story about an ape in a Paris zoo, which, having been taught how to draw, made his artistic debut by charcoaling a picture of the bars of his cage (311). A rather obscure explanation—and in all likelihood, a rather mischievously

misleading one, since the referenced news item has never been found—it remains a compelling one, if we consider Humbert, in ways the Parisian primate could never be, the artificer of that which entraps him. In Lyne's film, another animal allegory stands in for Humbert's self-ensnarement by desire. As the newly arrived professor is driven into Ramsdale, on the way to first meeting Charlotte (Melanie Griffith) and Dolores Haze, his car is pursued by a tireless, snapping Jack Russell. Though strictly speaking, in such a scenario the dog is the hunter and the car is the prey, a dog that successfully catches up with a car is in much more danger than its automotive quarry. Significantly, Humbert spends much of the rest of the film suspecting, correctly it turns out, that the car in which he and Lolita are crisscrossing America is being followed. What he perhaps fails to realise is that it is not just the law or his rival Quilty (Frank Langella) that is catching up with him, but also the fulfilment of a long-held sexual fantasy. Humbert's object lesson becomes an illustration of the old adage "Be careful what you wish for ..." or, as a literary authority on the subject once put it, the theme of "the wish come true ... which becomes reality with terrifying consequences" (Cain 1982, x).

Uncanny Memories of *Lolita*

For all its shortcomings, Lyne's film does a fine job of representing the uncanny consequences of Humbert's wish-fulfilment (Freud 1919). Lyne's Quilty is a haunting doppelganger for Humbert, a more sinister incarnation of Nabokov's character than Peter Sellers' earlier turn in the role, a bravura performance that epitomised Kubrick's darkly comical take on the novel. The overly sympathetic and melancholic portrayal by Jeremy Irons, as well as Lyne's restoration of the primal scene from Humbert's youth, adumbrates the unheimlich character of Quilty's pursuit. As Humbert's double, Quilty incarnates the metaphorical venom in Humbert's wound. Craving relief from his loss of Annabel Leigh, Humbert resurrects her in Lolita, but the poison catches up with him, and Humbert is undone by a desire at once fulfilled yet still unsatisfied; a desire that is in fact impossible to satisfy because it is a futile search for *temps perdu*.

Applying Svetlana Boym's (2001) taxonomy of nostalgias, we can diagnose Lyne's melancholic Humbert as stricken by a restorative rather than a reflective nostalgia, in contrast to the narrator-protagonist of the source novel, whose urge to reincarnate his

lost Annabel Leigh is tempered by an arch self-consciousness about his nefarious uses of his past. The difference in part can be attributed to the fact that while both the novel and Lyne's film are recounted after Humbert commits murder, the novel foregrounds Humbert's status as an accused man. In the novel Humbert recounts the events of both his youth and his adulthood with an all-too-evident awareness of his guilt, a self-consciousness that manifests itself in both a desire to present events in as flattering a light as possible and an understanding that such exculpatory impulses are both painfully obvious and insufficiently persuasive. The film version, by contrast, pays little or no heed to this rhetorical complexity. Thus, while the famously lyrical prose of the novel's first chapter is honoured through the voice-over narration's extensive quotation of Nabokov's (1955/1980) lines, notably absent is the line "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (9), as well as the chapter's final paragraph: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns" (9).

Humbert's direct address to the jury/reader, and his melodramatic allusions to scripture and to Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee", invite scepticism about the motivations and reliability of the account that is to follow. Specifically, Humbert's rhetoric in the opening chapters frames the forthcoming account as an affectively coloured reconstruction rather than as a transparent retrieval of the past, and thus presents a nuanced understanding of memory that Lyne's film seems unable or unwilling to replicate. Returning to Lyne's flashback, when viewed in tandem with the corresponding passages in the novel, it becomes clear that despite Lyne and Schiff's goal of a faithful adaptation, they have captured the essence of Nabokov's novel in only the most limited way. Thomas Frosch (2003) cites Humbert's recollection of his aborted tryst with Annabel as a prime example of how "Nabokov takes great delight in rapid and unpredictable changes in tone; we are never permitted to rest long in the pathetic, the farcical, the rapturous, or the mocking" (40). Thus, Nabokov's Humbert narrates the end of his affair with Annabel in a starkly different manner from the soft-focus romanticism in Lyne's work: "I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling, when two bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother, came out of the sea with exclamations of ribald encouragement, and four months later she died of typhus in Corfu" (Nabokov 1955/1980, 13; cf Frosch 2003, 40). The multiple

actions described within this single sentence facilitate the abrupt changes in tone that Frosch describes and continue a trend of offhand descriptions of tragic or traumatic events.²⁵ The soft-focus flashback in Lyne's film, in contrast, plays the scene straight; gauzily lit, with its high-end production values and its cover-girl beautiful Annabel Leigh, the sequence has the look of a perfume commercial. The flashback encapsulates the reverential tone that Lyne brings to the film as a whole, the director tending to stage Humbert's memories as a series of tasteful tableaux, rather than in a more experimental and prankish style that would better capture the tone of the source novel's unreliable and grimly comical narration.

One of the promotional posters for Kubrick's *Lolita* featured the question "How did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*?" and this tagline has lived on to become almost a cliché in critical writing on either of the two adaptations (cf Crowther 1962; Corliss 1998; Hatch 2002; Kelleher 2004). While the difficulty hinted at in the question concerns the controversial sexual subject matter of Nabokov's novel, the question can also be read as a statement about the daunting formal challenges posed by Nabokov's novel. In addition to the commonly held reservations about the ability of great literature to be turned into great cinema, adapting *Lolita* presents its own particular challenges with respect to narration. Perhaps most significant of these is that while traces of a vibrant plot certainly exist within the novel (the death of Lolita's mother, Humbert and Lolita's trip across America, the final showdown with Quilty), the main feature of the novel is Humbert's entrancing descriptions of his morally opprobrious behaviour. Throughout the novel, Nabokov toys with his readers, time and again drawing out our sympathy for his protagonist and then driving home the shameful realisation of how we have been charmed by a man engaged in the selfish and cruel exploitation of a child (Tamir-Ghez 2003). Unable or unwilling to find cinematic equivalences for the multi-tonal rhetoric of Nabokov's prose, Lyne's Humbert is presented as a permanently wounded adolescent, his adolescent loss a mitigating trauma for his immoral adult behaviour. In Nabokov's novel, the reader's sympathies are solicited throughout, but only ever provisionally won, sometimes to be undermined

²⁵ In the second chapter Humbert describes the death of his mother in a darkly comical aside: "My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three ..." (Nabokov 1955/1980, 10).

immediately afterwards. Thus, while Lyne's Humbert seems to leave immediately for Ramsdale after his tragic loss, Nabokov's narrator reveals something of his European young adulthood, a life phase marred by episodes of sexual predation, martial cruelty, and psychiatric hospitalisations.

Sigmund Freud (1919) noted a certain style of uncanny narration that also functions as a concise summary of Nabokov's formidable powers as a storyteller. As Freud put it, "the story-teller has a *peculiarly* directive influence over us; by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another, and he often obtains a great variety of effects from the same material" (250). An early draft of *Lolita* shows how the uncanny pervades the work, in more explicit ways than the subtle touches that remained such as the novel's doppelgangers and discomfiting multi-tonal narration. Consider, for example, how in an early version of *Lolita*, a German university student travels through Spain and falls in love with an innkeeper's beautiful pubescent daughter. Their affair inaugurates a Gothic turn of events, which the student/narrator recounts to party guests twenty years later when prompted of the memory by mention of the tales of that master of the uncanny, E. T. A. Hoffman.

If this version does not sound completely familiar, it is because the *Lolita* I have just described was not written by Vladimir Nabokov; instead, it is a story that has had a mostly obscure literary life, until recently barely remembered by anyone at all. The Spanish girl Lolita in this tale was the literary creation of the German author Heinz von Lichberg, whose story "Lolita" appeared in *Accursed Gioconda*, a collection of his tales published in 1916, nearly forty years before the later masterpiece, but only a few years before the exiled Nabokov began living and writing amongst the Russian émigrés of Berlin, in a neighbourhood not far from the home of von Lichberg. The earlier, more obscure Lolita was brought to the attention of contemporary readers by the German critic Michael Maar (2005) in his book *The Two Lolitas*. Maar enumerates the basic similarities between Lichberg and Nabokov's narratives (as well as a few more detailed ones) and offers three possible explanations for the concurrences. Maar's first is that the resemblance between the two books is entirely coincidental. Another theory (and the one that Maar finds most convincing) is that Nabokov did consciously appropriate the bones of Lichberg's story (which Maar, correctly I think, deems an act of inspiration

rather than plagiarism). A third hypothetical scenario, however, is, to my mind, the most intriguing, even if not the most plausible. In a speculation that dovetails with some of the preoccupations of turn-of-the-millennium memory culture, Maars wonders if:

Nabokov could have come upon Lichberg's *Accursed Gioconda*, and found in it a theme that had already begun to take shape in his mind. Thereafter he forgot the tale. Later, drawn to the surface by new bait, whole fragments of the Ur-Lolita rose from the depths. Nabokov remained quite unconscious of this resurgence of memory in what seemed to him to be entirely his own creation. The history of literature is not without examples of this phenomenon, called cryptomnesia (Maar 2005, 57).

This cryptomnesia hypothesis seems compelling in light of Nabokov's well-known obsessions with memory and with unreliable narration. For personal reasons, the twice-exiled Russian-born author was particularly attuned to nostalgia, and authorial sleight-of-hand is a recurring feature of his novels. With respect to the latter, consider how, in *Lolita*, the narrative is presented as a document found by its "editor", the psychiatrist John A. Ray, who explains that it is the "confession of a white widowed male," that is, the pseudonymous protagonist Humbert Humbert (Nabokov 1955/1980, 3). Moreover, Humbert, the first person "author" of this document, describes the document as both a statement meant for the judge and jury of his forthcoming trial, as well as a more personal confession; and he thus equivocates about the document's intended audience, sometimes using words such as "members of the jury", and at others, some variant of "dear reader" (Tamir-Ghez 2003). Nabokov's reflexive trickery is similarly on display at a critical point in the narrative when Charlotte Haze reads incriminating passages from Humbert's diary, and her boarder-turned-husband dissembles by trying to persuade her that the compromising material was simply an early draft of a novel, with real-life names used as temporary monikers for his characters. In a similar vein, the lost love whom Humbert seems to have mourned since his adolescence is identified in the confession as "Annabel Leigh"; has Humbert simply used the name of eponymous deceased heroine of Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee" as a pseudonym, or is her very existence just a literary trick perpetrated on Humbert's/Nabokov's readers?

Maar's cryptomnesia explanation is also oddly compelling, improbable as it may be, because Lolita's long and independent life since 1955 cannot help but make us wonder if she had a "beforelife" as well. As I noted in the opening of this chapter, Nabokov's heroine's name has entered the cultural lexicon as a ready shorthand for a sexually precocious young female. One of the more famous examples, and one that was still rather fresh in public memory while Lyne was shooting his film, began with media coverage of the attempted murder of Mary Jo Buttafuoco in the New York suburb of Massapequa in 1992. Ms Buttafuoco was shot and critically injured by her husband's seventeen-year-old lover, Amy Fisher, who in news reports thereafter was invariably called "the Long Island Lolita." The implied comparison is instructive, given that the differences between Nabokov's Lolita character and the "Long Island Lolita" are more striking than the similarities. To begin with, in the novel, Dolores "Lolita" Haze is aged twelve (the more cautious film versions raise her age to fourteen), while Fisher was sixteen when she began her affair with the Long Island mechanic. Moreover, while motels no doubt figured in the Buttafuoco-Fisher saga—receipts and registrations dated before Fisher's seventeenth birthday secured Buttafuoco's conviction on statutory rape charges—one imagines that the real-life story paled in comparison to Nabokov's droll renderings of the roadside inns of 1950s America. Of course, the most significant difference between the real and the fictional cases is the identity of the shooter—it is Humbert, not Lolita, who guns down a rival in the novel and films. Given these differences, it seems fair to ask why Nabokov's Lolita is so widely, yet so poorly, remembered. How did our culture's memory of the novel become so distorted that the name Lolita has become synonymous with a dangerous and precociously oversexed *fille fatale*, rather than the pitiable victim of the slaving and tyrannical dirty old man (Durham 2008; Vickers 2008)?

***Lolita*, Cultural Memory, and Recovered Memory**

To attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to understand "Lolita" through the conceptual lens of "cultural memory," a term which Marita Sturken (1997) uses "to define memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning" (3). If we vary

Sturken's formulation slightly—substituting literary/cinematic criticism for the official field of enquiry rather than “formal historical discourse”—we formulate a fitting shorthand for the ways in which “*Lolita*” circulates in various ways in overlapping discourses about gender, age, and sexuality. As such, conflict over the meanings of “*Lolita*”—as a story of male sexual exploitation of a minor, and/or of precocious sexuality in girls—is consistent with the general operations of cultural memory, which operates as “a field of cultural negotiation” (Sturken 1997, 1) in which different narratives vie for culturally legitimising dominance.

As I remarked earlier, the polysemic character of the source novel engenders a multitude of possible readings, each enmeshed within this domain of competing cultural memories. How are we to judge Humbert Humbert, when his account of himself and his relations with Lolita are entangled in so many skeins of deceit and irony? Are we to feel any sympathy for him at all? The requirement that Lyne cut his film in the presence of a lawyer (to avoid running afoul of obscenity laws) rather dramatically indicates the interpretive minefield that needed to be negotiated, lest the filmmakers stray from the safe ground of art into the explosive territory of pornography. While the final version of the film stayed within the law (at least in the United States), the ethics of its depiction of the Humbert-Lolita relationship are more dubious. While Nabokov's Humbert periodically tempers his appeal for our sympathies with an admission of his monstrosity, Lyne's Humbert, even when succumbing to rage and jealousy in his dealings with Lolita, can never fully escape the handsome and melancholic charm that Jeremy Irons brings to the performance. More damningly, while his literary forebear admits that Lolita never once thrilled to his touch, Lyne's Humbert at one point appears to bring Lolita to a state of sexual bliss, in the dewily lensed style that Lyne and Atherton have made the visual keynote of the film.

The vicissitudes of cultural memory with respect to Nabokov's *Lolita* (as well as “*Lolita*”) become especially clear when comparing the public reception of the two adaptations. In her analysis of the public reception of both film versions of *Lolita*, Kristen Hatch (2002) makes a striking point about the apparent shift in moral standards in the intervening decades between Kubrick's and Lyne's adaptations:

Although the difference between the responses to the two *Lolitas* defies the common perception that American society, Hollywood in particular, has become steadily less restrictive regarding sexuality since the 1960s, it also appears to confirm our sense that we have become increasingly enlightened regarding the problem of child sexual abuse since that period, when child victims of incest were regarded as sex delinquents (164).

In other words, our current state of enlightenment on the matter of child sexual abuse results in hostility toward the sort of representations that would have been nonchalantly accepted in the past. Such a self-congratulatory view would seem to support Paul Connerton's (1989) view that "concerning social memory in particular, images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order" (3).

Hatch (2002), however, maintains that the difference in reception has little to do with increased sensitivity to child abuse:

How is it that in 1962 the story of an older man's affair with his fourteen-year old stepdaughter should be considered neither "new" nor "perverse"? When we consider the contexts in which the film was released, it becomes clear that these responses arise not from a willingness to countenance child abuse as much as they do from a very different manner of defining relationships between adolescent girls and adult men (165).

To put it another way, around the time that Kubrick's film was released, Humbert-Lolita type relationships were viewed through the prism of the reigning paradigm of female sexual development, one which assumed the father (figure) played a central role as the focus of the adolescent girl's "Oedipal attachments" (Hatch 2002, 165; citing Devlin 1998, 92). What sealed the commercial fate of Lyne's *Lolita*, according to Hatch (2002), is a particular manifestation of the crisis of masculinity at the turn-of-the-millennium. With the eclipse of the American man's status as sole breadwinner and head of the household, as well as growing recognition of non-patriarchal family structures (especially the rise in gay and lesbian parents and single mother-headed households), male (hetero-) sexuality and men's relation to children were put under suspicion.

Hatch's analysis is insightful, but she omits some key cultural background that helps explain why Lyne's version of *Lolita* was so much more controversial than Kubrick's. A look at the recent history of memory reveals how such psychoanalytical readings were superseded, and with it the comforting myth that the type of intergenerational sexual

activity depicted in *Lolita* is caused by precocious female “jailbait” who ensnare older men.

Thus, a new set of discourses about memory emerged, discourses that stressed the new capacities of memory and a new highly gendered context within which remembering and forgetting could be understood. Here I am referring to the fact that in the majority of cases in which memories of sexual abuse were recovered the victim and rememberer was female and the perpetrator was male. Judith Lewis Herman (1992/2015) and other feminist advocates for recovered memory tied their insights to Freud’s abandonment of the “seduction theory” a century earlier, thus aligning themselves with other pro-feminist writers who charged the founder of psychoanalysis with turning his back on the sexual exploitation of children, thus engaging in “a Freudian cover-up” (Rush 1992) that was also an “assault on truth” (Masson 1985).

In “A Forgotten History,” the first chapter of *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman (1992/2015) writes of the “heroic age of hysteria,” the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when European neurologists such as Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet and the aforementioned Breuer and Freud broke new ground in the study of a disease that “for twenty-five centuries ... had been considered a strange disease with incoherent and incomprehensible symptoms” (Herman 1992/2015, 14). In 1896, Freud declared in his paper *The Aetiology of Hysteria*:

I therefore put forward the thesis that at the bottom of every case of hysteria *there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience*, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood, but which can be reproduced through the work of psycho-analysis in spite of the intervening decades. I believe that this is an important finding, the discovery of *caput Nili* in neuropathology ... (Freud 1896, 202; cf Herman 1992/2015, 13).

Freud’s analogy is apt: with psychoanalysis he has discovered “*caput Nili*” (the source of the Nile)—he has at last penetrated the dark continent and found the source of hysteria—the condition one historian would later call the “dramatic medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in the opposite sex”—flowing from the dark heart of patriarchy’s violent desires (Herman 1992/2015, 10).

Shortly after the publication of this paper, however, Freud abandons his “discovery,” in a *volte-face* that nearly a century later Judith Herman (1992/2015), Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (1985) and other scholars would condemn as a failure of political nerve. As Herman puts it, Freud’s private correspondence:

makes clear that he was increasingly troubled by the radical social implications of his hypothesis. Hysteria was so common among women that if his patients’ stories were true, and if his theory were correct, he would be forced to conclude that what he called “perverted acts against children” were endemic, not only among the proletariat of Paris, where he had first studied hysteria, but also among the respectable bourgeois families of Vienna, where he had established his practice (Herman 1992/2015, 14).

Within a decade, Freud had renounced the “seduction theory.” In his later work, which would be recognised as constituting the foundations of psychoanalysis, though sexuality continued to be “the central focus of inquiry ... the exploitative social context in which sexual relations actually occur became utterly invisible. Psychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, dissociated from the reality of experience” (Herman 1992/2015, 14). The “recovered memory” theories advocated by Herman and others would later be challenged by opponents of the movement, who argued that complete repression of traumatic memories was impossible and that what were called “recovered memories” were actually “false memories” implanted by suggestion during therapy (Crews 1995; Hacking 1995; McNally 2003).

In *Remembering Trauma*, Richard J. McNally (2003) provides a concise sketch of the contemporary controversy over traumatic memory, in the process hinting at the political implications at stake:

How victims remember trauma is the most divisive issue facing psychology today. Some experts believe that rape, combat, and other horrific experiences are engraved on the mind, never to be forgotten. Others believe that the mind protects itself by banishing traumatic memories from awareness, making it difficult for many people to remember their worst experiences until many years later (1).

McNally continues by noting that this difference of viewpoints is more than “an ordinary academic controversy. It has spilled out of the clinics and psychology laboratories, capturing headlines, provoking legislative change, and determining outcomes in criminal and civil suits” (1). As Marita Sturken (1999) observes,

The narrative of recovered memories permeates the world of television tabloid and talk shows; it is rescripted in television movies, recounted in public by Hollywood celebrities, and parodied in *Doonesbury* [comic strip]. With their elements of family trauma, sexual abuse, denial, and victimology, these memories are emblematic of our time (231).

Recovered memory has become, in other words, part of—it is tempting to say, a symptom of—a larger cultural phenomenon, one which Nabokov’s *Lolita*, with its haunting doubles, sexual violations and wounded memories, figures as a key text, despite its author’s well-known antipathy to psychoanalysis and psychiatry more generally.

To recap McNally’s summary: the effects of (sexual) violence on an individual are either (according to one camp) unforgettable or (according to another) especially susceptible to being purged temporarily from personal memory. Moreover, proponents of the second view have in effect implicated the discipline of psychiatry as well as the larger culture in a failure of social or collective remembering (Masson 1985; Rush 1992; Herman 1992/2015). The most infamous alleged censor here is Freud, whose early work speculated that childhood “seduction” was invariably the root cause of adult cases of hysteria (Herman 1992/2015, 9). Herman’s first chapter takes as its epigraph a passage from Freud’s *Introductory Lectures of Psychoanalysis*, in which Freud offers a blunt recantation of his earlier hypothesis:

Almost all my women patients told me that they had been seduced by their father. I was driven to recognize in the end that these reports were untrue and so came to understand that the hysterical symptoms are derived from phantasies and not from real occurrences. It was only later that I was able to recognize in this phantasy of being seduced by the father the expression of the typical Oedipus complex in women (Freud 1933, 119; quoted in Herman 1992/2015, 7).

Freud's disavowal of claims of incestuous abuse thus necessitated a particular theoretical model—"the typical Oedipus complex in women." This model, and the discursive edifice of psychoanalysis built around it, according to the advocates of the second, or "recovered memory" position, works on the "macro-" level to deny the validity of women's memories of sexual abuse. Thus, psychoanalysis' alleged "assault on truth" (Masson 1985) is an assault on memory, a disavowal of female victims' personal memories that also helps to prevent the articulation of these individual stories into a shared feminist collective memory. On the "micro-" level of personal memory, the mind, according to advocates of the second, or "recovered memory" position, possesses a "special mechanism of repression or dissociation" in order to "banish traumatic memories from awareness" (McNally 2003, 1-2).

It seems clear that the misremembering of *Lolita* is a kind of cultural screen memory, as well as a textbook specimen of what Marjorie Garber (1998) calls a "symptom of culture." *Lolita* as a narrative encodes or encrypts censored—because more disturbing—truths about the uncanny coexistence of normative and forbidden desires structuring hegemonic models of male heterosexuality. Another way of saying this is that our misrecognition of *Lolita* as wanton juvenile temptress—and, for that matter, our judgment of Humbert as *either* pathological mourner (ie, melancholic) *or* predatory monster (rather than some complex combination of both)—hides the more unpalatable and ambivalent truths about male sexual desire and female sexual desirability in contemporary culture.

Indeed, despite some shifts in social expectations around male sexual behaviour, emotionally detached and predatory male sexuality is in many ways still held up as a cultural norm, sitting uncomfortably close to the contemporary demonization of sex offenders. This indistinct borderline between the normal and the deviant is perhaps most eloquently addressed in a recent American independent film. *The Woodsman* (Nicole Kassell, 2004) tells the story of Walter (Kevin Bacon), a paroled child molester struggling to adjust to life after prison. Harassed by co-workers and law enforcement, Walter also still struggles to resist his paedophilic urges. In his regular counselling sessions, Walter repeatedly asks the same question: "When will I be normal?" It is a question that the film implicitly addresses in a number of ways through Walter's interactions with lovers, strangers, and family members. For example, when he

confesses his paedophilic past to his new girlfriend Vicki (Kyra Sedgwick), she tells him how as a child she was sexually abused by her brothers. In another scene that contemplates the question of what is normal, Walter's brother-in-law Carlos (Benjamin Bratt) talks lasciviously about the revealing outfits worn by his young daughter and her friends. When Walter responds to this information by asking if Carlos is ever tempted to improperly touch his daughter, he flies into a rage and threatens Walter with violence, telling him "I don't have your disease, or whatever it is." Carlos' defensive fury is a tell-tale sign that the "deviant" sits perhaps a bit too close to the "normal" for comfort, and that, for many men, this border must be violently policed so that they can feel secure about their own sexual urges.

For feminist anti-Freudians such as Jeffrey Masson and Judith Lewis Herman, a wilful amnesia on the part of male institutions has resulted in downplaying the prevalence of sexual assault within patriarchal societies, in particular father-daughter incest. As Herman puts it, "to be sexually exploited by a known and trusted adult is a central and formative experience in the lives of countless women," which is a "disturbing fact, embarrassing to men in general and to fathers in particular, [that] has been repeatedly unearthed in the past hundred years, and just as repeatedly buried" (Herman 1992/ 2015, 7). The suggested opposition here (unearthing/remembering versus burying/forgetting) plays on a typically spatial metaphor of memory—the past (or, more to the point, past transgressions) as a sort of poorly guarded forensic site, where new structures (Freud's theories about female Oedipal fantasies) are erected over and obscure the previously uncovered incriminating evidence. In Nabokov's novel, Humbert's account of his seduction of Lolita is, in a sense, a fantasy built over his unearthed memory of Annabel Leigh. Lyne's adaptation of this fantasy was, in turn, seen as an attempt to build over and rebury recently recovered social memories. The film's lack of success in doing so indicates the strength of the "recovered memory" model of trauma, and also clearly underscores the fault lines along gender and sexuality opened up by memory at the turn of the millennium.

Chapter Six

“The Past Is Not Through with Us”: Remembering and Forgetting in *Magnolia*

If the turn-of-the-millennium version of *Lolita* shows the influence that new discourses of memory could have on the production and reception of popular texts, another film from the period attempts, in a more direct way, to work through the interconnected problems of masculinity and recovered memory. *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) represents patriarchal masculinity through the lens of what Ian Hacking (1995) calls the “memoro-politics” of recovered memory, which is “above all a politics of the secret, of the forgotten event that can be turned, if only by strange flashbacks, into something monumental” (Hacking 1995, 214). The power of the (wilfully) forgotten secret event will be a recurring theme throughout this thesis, one side of the ambivalent relationship that men in turn-of-the-millennium texts have with the past. Indeed, when this period of recent film is considered as a whole, it seems that for every nostalgic man looking back at a lost golden age, there is another man (or even simply another perspective within the same man) who struggles to expel from his memory a traumatic past that refuses to be forgotten.

Magnolia uses a large ensemble cast to weave multiple intersecting storylines in a film whose postmodern stylistic excesses show the influence of both arthouse “counter-cinema” (Wollen 1972, 6) and magical realist literature. Anderson’s sprawling third feature thus defies easy description, but its production notes provide a helpful overview of the film’s characters, subplots, and themes:

On one random day in the San Fernando Valley, a dying father, a young wife, a male caretaker, a famous lost son, a police officer in love, a boy genius, an ex-boy genius, a game show host, and an estranged daughter will each become part of a dazzling multiplicity of plots, but one story. Through a collusion of coincidence, chance, human action, shared media, past history and divine intervention they will weave and warp through each other’s lives on a day that builds to an unforgettable climax. Some will seek forgiveness, others escape. Some will mend frayed bonds, others will be exposed. *Magnolia* is a mosaic of American life woven through a series of comic and poignant vignettes. It is a portrait of a lonely city sometimes called up short on love. It is a personal exploration of the hidden elements of crisis. It is a story about putting things right again (New Line Cinema 1999).

The key conflict in *Magnolia* is the struggle between remembering and forgetting, the choice between facing up to the traumas of the past—"the hidden elements of crisis"—or banishing them from memory and foregoing any chance of working through them. This chapter explores how *Magnolia* stages this tension through investigating two similar subplots within the film, each of which involves a father trying to reconcile with his estranged child. In doing so, this chapter uncovers how contemporary memoro-political discourse informs Anderson's representations of masculinity in crisis and how the anti-patriarchal politics of recovered memory can illuminate the suffering of men as well as women at the turn of the millennium.

The conflict between remembering and forgetting in *Magnolia* is most succinctly expressed in a repeated line of dialogue in the film. After an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile with his estranged daughter Claudia (Melora Walters), game show host Jimmy Gator (Phillip Baker Hall) returns to the television studio and begins drinking heavily. Moments before he is scheduled to begin a live broadcast, a drunk and morose Jimmy enigmatically says to his producer, "And the book says: 'We may be through with the past, but the past ain't through with us.'" At about the same time, elsewhere in the San Fernando Valley, the same line is spoken again, this time by a former champion of Jimmy's show, Donnie Smith (William H. Macy). A former child prodigy whose winnings were stolen by his parents and who never managed to turn his early promise into adult success, the adult Donnie Smith lurches from one disaster to another. After a pitiful afternoon in which he crashes his car into a convenience store and is then fired from his low-level job, Donnie retires to a neighbourhood bar to drown his sorrows. In the middle of a drunken rant about his quiz show career and his unhappy childhood, Donnie proclaims that, "... the book says: 'We may be through with the past, but the past is not through with us.'"

The most obvious question raised by Jimmy and Donnie's statements is what is "the book" to which they refer. The line that both men quote is the opening of the 1946 book *The Natural History of Nonsense*, by the American academic, broadcaster, and quiz show compere Bergen Evans. A treatise on the persistence of superstition and pseudo-science in technologically advanced modernity, the book begins by noting that:

We may be through with the past, but the past is not through with us. Ideas of the Stone Age exist side by side with the latest scientific thought. ... Giant planes throb through the sky, but half their passengers are wearing magic amulets and are protected from harm by voodoo incantations. Hotels boast of express elevators and a telephone in every room, but omit thirteen from all floor and room numbers lest their guests be ill at ease (Evans 1946, 5).

Evans' statement most directly speaks to the tentative hold of rationalism in the contemporary world, but it is also a warning to those who believe that the past can be kept at a safe distance from the present. Read at the turn of the millennium, the neat reversal in Bergen's opening line can also be interpreted as a statement about the dominance of the traumatic mode of memory at the turn of the millennium—the past will intrude on the present whether we like it or not.²⁶ By focussing on memory as a process of involuntary recollection, trauma threatens the hegemony of conscious recollection, and, accordingly, the remembering subject who through nostalgia or other forms of self-deception struggles to dominate a past that is beyond his control (the pronoun “his” is appropriate here, as it describes a quintessentially masculine will to self-definition).

“What Do Kids Know?”

In “Male Sexuality in the Media”, Richard Dyer (1992) notes the similarities between “normal” male sexuality and “normal” (linear) narrative. Male sexual desire is conventionally seen as a straightforward drive to a climax (here both the narrative and sexual connotations of the word are noteworthy), and Dyer contrasts the phallic linearity of this trajectory with other sexually charged narrative possibilities, such as the multi-climactic plot lines of the traditionally feminine genre of the soap opera (120). Dyer's comments are relevant to *Magnolia*, as its mosaic structure of intersecting subplots is as influenced by the television soap opera as it is by the works of Robert Altman. The influence of serial television drama is especially evident in Anderson's underscoring of the temporal simultaneity of geographically separated events, the “meanwhile” moments of traditional soap opera that are repeatedly

²⁶ In this sense, the use of the line in *Magnolia* also recalls William Faulkner's (1951) famous statement that, “The past is never dead. It's not even past” (85).

inscribed as “THAT MOMENT” in Anderson’s shooting script (P Anderson 2000). The fractured or dispersed focalisation in the film, as well as the doubling of characters and scenarios, invites viewers to take a systematic view of the individual conflicts represented within the film.²⁷ With specific reference to the film’s representation of philandering, neglectful or abusive fathers, the doubling of characters and elaborate structure present as narrative symptoms of masculinity in crisis. A world away from conventional narrative templates in which a solitary man overcomes obstacles and successfully tests his mastery, *Magnolia* recounts the struggles of decidedly unheroic men, male protagonists who are so diminished they are not even worthy of a dominant stake in the film’s narrative.

The film’s splintered attention reflects its suburban Los Angeles setting (the film takes its title from Magnolia Boulevard, a major thoroughfare of the San Fernando Valley), a late twentieth-century environment in which mediated communication has supplanted face-to-face human interaction. This milieu allows Anderson to shift the family melodrama from its usual relatively claustrophobic setting of home and hearth to a dispersed collection of characters and sites connected through a sort of networked intimacy by their relation to the producers and content of the television quiz show *What Do Kids Know?* The nine major characters of the film are all connected in some way to the professional or personal histories of the two dying patriarchs at the centre of the film: Earl Partridge (Jason Robards) and Jimmy Gator, the former producer and compere, respectively, of *What Do Kids Know?* This chapter focuses on the relations between Partridge and his estranged son, Frank T. J. Mackey (Tom Cruise) and the conflict between Jimmy and Claudia Gator as similar manifestations of a trauma that Anderson suggests is endemic to patriarchy.

The title of the television program that connects Earl and Jimmy and, more indirectly, the other principal characters in the film, alludes to the Freudian family romance, the childhood fantasy of alternative parentage that has often been worked through in the Hollywood melodrama (Freud 1909; Nowell-Smith 1991). The question

²⁷ In *Magnolia*, there are two womanising men dying of cancer (Earl Partridge and Jimmy Gator), two adult children estranged from their fathers (Frank T.J. Mackey and Claudia Gator), two wise beyond their years children (Stanley Spector and Dixon), and a current and former child prodigy quiz show champion (Stanley Spector and Donnie Smith, respectively).

“What do kids know?” also preoccupied Freud (1909), who in his essay “Family Romances” surveys children’s developing knowledge and beliefs about their families. In this essay, Freud notes that while a child begins with the view that his or her parents are “the only authority and the source of all belief,” the child’s maturation and his or her growing knowledge of the world outside the family home triggers “doubt [in] the incomparable and unique quality which he [or she] had attributed to them” (236). This knowledge later becomes fuel for the child’s conscious or unconscious fantasies that one or both of his or her parents are only stepparents or adoptive parents, inferior to the proper, biological parents. As the narrative of the film unfolds both Partridge and Gator are exposed as irresponsible and/or abusive fathers whose misdeeds continue to haunt the lives of their now grown children. Recalling Ian Hacking’s discussion of “memoro-politics”, we might rephrase the question asked in the quiz show title as, What do the (now grown) children of these men know, about their fathers and their family histories? What terrible secret happened, who remembers (and who has forgotten), who was responsible, and who suffered (and perhaps is still suffering) because of that trauma? The film also invites viewers to ask what precisely does it mean for a son or daughter *not* to know about the events that have shaped their lives. Does not knowing in such situations mean that a secret has been kept from the children, or was the truth once known but has now been forgotten?

The melodramatic plot device of the family secret, so incisively discussed by Daniel Gerould (1991), is just one way in which that genre has influenced Anderson’s *Magnolia*. The motivating power of the secret at the heart of the narrative is of a piece with what Ben Singer (2001) calls the “nonclassical narrative structure” of melodrama:

Compared with the classical narrative’s logical cause-and-effect structure, melodrama has a far greater tolerance, or indeed a preference, for outrageous coincidence, implausibility, convoluted plotting, deus ex machina resolutions, and episodic strings of action that stuff too many events together to be able to be kept in line by a cause-and-effect chain of narrative progression (46).

Magnolia not only fulfils most of these narrative criteria, it does so in boldly reflexive fashion, providing emotionally charged and implausible representations and then explicitly noting how such material strains credulity. Indeed, as his multiple references

to Evans (1946) make clear, in many ways Anderson makes narrative implausibility the key subject of his film, a representation of the irrational and unordered in a world that has supposedly outgrown superstition. The deviations from conventional screen narrative form become apparent from the film's first scenes, which do not bring the viewer immediately into the film's diegesis, but instead present a prologue that establishes a critical or interpretive framework through which the film proper can be understood. This brief prologue consists of three short stories of bizarre coincidences and violent deaths, as recounted in voiceover by an unseen narrator. This sequence of tales is characterised by increasing implausibility, each story appearing more outlandish than the one that preceded it. The narrator concludes the first tale with the judgment, "And I would like to think that this was only a matter of chance," while the second finds the narrator straining to believe only a random turn of fortune was responsible ("And I am trying to think this was only a matter of chance"). The third story, however, ends up breaking the narrator's resolve. After recounting the strange tale of a boy who would have survived his attempted suicide had he not been accidentally shot by his violently bickering parents, the narrator concludes the prefatory frame with the words:

... and it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that this is not just "Something That Happens." This cannot be "One of those things..." This, please, cannot be that. And for what I would like to say, I can't. This was not just a matter of chance. ... These strange things happen all the time.

In the film's final minutes, the framing voice-over returns, with a quick replay of the opening vignettes. The narrator's final words, as the film comes to an end, declare:

There are stories of coincidence and chance and intersections and strange things told, and which is which and who only knows. ... And we generally say, "Well, if that was in a movie, I wouldn't believe it." Someone's so-and-so met someone else's so-and-so and so on. And it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that strange things happen all the time. And so it goes, and so it goes. And the book says, "we may be through with the past, but the past ain't through with us."

What is significant here is the telling, not the tales themselves; that is, what is most crucial about this frame of mini-narratives is their enunciation, the voice-over

articulation that not only recounts these brief stories but reflects and comments upon them as well. The voice-over takes pains to emphasise—needlessly, one would think—the bizarre coincidences at work in the tales, but then goes to just as much trouble to deny that chance is the main driver of these events. In short, the appearance of chance connections may be the tell-tale sign of strange happenings, but there is a higher force at work than just coincidence. Something else is to blame for “these strange things [that] happen all the time.” The commentary that accompanies these vignettes indicates that *Magnolia* is a cinematic investigation into whether there is any order behind the apparent moral chaos of the universe. What motivates this quest for moral order is an investigation into the politics of gender and memory, a determination to seek answers to the question of what children know (the matter to which the title of Jimmy Gator’s quiz show alludes), and (perhaps most crucially) what adults have hidden from them.

After the film’s prologue, an ornately composed title montage introduces the two patriarchs at the centre of *Magnolia* as well as their respective children, in a sequence that foreshadows the pathos-laden melodrama about to unfold. The film proper begins with singer Aimee Man’s version of Harry Nilsson’s “One” playing over the film’s production credits, followed by an abrupt cut to multiple-exposure footage that incorporates time lapse photography of a magnolia flower blossoming, a street map of the San Fernando Valley, and CAT scans of a human heart and lungs. Within seconds the film’s preoccupations have been signalled: the fate of alienated and suffering individuals (“One is the loneliest number,” as the song’s refrain puts it) at the mercy of immense forces beyond their control, forces both external (the sprawling networks of post-urban and mass-mediated culture) and internal (the pathologies lurking within their own bodies and souls).

A straight cut to an unoccupied lounge room follows this time-lapse montage, with a rapid zoom to the television set in its centre. The television is playing Frank Mackey’s *Seduce and Destroy* infomercial, and through a quick dissolve that breaches the television screen, Anderson takes viewers into the commercial itself. A sound bridge spans the boundary between the media and real worlds again, as the film cuts to Claudia Gator (Melora Walters) drinking in a bar, where on a TV in a corner, Mackey’s commercial airs seemingly unnoticed. Claudia is then joined by what the shooting

Commented [JM3]:

script calls “a vaguely creepy middle-aged guy” (P. T. Anderson 1999, 9). Anderson’s fluidly hyperkinetic but intimate style then produces a quick succession of shots showing the two leaving the bar for her place, and then Claudia snorting cocaine provided by the man in exchange for sex.

The camera quickly dollies in and focuses for a moment on the man’s thrusting and on Claudia’s bored and distracted face, before turning back to the media world. This time, however, the *Seduce and Destroy* commercial—which had still been audible as Claudia snorted cocaine—is replaced by another advertisement, this time for the TV quiz show *What Do Kids Know?* Significantly, this time Anderson’s camera dollies “into” the commercial through the TV screen’s reflection in a glass picture frame over Claudia’s bed. Over still photographs of Jimmy at work and play, the commercial’s voice-over recounts his lengthy career as host of the game show and, therefore, as an enduring part of the mediated memories of the programme’s audience: “For over thirty years, America has hung out and answered questions with Jimmy Gator. An American legend and a true television icon, Jimmy celebrates his 20,000th hour of broadcasting this week.” At this point the promo cuts to footage of a self-effacing Jimmy Gator being interviewed during a red-carpet appearance, joking with an interviewer, “God, have I really been around that long?” The fawning voice-over then continues, with one shot in the montage plainly contradicting the simultaneous commentary—as Jimmy has sex with a showgirl in a dimly lit office, the audio commentary notes that “he’s a family man who’s been married for over forty years, with two children and one bouncing baby grandchild on the way.” From here the camera cuts to a close-up of a family photograph—“circa 1987,” according to the shooting script—and then a further “optical zoom into the photo that isolates Jimmy and Claudia in the picture” (P. T. Anderson 2000, 10).

This montage—melodramatically framed by the song “One” (the film’s use of music underscores the centrality that music—in Greek, *melos*—originally had in the form)—continues for a few more minutes, ultimately turning the camera’s gaze on and introducing the remaining characters within this sprawling mosaic narrative. Nonetheless, it is in the visually dense forty-five seconds or so recounted above, from Claudia’s bar room encounter to the family snapshot in the quiz show commercial, that the film introduces its treatment of memory and family secrets. It is a theme that also

plays out in the lives and lies of Earl Partridge and his son, but it is only when considered alongside the parallel broken family of the Gators that the social significance of this cultural memory takes shape.

The opening minutes of *Magnolia* set up the visual keynote of Anderson's style, most notable for its gracefully mobile cinematography—with cameras that pan, dolly and refocus (sometimes incorporating all three movements within the same shot) even when capturing intimate interior-set dialogue and love scenes. Perhaps even more significant, though, is how Anderson's camera work utilises what we might call diegetic frames; that is, how Anderson's camera travels into the bounded spaces of mirrors and other reflective glass surfaces, and most notably into television screens to produce an intensely mediated and highly recursive sense of cinematic space. The aforementioned sex scene provides perhaps the film's best example: a TV blares in the background, its images captured in a reflection on a glass frame; Anderson's camera enters this media space, which fractures into multiple frames of old television footage and still photographs, culminating in Anderson's framing, within a photograph, of Claudia and Jimmy, characters from realms on opposing sides of this fantastical televisual looking glass. Anderson's optical trickery is extreme here, but it is representative enough of the film for Joanne Clark Dillman (2005) to claim that the film "exposes how we perform our lives through the mediation of televisual and filmic images. The film does not envision any 'real' beyond this mediation" (150).

"Seduce and Destroy"

Dillman's (2005) suggestion that the film foregrounds the imbrications of media images and everyday life is particularly relevant to the film's representation of masculinity. Anderson consistently shows male identity as being created and maintained through media engagement, a point evident not just in the number of male characters linked to Earl Partridge's quiz show, but also in the self-produced video diary entries of Officer Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly) and in the infomercials of Frank T. J. Mackey. Mackey presents a particularly interesting case with respect to media-created masculinity, as the spokesman and creator of the *Seduce and Destroy* self-help program is the film's most stereotypical representation of regressive machismo and its

most florid symptom of male hysteria. Viewers are first introduced to the estranged son of Earl Partridge in one of his television advertisements, in which he describes himself as “a master of the muffin and author of the *Seduce and Destroy* system now available to you on audio and video cassette.” Played with an over-the-top level of arrogance and narcissism by Cruise, by the end of the film we see Mackey humbled and undone by the reappearance of his estranged and dying father.

In narrating Mackey’s spectacular fall from alpha-male grace, *Magnolia* mobilises many contemporary ideas about a crisis of masculinity. While Hollywood masculinity in the 1980s was perhaps most readily associated with a hypertrophied muscularity (as famously incarnated by such stars as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone), in 1990s cinema masculinity became more self-conscious and conflicted (Jeffords 1994; Malin 2005; Greven 2009).²⁸ In this light, Anderson’s representation of machismo in the figure of a promiscuous male is apt, as sexual conquest has in many ways become one of the few remaining socially acceptable ways for men to display their masculine credentials (Illouz 2012). Perhaps even more than oversized biceps and pectorals, the oversized libido of men such as Mackey attests to the overcompensation that so often characterises masculinity. Instead of hunting elephants or fighting enemy soldiers, the compulsive seducing of men such as Mackey attests to what Richard Dyer (1992) has called the “hysterically phallic” strain that is so often characteristic of masculinity (275).

The anxious character of this type of masculinity becomes especially clear in Mackey’s second appearance in the film. Still performing, but this time in front of a seminar audience rather than in an infomercial, Mackey begins his *Seduce and Destroy* with a muscle-flexing pose, accompanied by the opening fanfare of Richard Strauss’ *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. When the enthusiastic applause subsides, Mackey’s presentation begins with a two-part command for his audience: “Respect the cock. And tame the cunt.” Throughout his performance Mackey has his audience eating out of his hand; there is an undeniable homoerotic element in this performance, as the audience

²⁸ No doubt part of the reason for this move from a hard-bodied to a softer and more conflicted masculinity was an increase in the number of images of *female* athleticism and muscularity, in films such as *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991).

cheers not just at the guru's misogynistic maxims, but at his every pose and gyration. When Gwenovier (April Grace), a reporter sent to interview Mackey and the only woman present for his performance, gives the evening's most tepid response to his macho exhibitionism, the irony is complete: this most aggressively, predatorily heterosexual "master of the muffin" is a figure of fascination mostly to the other self-identified heterosexual men in the venue. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2015) coined the term "homosocial" for just the sort of male-bonding dynamic at work here, wherein desire between men is displaced onto a woman—or, in this case, a fetishized conception of the female body (Stratton 1996)—who is the prize of men's rivalry and the conduit for men's mutual but disavowed affection.

With respect to memoro-politics, Mackey's performance of this misogynistic masculinity requires a wilful forgetting of the past—that is, a wholesale rejection of the notion that the past might not be through with the present. The anxious masculinity behind Mackey's *Seduce and Destroy* program depends upon the repression of inconvenient truths from one's past. Instead of working through unpleasant memories, Mackey demands that his followers ignore whatever lessons the past might hold for them; as he explains to the television reporter who asks unwelcome questions about his life story, "Something I tell my men is that facing the past is an important way in not making progress." Mackey's relation to the past is of a piece with the instrumental rationality that is characteristic of traditional masculinity—if memory threatens the fortifications of the ego, it can be ignored. If personal history is too unpleasant to consider, a new life story and identity can be fabricated to replace it.

"This Is That Scene"

In an interview about *Magnolia*, Anderson spoke of how his cinephilia has interfered with his experience of real life:

... there come these times in life ... when you feel like movies are betraying you. Where you're right in the middle of true, painful life. Like, say, somebody could be sitting in a room somewhere, watching their father die of cancer, and all of a sudden it's like, no this isn't really happening, this is something I saw in *Terms Of Endearment*. You're at this moment where movies are betraying you, and you resent movies for maybe taking away from

the painful truth of what's happening to you – but that's exactly why those moments show up in movies. Those things “do happen” (P.T. Anderson 2000, 205).

Anderson's comments here—referring to his own experience of losing his father to cancer—speak to a familiar set of concerns about postmodern culture. The inability to feel deep emotions—even on the brink of suffering and loss—without reference to pre-existing mass media images and narratives reflects Fredric Jameson's (1991) comments about two crises of postmodernism, the deadening of affect and the waning of historicity.

Put another way, Anderson's remarks about the interpenetration of film and life can be interpreted as a way of asking what constitutes authentic emotion and authentic memory in an era in which the mediated spectacle reigns supreme. In *Magnolia*, Anderson stages these interrogations in a gendered melodrama in which Frank T. J. Mackey plays a key role. The case of the *Seduce and Destroy* author demonstrates how both masculinity and memory lack any connection to a non-mediated “real”, the former being a mere charade of identity whose performance is only made possible by repression or deliberate ignorance about the latter. The mastery that Mackey pretends to embody is exposed as a frail and vulnerable façade when it is revealed that the self-proclaimed “master of the muffin” is not even the master of his own life story. Among the first lessons Mackey gives in his seminar is his bold proclamation that “in this big game that we play, life, it's not what you deserve, it's not what you hope for, it's what you take.” The notion that life is a game, the spoils of which are up for grabs to the fiercest competitor, is part and parcel of the same ideology at the heart of the TV game show, the televisual cocktail of illusion and competition with which Mackey's father made his fortune. As John Fiske (2010) has suggested, the television game show rehearses a mystified version of capitalism in which aspiration and talent are the only qualities necessary for success, since the format of the competition insists that the contests are fair and adversaries are equally matched. Mackey puts this mythology in the service of the battle of the sexes, explaining to his adoring male fans that the spoils of patriarchy are equally available to all men, provided that they purchase the wisdom that he offers: “I don't care about how you look, what car you drive, or what your last

bank statement says. *Seduce and Destroy* is going to teach you how to get that naughty sauce you want—fast!”

The bitter lesson that Mackey learns—that the past is not through with him—tears away his mask of phallic masculinity and reveals him as an abject child with unhealed psychological wounds. A classic French film—one generically very different from *Magnolia*—provides the template for how Anderson crafts Mackey’s undoing. In *Le Samourai* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1967), the downfall of Jef Costello (Alain Delon), an apparently invincible hit man, begins the moment that one of his crimes is witnessed by a gaze that is doubly Other—that of the black female nightclub pianist Valerie (Cathy Rosier) (Neale 1993, 280). The look of the gendered/racial Other signifies a crucial shift in power dynamics, and the previously unassailable hard-boiled Costello begins an inexorable slide toward death (Neale 1993, 280).

Melville’s *Le Samourai*, and Neale’s reading of it, might at first glance seem a world away from the suburbia of Anderson’s *Magnolia*, yet the cool and ruthlessly efficient Costello of the Parisian underworld has his counterpart in Mackey, the sex guru of the San Fernando Valley. Both narratives trace the dissipation of male mastery, and Mackey’s undoing also begins with a black woman turning her gaze on a self-assured white man. During the intermission in Mackey’s seminar, he sits down to an interview with the African-American television journalist Gwenovier. After claiming that his mother was alive and that his father was dead, Mackey is stopped in his self-promoting tracks by Gwenovier’s well-researched interview questions. Mackey’s unravelling begins with the following exchange:

GWENOVIER

Do you remember a Miss Sims?

FRANK

I know a lot of women, and I’m sure she remembers me.

GWENOVIER

She does. From when you were a boy.

FRANK

Mmm-hmm.

[...]

GWENOVIER

I was told that your mother died. That your mother died when you were young—

FRANK

And that's what you've heard?

GWENOVIER

I talked to Miss Simms. Miss Simms was your caretaker and neighbour after your mother died in 1980. ... In my research, I have you listed as the only son of Earl and Linda Partridge, and what I learned from Mrs Simms is that your mother passed away in 1980. See, it's my understanding that the information supplied by you and your company and answers to questions I've asked are incorrect, Frank. And if I'd like to get to the bottom of who you are and why you are, then, I think your history, your accurate family history ... well, this seems important, Frank?

Gwenovier's interrogation of Mackey's official life story effectively punctures the protective family romance that Mackey has constructed and forces an acknowledgment of the juvenile traumas that so disfigured Mackey's identity (Bruzzi 2005). At this point, chance appears to exert its mysterious influence yet again. Frank waits out the now very uncomfortable interview in silence, until the allotted time for the interview has elapsed. Like a boxer saved by the bell—an appropriate metaphor given his view of male-female relations as nothing more than a battle of the sexes—Frank manages to evade the knockout punch of Gwenovier's interview. He is able to avoid facing his past, until he leaves the interview and finds that the past is not through with him.

It is when Frank returns to the stage that the father who abandoned him (and who Frank had been claiming is already dead) returns. Phil Parma (Philip Seymour Hoffman), Earl Partridge's palliative care nurse, has finally succeeded in tracking down the long-lost son of his dying patient. Parma's first reaction is disbelief when he discovers the identity of Earl's estranged son: the local infomercial celebrity and sleazy sex guru Frank T. J. Mackey. Parma's work as physical carer and emotional confidant sets him at odds with the dominant masculinity of *Magnolia*, in which most of the male protagonists are distinguished by their sexual promiscuity and infidelity and by their general emotional callousness (Bruzzi 2005). Parma for a moment seems to fit right

into this niche, when he is shown placing a phone order for pornographic magazines. When the magazines arrive, however, Parma uses them not for voyeuristic sexual enjoyment, but to help track down Partridge's son through the *Seduce and Destroy* advertisements placed within them. Pleading with one of Mackey's assistants, Parma acknowledges the strangeness of receiving out of the blue a call of such urgency:

I know this all seems silly. I know that maybe I sound ridiculous, like maybe this is the scene of the movie where the guy is trying to get a hold of the long-lost son, but this is that scene, you know? I think they have those scenes in movies because they're true, because they really happen. And you've got to believe me: This is really happening. I mean, I can give you my phone number and you can call me back if you want to check with whoever you can check this with, but don't leave me hanging on this ... please ... please. See ... see ... see this is the scene of the movie where you help me out.

The centrality of its deathbed sequence puts *Magnolia* squarely within the melodramatic genre, following the lead of such classic examples as *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1950) and *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), as well as more recent examples such as *Terms of Endearment* (James L Brooks, 1983) and *Steel Magnolias* (Herbert Ross, 1989). Linda Williams (1991) has argued that the temporal signature of the melodrama is untimeliness, the epiphany that comes too late to mend romantic or familial bonds. As the deathbed marks the borderline between the living and the dead, it is the ultimate sign of time being out of joint. Even when the living are there to say goodbye—unlike, for example, the famously too late for a reunion ending of *Imitation of Life*—the passing of the beloved marks the end of shared time together. There is nothing like a deathbed for so clearly revealing the irreversible trajectory of time's arrow.

Sirk's classic *Imitation of Life* is a significant generic reference here, for the instructive similarities and differences in each film's handling of filial estrangement and deathbed reunions. While in Sirk's film the estranged daughter returns too late for a reconciliation with her mother, in *Magnolia* the final gaze shared between father and son marks a kind of deathbed détente, as heartbreakingly ill-timed and inadequate as it may be. Yet there is a fundamental similarity between the two films in that each film blames the offspring's disavowal of the parent as at least partially responsible for the tragically deferred reunion. Specifically, while the estrangement at the centre of

Imitation of Life stems from the daughter's failure to confront the polluting discourses of racism, in *Magnolia* Frank Mackey's alienation derives from his refusal to reject the toxic masculinity that he inherited from his deadbeat father—though the father himself has also come to a belated realisation, in his case how his own desire to live up to a masculine ideal destroyed his relationship with both his first wife and his son.

The irony of Frank's disavowal of the father who left him when his mother was terminally ill is that despite his most strenuous efforts he is unable to leave his father behind. Frank compensates for his father leaving him by *becoming* his father. This becomes clear after Frank finally agrees to visit Earl. Before he makes it to the house, however, Earl confides in Phil about the breakup of his family. In a long and haunting confession, wracked with pain and half-delusional from morphine, Earl recounts meeting and falling in love with Lily, his high school sweetheart. At first admiring her from a distance because he was intimidated by her brazenness, Earl succeeds in winning her heart and eventually marries her, but his sexual insecurity dooms their relationship. Jealous and abusive, he eventually succumbs to womanizing to shield himself from deeper intimacy with Lily: "I cheated on her ... over and over and over again ... because I wanted to be a man and I couldn't let her be a woman...a smart, free person who was something." Even after nearly four decades together, Earl cannot offer himself emotionally to Lily; at her hour of need, he leaves. As he recounts from his deathbed:

I loved Lily. I cheated on her. For thirty-five years. And I have this son. And she has cancer. And I'm not there. And he's forced to take care of her. He's fourteen years old, and he has to take care of his mother and watch her die on him. Little kid. And I'm not there. And she dies. And I live my life. And it's not fair. Thirty-eight years and she has cancer and I'm gone ... I leave ... I walk out, I can't deal with that.

It is fitting, then, that it is Phil Parma who finds Frank Mackey. When he rings, Frank is forced to confront not just his father, but his old self as well. The role that Earl refused—caregiver and comforter to Lily—was taken up instead by his son Frank, who after his mother's death effectively vows never to become the kind of man Phil Parma

represents: caring, self-effacing, and apparently uninterested in the “game” of sexual conquest.

“But It Did Happen”: Jimmy and Claudia Gator

The most significant intervention that *Magnolia* makes in turn-of-the-millennium memory culture is its insistence that masculine delusions of mastery and oblivion must give way to a past that cannot be mastered. While this point is convincingly made with the story of Earl Partridge and Frank T. J. Mackey, it is fully driven home by the story of Jimmy and Claudia Gator. As is the case with Earl and Frank, the Gators are introduced to viewers—in the lengthy montage discussed earlier in this chapter—through a mass-mediated prism that reflects the film’s preoccupation with the ubiquity of the spectacle in postmodernity. Subsequent glimpses of Jimmy and Claudia present both characters as heavily stereotyped: the former, a rather ingratiating show-business veteran whose avuncular persona is a front for lecherous tendencies; the latter, an anxiety-ridden twenty-something with a severe cocaine addiction. Presented without significant backstory that would contextualise their fraught relationship, the violent quarrel that ensues when Jimmy visits Claudia appears to be only the result of Claudia’s drug-addled instability:

JIMMY

I’m dying, Claudia. I have cancer. I have cancer, and I’m dying, soon. It’s metastasized in my bones and I ...

CLAUDIA

You burn in hell! You burn in hell, and you deserve it. You get the fuck out!

It is shortly after this scene that Jimmy gives voice to the statement that gives this chapter its title: “We may be through with the past, but the past is not through with us.” While no clue is given about what Jimmy is specifically referring to with this statement, his pain and regret are evident to see, even if their cause is not yet known.

In his role as quiz show compere, Jimmy Gator is the man who literally has all the answers. He embodies Freud’s (1909) description of the naïve child’s faith in the father as the “the only authority and the source of all belief” before the routine

disappointments of life lead the child to the creation of family romances—that is, fantasies of alternative parentage (236). Outside of the television studio, however, Jimmy's authority is steadily eroding until, near the film's end, it is revealed that there are questions that he cannot (or, more accurately, will not) answer. Jimmy Gator's plight parallels that of Mackey, though the older man begins *Magnolia* with a desire to reconcile with the past and ends with the desire to forget. Jimmy persists with his efforts to make amends for his past transgressions, ending a long-time extramarital affair with one of his wife's friends and deciding to confess to his wife Rose (Melinda Dillon) about this affair and his numerous other infidelities. His resolve to live up to his past finally fails him, however, when his confession to Rose leads to a series of interrogations that is much tenser than anything he has ever presided over on his quiz show:

ROSE

Why doesn't Claudia talk to you, Jimmy?

JIMMY

Why, well I think we've, we both don't know ... what do you mean?

ROSE

I think that you know.

[...]

ROSE

Say it, Jimmy...

JIMMY

Do you know the answer to this?

ROSE

I'm asking you. I'm asking you if you know why Claudia will not speak to you. Please, Jimmy, tell me.

JIMMY

I think that she thinks I may have molested her. [pause] She thinks terrible things that somehow got in her head...that I might have done something. She said that to me last time ... when it was ... ten years ago she walked out the door, "You touched me wrong, I know that." Some crazy thought in her, in her head...

Did you ever touch her?	ROSE
No.	JIMMY
	[pause]
Jimmy, did you touch her?	ROSE
I don't know.	JIMMY
Jimmy ...	ROSE
I really don't know.	JIMMY
But you can't say....	ROSE
I don't know what I've done.	JIMMY
Yes, you do. You do, and you won't say.	ROSE
	[...]
I don't know what I've done.	JIMMY
You should know better.	ROSE

This tense and revelatory exchange ends with a shaken Rose storming out and driving to Claudia's apartment, and a despondent Jimmy on the brink of suicide. For the second time in *Magnolia*, Anderson choreographs a moment of intense emotion—at the very same time that elsewhere in the San Fernando Valley, Frank confronts his dying father—with a pointed rejection of cinematic realism, as a violent storm rains a

torrent of frogs across the crisis-ridden suburban landscape.²⁹ Anderson provides a cinematographic comment about this credulity-straining event in the form of a final bravura dolly shot, which travels down the hallway of Claudia's apartment and through a magnifying lens to reveal an almost microscopic line of text within a painting on one of Claudia's walls, a cryptic statement that reads, "But it did happen". This revelation—Claudia's defiant insinuation that Jimmy in fact did sexually abuse her—testifies to a past that cannot be subdued or forgotten.

It is impossible to read this moment of the film as anything but an intervention (though possibly not a completely conscious one) in the late twentieth century Memory Wars, the completing claims of the recovered memory and false memory camps (Crews 1995; Hacking 1995). The framing of this controversy as a "cultural memory" that encodes within cultural scripts women's experiences of violation, betrayal, and silencing (by fathers or other trusted authority figures) speaks to the commonality of such traumatic experiences even if the veracity of individual claims about the past cannot be definitively established (Sturken 1998 and 1999). In this light, that category of events that so preoccupies Anderson and which he suggests are to some degree unbelievable is coterminous with the misdeeds of patriarchy. The melodramatic secret that the narrative of *Magnolia* hinges upon is the unspeakable family crypt of incest that is built by patriarchy, and it is this trauma—as well as Earl Partridge's abandonment of his son Frank—that must be worked through and remembered.

As in the legend of Bluebeard, *Magnolia* narrates an exposé of patriarchal rule, but one in which some of the victim status has been displaced from the daughter to the son. There undoubtedly is an element of what John Mowitt (2000) calls "trauma envy" at work here, an attempt on the part of men to appropriate the rhetorical legitimization that virtuous suffering imparts, most evident in Frank Mackey's hysterical *j'accuse* against contemporary women (272). Yet it is worth recalling Max Weber's (1978) observation that patriarchal authority describes not just the domination of women by men, but of less powerful men (younger men/sons) by more powerful males (older men/fathers)

²⁹ With respect to the codes and conventions of realism collapsing under the strain of emotion, the first example in *Magnolia* is the moment at which emotionally devastated characters who are geographically dispersed sing along at the same time to Aimee Man's song "Wise Up", the chorus of which cautions against the effort to block out the traumatic past ("It's not going to stop / 'Til you wise up").

(359). The most significant contribution that *Magnolia* makes to discourses of memory and masculinity is a prescription for male cultural memory that is not reactionary or nostalgic, but instead demands a warts-and-all reckoning of the devastation sowed by patriarchal culture and predatory male sexuality. The film's despairing indictment of fathers suggests they have left little beneficial to their sons, only gaps in their memories and holes in their souls, and an insatiable drive for sexual conquest that cannot heal the wounds that patriarchy has left behind.³⁰

³⁰ In its preoccupation with the lifelong psychological or spiritual wounds that negligent fathers inflict on their children, *Magnolia* shows the influence of the 1990s mythopoetic men's movement (Bly 1992; Keen 1991), though Anderson's explicit recognition of the wounds suffered by daughters and his indictment of predatory male sexuality suggests a more progressive mobilisation of the mythopoetic trope of the father wound (Kimmel and Kaufman 1994).

Chapter Seven

“Remaining Men Together”: Trauma and Memory Between Men in *Fight Club*

One of the more devious stratagems that Frank Mackey shares with his sexually frustrated fans involves fabricating distressful incidents to win the emotional sympathies of—and sexual intimacies with—attractive women. Using the example of a man who pretends to be distraught because he has accidentally run over a dog, Mackey’s sexual Machiavellianism is fully on display here. For men like Mackey, the bedroom is a battlefield where conquest is the only goal that matters (“Respect the cock. And tame the cunt,” he proclaims at the beginning of his speech) and any sort of cynical manipulation is fair game. The three words which Mackey uses to introduce this ploy could double as the gambit for many men’s reaction to the threat faced by a more gender egalitarian society. “Create a crisis,” Mackey commands. For would-be seducers, Mackey explains, the manufactured crisis is a persuasion or seduction technique that is “simple and clean, and if done properly it can be quite effective in getting some bush.”

As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the feminist diagnosis that masculinity’s crisis is a convenient fabrication has a long pedigree (Modleski 1991; Solomon-Godeau 1995; Robinson 2000). A feminist faced with a man’s complaint of being under threat, despite the mountains of evidence that men remain the dominant gender, can choose either of two explanations for this mismatch between rhetoric and reality: a man who makes such a claim is either lying or deluded. On the broader cultural level, this means asking whether the crisis of masculinity has been created deliberately, or is it a symptom of male hysteria? Perhaps the crisis is all in *his* head, to upend the sexist stereotype of female hypochondria.

This question of deceit or delusion is worked through in a number of turn-of-the-millennium “mind-game” (Elsaesser 2009) or “mindfuck” (Eig 2003) films, most notably in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999). At the start of the film’s main flashback, the unnamed narrator-protagonist (Edward Norton) joins “Remaining Men Together,” a support group for survivors of testicular cancer. Strangely enough, he does not join the group because he actually has testicular cancer; instead, a much less serious ailment

brings him to his first meeting. As a brief flashback within the main flashback reveals, a few days earlier the narrator presented at a hospital emergency room with a complaint of insomnia. Pleading for a sedative to ease the “pain” of his chronic sleeplessness, the narrator finds his attending doctor (Richmond Arquette) unmoved by his plight; if his insomniac patient wants to see real pain, he advises, then he should “swing by First Methodist on Tuesday nights--see the guys with testicular cancer. *That’s* pain.”

The pain that the protagonist discovers in the meeting, however, is not the physical trauma of the disease or the side effects of chemotherapy, but the emotional trauma of emasculation, which must be treated with the purgative of support group confession. The scene begins with a shot of men assembled in a circle of folding chairs, with Thomas (David Andrews), a member of the group, offering his testimonial:

I always wanted three kids . . . two boys and a girl. Mindy wanted two girls and a boy. We never could agree on anything. Well, I ... She [stammering as he tries to find the right words] ... She had her first child last week. A girl. With ... With her ... with her new husband. ... And thank God, you know. ... I’m glad for her. Because she deserves it ... [breaks down in tears]

From here, the group breaks into pairs—“the one-on-ones,” where all should, according to the group’s leader, “follow Thomas’s example and really open ourselves up.”

Such sharing of personal experiences is a kind of memory work, a sort of labour that shores up male identity—the revealing of secrets is the key to “Remaining Men Together.” It is at this point that *Fight Club* reveals itself as a narrative centring on remembering and (especially) forgetting, even if its contemplation of memory and identity is not so foregrounded as in, for example, *Memento* (chapter two). The main site of Fincher’s cinematic exploration of memory is what we might call the contemporary memory genre of confessional discourse, a group of ideas about memory and the self that are heavily influenced by our present cultural obsessions with psychical trauma and its impact on our understanding of personal and social identity. Simultaneously building upon and subverting the therapy culture that so agitated Tony Soprano (see chapter three), *Fight Club* explores the relationship between men’s emotional lives and their attempts at building and maintaining a corpus of social

memories. Exploring three different confessional scenes within Fincher's film, this chapter investigates the film's representation of male ambivalence about "opening up" and the problems and perils that both emotional commitment and group identity pose for contemporary men.

Fighting and Feeling: Masculinity in Crisis and Therapy Culture

In America especially, but also in other countries of the Anglosphere, one of the most significant manifestations of men's gendered self-consciousness at the end of the twentieth century was the rise of the mythopoetic men's movement, a proliferation of unaffiliated or loosely affiliated all-male groups that turned to myth and a nostalgic view of the past in search of remedies for what ailed contemporary men (Connell 2000; Faludi 1999; Magnuson 2016; Messner 1997; Pfeil 1995). The foundational texts of this movement (Bly 1992; Keen 1991) advocated for nostalgia on what we might call both micro and macro levels: on the one hand, a popular psychological examination of men's life stories, particularly accounts of men's inadequate relationships with their father as children; and, on the other, a call for men to reconnect with a mythic pre-industrial past in which father-son relations were purported to be more emotionally intimate and nurturing than the family relationships that contemporary men experienced in their boyhoods. The American provenance of this movement is unsurprising given a national frontier mythology that promised men boundless opportunity, an ethos dedicated to a masculinist promise of self-definition and regeneration (Slotkin 1973; Ray 1985). Men's "victimisation," as the loss of this prerogative is often perceived, is represented in mainstream media accounts as men's "psychological wound, [as] being cut off from the true or deep masculinity that is their heritage" (Connell 2000, 5). This "wound" has affinities with the memory wound of trauma, as the wounding is experienced repeatedly, first at an original moment of "emasculatation"—in *Memento* (chapter two), for example, the moment when Leonard's wife is violated and killed (at least according to Leonard's account of the events)—and at later instances when this loss is remembered, either through conscious recollection or through the unconsciously generated symptoms whose recurrence stands in for conscious recollection.

Indeed, the wound, whether physical or psychological, has played a key role in recent cinematic explorations of masculinity, with physical violence and/or psychological trauma consciously or unconsciously mobilised by filmmakers as the mark that binds men into the shared identity of masculinity. Whereas *The Passion of the Christ* (chapter one) only registered this rhetoric on an unconscious or symptomatic level, turn of the millennium screen narratives such as *Memento* (chapter two) and *The Sopranos* (chapter three) work to subvert such conservative masochism. In other words, while Gibson perceives the wound as a sacred text, the most challenging screen narratives of the period interpret the (physical/psychological) wound as a unit of visual language and as a trope of collective (gender) identity that is ripe for quotation and revision, pastiche and parody. This distinction has played out throughout this thesis, as Gibson's devotion to the wound gave way to discussions of how Christopher Nolan (*Memento*) and David Chase (*The Sopranos*) recognise that wounding obscures as much about masculinity as it illuminates. Similarly, in *Flags of Our Fathers* (chapter four) Clint Eastwood presents a revisionist take on the Battle of Iwo Jima that does not endorse a narrative of noble sacrifice—indeed, the film consistently paints civilians' celebration of war heroism as sanitised and naïve. Instead, the film seems to make a real investment in trauma as a sort of language by which sons can come to understand their fathers. This chapter furthers this argument by demonstrating how *Fight Club* speaks the dialects of both physical and psychological suffering to underscore the particular crisis of masculinity faced by the turn-of-the-millennium man, who recognises both internal and external pressures to reform his masculinity but is unable to find a new language of self-transformation that he can use to give voice to a new collective identity.

To understand the discourses of confession and self-transformation at work in *Fight Club*, we must first recap the complicated and rather unusual plot of Fincher's film. After its title sequence, *Fight Club* opens with a shot of the unnamed protagonist in a parking garage, with Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) holding a gun in his mouth. Explaining that all the buildings in the area are wired with explosives, the narrator begins to recount how he came to know his captor and, more generally, how he came to find himself in this situation. From this point a lengthy flashback (comprising most of the film's running time) unfolds as the confessional "mindscreen" (Kawin 1978) of this unidentified "recall co-ordinator." At the beginning of this long flashback, we are

introduced to the protagonist, a lonely insomniac and white-collar worker who begins to fake illness in order to find companionship in medical recovery support groups. The ruse works well for him, curing his sleeplessness, until at one of these meetings, he encounters Marla Singer (Helena Bonham-Carter), an eccentric young woman who has, for similar reasons, also been faking her way into support groups. His newfound equilibrium disturbed, the protagonist seems on his way to recovery again after meeting Tyler Durden, a mysterious stranger who believes contemporary men can use violence to work through their feelings of anger and alienation. Tyler and the narrator move into a decrepit old house together and in the basement of a local bar form an all-male “fight club”, which replaces the therapeutic communication of “Remaining Men Together” with bouts of consensual violence.

As this project gains popularity, the groups begin to move on from fistfights to acts of sabotage and vandalism against symbols of corporate power. In the meantime, Tyler and Marla begin a relationship after he rescues her from a suicide attempt, a development that causes friction between the two housemates and between the narrator and Marla. After realising that Tyler has a plan to blow up local skyscrapers, the narrator frantically struggles to stop him, only to learn that Tyler is actually his own hallucinated alter ego. At this point, the film returns from the flashback to the present, and the narrator then “kills” Tyler Durden by turning the hallucinated figure’s gun on himself. At the film’s end, the bombs beneath the city’s skyscrapers detonate, and Marla and the narrator hold hands and watch them crumble to the ground.

Returning to the “Remaining Men Together” scene, we can note both similarities to and differences from another masculinity in crisis film of 1999. From the first reel of *Fight Club*, as in P. T. Anderson’s *Magnolia* (chapter six), terminal illness is represented as a site for the articulation of male dissatisfaction and anger. Moreover, in both films the resentment-breeding crimes of the fathers are the same: male parents are condemned for neglecting their parental responsibilities and for modelling for their sons a sexual lifestyle characterised by emotional detachment and exploitation. Where the two films diverge, of course, is in the generic registers in which these conflicts are worked through: (melo-)drama in the case of *Magnolia*, and (black) comedy in the case of *Fight Club*. The stark difference in treatment itself invites analysis. In *The Theory of*

Comedy, Elder Olson (1968) suggests that the pleasure of comedy inevitably comes from such insensitivity. For Olson, as Geoff King (2002) explains:

the comedy experience is pleasurable because it involves a relaxation of any tension that might be created by taking the [depicted or described] events more seriously; a relaxation usually guaranteed in advance by audio-visual and extra-textual markers of modality (14).

Within *Fight Club*, the darkly comic tone of the scene is signalled in part through the protagonist's stiff passivity within the scene. The first glimpse of the narrator during the flashback is a shot of him staring blankly as he is awkwardly squashed between the "bitch tits" of the weeping, much larger Bob Paulson (Meatloaf Aday). The interruption he foists on his own narration at this point—"Wait, let's go back"—underscores in an almost cartoonish fashion the comical framing of his awkward trespassing of the support group environment. In "On Laughter," Henri Bergson (1911a) remarks that the comic can be seen when the human appears to act like a machine, and the protagonist's halting approximation of sensitivity certainly jibes with this formula. Within this pack of "confessing animals" (Foucault 1990, 59) at the "Remaining Men Together" meeting, the protagonist stands out like the mechanised decoy that he is. His subsequent addiction to support groups is of a piece with the young protagonist's compulsive funeral attendance in *Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1971)—the cultivation of an inauthentic mourning as a palliative for a genuine but secret experience of suffering and alienation. In both films, the impersonation of mourning (the loss of a loved one in *Harold and Maude*; of good health in *Fight Club*) cloaks a genuine melancholia in which, *pace* Freud (1915), the sufferer harshly reproaches himself. In a sense, what is mourned in the case of *Fight Club* is not a lost love object, but what the protagonist perceives as a lost true self. The film thus begins with the narrator's identity crisis—a belief that his authentic self has died and been replaced by an inauthentic self, one which is a kind of post-Fordist Frankenstein's monster cobbled together through résumé entries and consumer purchases. What *Fight Club* proposes, then, is remembering and recovering an authentic masculinity identity, but in an ironic manner that critically responds to contemporary popular—and highly gendered—discourses about traumatic memory and its impact on bodies and psyches.

A brief and, at first glance, rather inconsequential, scene further complicates the influence that confession has on the film. On a business flight, the narrator engages his “single-serving friend” (in this case, the female passenger seated next to him) in conversation. Identifying himself as a “recall co-ordinator,” he relates the following example of a typical scenario in his working life:

A new car built by my company leaves somewhere travelling at 60 mph. The rear differential locks up. The car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside. Now, should we initiate a recall? Take the number of vehicles in the field, A, multiply by the probable rate of failure, B, multiply by the average out-of-court settlement, C. A times B times C equals X. If X is less than the cost of a recall, we don't do one.

The disclosure in this scene—which occurs barely ten minutes into the film's running time—represents the third confession of the film (the first two being the flashback that frames the film, and the support group “sharing” of the Remaining Men Together circle). These three confessions are key to the film's investigation of a contemporary crisis of masculinity.

At first glance, the “Remaining Men Together” scene and the “Recall Co-ordinator” scene would appear to have little in common. The former scene, which begins only as a voice-over track, before cutting to an image of the protagonist's “single serving friend” and interlocutor, recalls an offence for which he shares some blame—or, more accurately, describes what a priest might call “a sin of omission,” since it describes iniquity that stems from a deliberate refusal to do what one knows is right. The difference between this speech and Thomas's avowal in “Remaining Men Together” is striking. What Thomas recounts is not a sin he has committed, but a misfortune that has befallen him. To borrow Jon Dovey's (2000) distinction, Thomas's speech is a descendant of the “psychoanalytical couch rather than the closed confessional,” or for that matter the courtroom or police station (111). For Dovey, this type of confessional speech reaches its zenith on late twentieth century daytime talk shows and in other forms of “first person” television; such speech is part of:

a range of subjective modalities in which we speak on television, another set of qualities for our biographical direct speech, which, though they might

carry the memory of the confessional, *appear* to express a different sort of power relations. A characteristic of these kinds of “confession” is that they are anything but guilty. On the contrary they are assertive, empowering, declamatory (112-13).

If in confession one can articulate either a memory of transgression or one of victimisation, how are we to understand this act capable of including such disparate, even antithetical, forms? The common point here, I would argue, is that both types of confession involve the revelation of a secret: the “opening up” or exposure of what is hidden and internal. Peter Brooks (2000) has commented on the “double” nature of confession, a speech act which has both constative (“the sin or guilt to which one confesses”) and performative dimensions (“the elusive and troubling *action* performed by the statement ‘I confess’”) (21). For Michel Foucault (1990), whose remarks on confession in his *History of Sexuality* have informed so many later writers on the subject, confessional speech effectively inaugurates modern selfhood. As Dovey (2000) explains, for Foucault “confessional discourse ... has dispersed itself into every aspect of social practice as a *structuring* process which generates the whole experience of individual identity” (105).

While recognizing the importance of Foucault’s work, Dovey is anxious to problematise and open up this discussion of confession. Dovey describes *testifying* and *witnessing* as alternatives to standard models of confession. To testify is to assert “group identity as part of a politically oppositional practice ... to testify in this sense is to assert the ontology of self in a way that is implicitly linked to a collective identity” (Dovey 2000, 113). Confessions of this sort—public divulging of secret experiences—are known more for their articulation of suffering and victimisation, than their avowal of past transgressions. For Elayne Rapping (1996), the Second Wave feminist movement represents the most exemplary type of such confession, in the form of consciousness-raising (CR) discussions, where small groups of women met and spoke of what Betty Friedan (1963/1971) famously called “the problem that has no name,” their experience of oppression in a patriarchal society (15). The discourse of consciousness-raising adumbrates the performative possibilities of confessional speech, since CR had the effect not just of constatively reporting the acts of oppression

of Friedan's "problem", but of calling into being a diagnosis for the problem and the possibilities for its cure.

This feminist discourse, then—a kind of memory work that aims to raise consciousness and consolidate social identity—is what *Fight Club* co-opts: the investigation of a problem so ineffable that it lacks a name, though its sufferers seem quite capable of at least identifying its effects. Curiously enough, both cases share a major symptom: insomnia. To return to *The Feminine Mystique*, we can look at its famous opening paragraph, which describes a life of somnambulistic days and sleepless nights:

The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban housewife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: "Is this all?" (Friedan 1963/1971, 15)

The first of the confessions under consideration here—the flashback itself—begins with the narrator recounting his sleep problems: "For six months. I could not sleep. When you have insomnia, you're never really asleep ... and you're never really awake. With insomnia, nothing is real. Everything is far away. Everything is a copy of a copy of a copy." In both cases, failure to sleep is an index of a failure to live properly, to live unashamed in an ethically meaningful and personally fulfilling way. One might be tempted to say that knowing how the narrator earns a living, is it any wonder he cannot sleep at night? What is significant, however, is not so much whether the confession is a remembrance of transgression or of victimisation; instead, it is the articulation, the *externalisation* of this memory that is important. *Fight Club* is obsessed with the "inner" truth of the self, though its preferred method for "opening up" the modern man is through ritual wounding rather than therapeutic confession. While the mythopoetic men's movement celebrated the descent into self, *Fight Club* bears a rather Foucauldian suspicion of confession, fearing that the practice of confession creates psychological depth only as a nefarious means to survey and control consciousness (P.

Brooks 2000, 111). *Fight Club*, though, does not really abandon “the metaphors of innerness, depth, [and] recesses within” (P. Brooks 2000, 111) characteristic of confession; instead, the film brings to the surface a self that it suggests has been repressed by therapy culture. If confession, as Terry Eagleton (2003) has described it, is an act of externalization in the pursuit of authenticity, then *Fight Club* offers the speaking of the grotesque body as an alternative way of turning the inside out. This externalization occurs from the film’s first frames—its first shot is a sort of CGI-constructed confessional pullback that tracks out from the protagonist’s brain to Tyler at the trigger end of the pistol jammed in the narrator’s mouth. The film returns time and again to the proclamations of the grotesque body (e.g., “I am Jack’s colon. I get cancer. I kill Jack.”), which, in their satirical treatment of self-narration, lampoon the cult of the confession and give the film some of its more darkly comical moments. Much of the film’s mordant humour derives from its appropriation and satirising of stereotypes of masculinity, and there is hardly a more entrenched cliché about men than the truism that they are afraid or unwilling to share their emotions.³¹

According to this view, traditional masculinity demands a firm division between a man’s private and public lives, between his internal emotional state and the “appropriate” external posturing that conceals it. Antony Easthope has theorized the divided self of hegemonic masculinity in architectural terms, describing how conventional male subjectivity constructs “a castle of the self,” the walls of which defend against both invasion from outside and treason from within, the latter being a man’s hidden femininity (Easthope 1992, 40-41). According to this model, the externalization of internal emotional states can therefore be seen as a breach or rupture in these masculine fortifications. In colloquial terms, this model manifests itself as the “stiff upper lip”—the refusal to disclose inner turmoil.

In practical terms, such emotional reticence often means the refusal to discuss troubling experiences, and Tyler Durden’s path to a new masculinity is entirely consistent with this taciturnity. One of the film’s most memorable lines is the order

³¹ Academic research into masculinity more often than not unproblematically endorses this stereotype: see, for example, the works of Seidler (1989 and 1994), Horrocks (1995), and Connell (2000 and 2005). Galasinski (2004) provides a lengthy and critical survey of this body of research, countering claims of male “emotional illiteracy” by advancing a theory of emotions as “discursive practices, as ways of speaking” rather than as “internal states” that can either be hidden or bodily expressed (6).

from Durden to his followers: “The first rule of Fight Club is, ‘You do not talk about Fight Club.’ The second rule of Fight Club is, ‘You DO NOT TALK ABOUT FIGHT CLUB.’” The irony at work here is that the implicit programme of the Fight Clubs—to reject the social pressure for a more emotionally open masculinity—is to some degree contradicted by the practices of the groups, as recruiting new members depends upon soliciting (at least implicitly) their agreement with a collective statement of dissatisfaction. The members thus endorse a sort of group testimonial or confession that serves as part of the cult’s initiation rite. When the accompanying mortification of the flesh is completed (“If this is your first night at Fight Club, you have to fight”), a threshold has been crossed—the old self has died and a new one has been born.

Confession is an apt—perhaps, requisite—speech act for such an initiation. As Richard Terdiman (1995) has observed, confession’s defining trait as an act of memory is its narration of the past in a way that effectively draws a line between a person’s *then* and his or her *now*, between the life of the sinner and the life of the absolved: “as in the performance of the Mass itself, absolution *takes away* sin, and thereby rewrites the penitent’s history. Consequently, the past that is the referent of confession is always an ‘inauthentic’ one—or is made to become so” (77). The confessant’s desire for absolution, then, is the desire “to neutralize memory: in confession one remembers *in order to forget*” (Terdiman 1995, 77). This contradiction seems especially relevant to the men in *Fight Club*, who feel compelled to remember through confession, despite a perceived lack of past to recall—as Tyler Durden remarks, his is “a generation of men without history.” Implicitly, then, the memory paradox of confession is compounded: in a false confession one remembers in order to forget something that never happened in the first place.

Turn Your Head and Cough: Confession and Masculinity

Male readers at least will recognise in this section’s title (“Turn your head and cough”) an echo of the family doctor’s instructions during a routine physical examination. Hands on the patient’s scrotum, the physician tactilely inspects for signs of hernia (Latin for “rupture”) made palpable during the body’s tussive spasms. Colloquially, “to cough” can also mean “to confess”, and it is at the intersection of these

three elements—confession, rupture and men’s anatomy—where *Fight Club*’s meanings reside. In short, *Fight Club* is a film about men’s about-face on emotional revelation, and their fears about who “has them by the balls” (the narrative is book-ended with representations of eunuchs and threats of castration) when they set off on a path to new, more emotionally open masculinity. The film thus taps into potent cultural myths about the connections between men’s bodies and their emotional lives.

Sally Robinson (2000) has described how the dominant belief that “men aren’t permitted to express their emotions” has often been somatically rendered, in diagnoses such as “emotional blockage” or what Warren Farrell (1974) called “emotional constipation” (the more familiar intestinal variety is a major cause of hernia) with potentially life-threatening effects on men’s minds *and* bodies (Robinson 2000, 128-30; W. Farrell 1974, 71). According to Robinson, many “male liberationists” of the mid-1970s viewed the contemporary feminist movement in a depoliticized way consistent with the therapy culture model outlined above; in other words, the early men’s movement identified feminism as a “program for personal growth, rather than a movement for social justice” (Robinson 2000, 130). Such an outlook allowed men to co-opt the radical critique of gender relations for their own ends. For these men, the most pressing problem with patriarchy was the effect that it was having on *men*. What was needed was a release of the pent-up forces (the dammed currents of emotional, sexual and violent expression) that were emotionally and physically crippling the more powerful half of society. Nearly twenty-five years later, *Fight Club* dramatizes the problems faced by men when they turn their heads and cough—that is, when they re-orient their thinking about masculinity and publicly express the emotional trauma disfiguring their lives. It is at his first recovery group—after the leader’s plea for men to “open themselves up”—that the protagonist finds the courage, as he puts it, to “let go”—to release in a flood of tears the pent-up emotions causing his chronic insomnia.

The diagnosis of emotional blockage that was first put forward in the 1970s would later be taken up by the New Age men’s movement during the 1990s. R. W. Connell (2000) pinpoints how authors such as Robert Bly (1992) and Sam Keen (1991) called for an about-face in men’s attitudes towards their emotional lives. Because, as Connell (2000) puts it, “middle-class western masculinity tends to suppress emotion and deny vulnerability,” the majority of men in Anglo-American societies find themselves

emotionally traumatized and alienated from each other (5). The solution to this emotional privation, according to Bly and other men's gurus, comes from unearthing the grief at the core of men's existence and finding and celebrating ritualized wounds that can properly confirm men's initiation into a more socially responsible patriarchy.

Of course, social responsibility is hardly a priority of Project Mayhem; while *Fight Club* re-imagines the wounds of the therapeutic men's movement, it has even grander revisions in mind for the subsequent healing of those wounds. As in its precursor "male rampage" films, men's trauma and hysteria are rendered with a pronounced ambivalence (Pfeil 1995, 1). Trauma may be, as Kirby Farrell (1998) puts it, an experience which exiles the sufferer "outside the magic circle of everyday life" (xii), but it may also be, again in Farrell's words, a "strategic fiction that a complex, stressful society is using to account for a world that seems threateningly out of control" (2). In other words, trauma should not simply be thought of as happening to a victim; rather, the trauma victim can consciously or unconsciously take up trauma for strategic purposes. While trauma undeniably has its pitfalls, it also potentially offers certain pleasures. *Fight Club* ponders the possibility that the rupture of the "magic circle of everyday life" might enable a release from an emotionally blocked and repressive masculinity.

How does one refuse the exhortation to be a man? For those men who adhere to the type of masculinity described by Easthope's (1992) castle of the self, the only escape route is the temporary or permanent extinguishing or radical alteration of consciousness. The dissociation experienced by the protagonist of *Fight Club*—the hallucinated alter ego Tyler Durden that he assumes—is, like the fainting spells of Tony Soprano, a sort of hysterical protest against the demands of masculinity. As Fred Pfeil (1995) has noted in his study of hard-boiled crime fiction, losing consciousness offers the pleasure of surrendering to the feminising forces strenuously kept at bay by the fortified walls of tough masculinity. In his close reading of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe novels, "there is a scarcely concealed sensual pleasure encoded in Chandler's descriptions of passing out" (Pfeil 1995, 117). Megan Abbott (2002) expands on this point, noting that Marlowe's bouts of unconsciousness and dissociation underscore the Herculean effort required to maintain the hard-boiled pose: "Masculine expectation is seemingly a demand Marlowe cannot quite manage to embody, hence trauma comes,

allowing him to split, to avoid responsibility, to disengage from the demands of interpellation” (58).

A similar dynamic is at work in the trademark narrative twist of *Fight Club*, that is, the delayed revelation that what the film has been presenting to its viewers as objective is in fact the deluded point of view of the film’s mentally unstable protagonist. Thus, as viewers we are aligned with the protagonist and are co-sufferers of the bewilderment that ensues from his post-traumatic dissociative state. On one level, the unreliability of his confession ought to be unsurprising, given the numerous individual and corporate prevarications we have already seen; however, the revelation that the narrator-protagonist and Tyler are alter egos rather than distinct individuals comes as a surprise not only because each is played by a different actor, but because of the privileged status attached to the speech act of confession—its status as the “queen of proofs” (P. Brooks 2000, 4). As Peter Brooks (2000) writes in his discussion of Foucault’s work, even a disputed confession is thought to guarantee important information about the confessant: “We may question [the confession], we may find it self-glorifying or self-excusing, we may search for errors of fact in it, yet we regard it in its own terms—precisely, as a confession—as true to the self in ways that other discourses never can be” (110-11). Megan Abbott’s description of splitting also provides an apt summary of the protagonist’s problematic sense of self. Indeed, while many critical studies of *Fight Club* describe the protagonist as schizophrenic (see, for example, Horsley 2009), multiple personality—or, more formally, Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)—would seem to be a much more accurate diagnosis. While dissociation and similar fugue states have been associated with trauma’s aftermath for over a century, the incidence of diagnosed multiple personality disorders appears to have risen exponentially since the 1980s, when it came to be recognised as a symptom of sexual abuse trauma (Hacking 1994, 8).

Fight Club investigates the (practical as well as ethical) ramifications of men coming together as men, and in pondering what might link them together under that category of self-identity and looks for the answer to these problems by sifting through the rubble of individual and cultural memory. Most significantly, *Fight Club* can be read as a symptom of a contemporary struggle over trauma’s impacts on the human psyche and memory, a conflict that directly maps onto the sorts of crises of gender and sexual

identity that have bedevilled contemporary masculinity. When Judith Lewis Herman (1992/2015) refers to the recent rediscovery, after a dormant period of a century, of the traumatic effects of “the hidden violence of men,” she is alluding to a renewed interest in the early work of Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer on hysteria, before the former abandoned his “seduction theory” of the aetiology of hysteria. When Freud moved on from this early theory, Herman writes, his focus remained on human sexuality, but “the exploitative social context in which sexual relations actually occur became utterly invisible. Psychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, dissociated from the reality of experience” (Herman 1992/2015, 14).

Herman’s choice of verbs is telling here: psychoanalysis became “dissociated” from the all too common female experience of sexual exploitation. Part of Herman’s very influential thesis is that chronic childhood abuse can foster an ability to dissociate, a skill at which some heavily traumatised children may excel to the point that they can cultivate multiple personalities. Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), later renamed Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), enters the third edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III)* of the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, and with its conjectured aetiology of repressed memories of childhood abuse, the disorder becomes a flashpoint in academic, clinical, and popular discussions about the nature of memory: specifically, about the (im)possibility of such repression and the therapeutic regimes of memory recovery and the veracity of such rediscovered accounts (Hacking 1994, 10-11).

In her book *Hystories*, Elaine Showalter (1997) notes that the suspected aetiology of severe yet repressed abuse means that even the *DSM-IV* (published by a professional body that does not doubt the reality of the disorder) cautions that:

Individuals with Dissociative Identity Disorder frequently report having experienced severe physical and sexual abuse, especially during childhood. Controversy surrounds the accuracy of such reports, because childhood memories may be subject to distortion and individuals with this disorder tend to be highly hypnotisable and especially vulnerable to suggestive influences (*DSM-IV* 485, qtd in Showalter 1997, 161).³²

³² Showalter (1997) also provides a brief survey of sceptical responses to MPD/DID, including the hypothesis that the disorder is iatrogenic (161); see also Hacking 1995, 8-20.

The sharp rise in reported cases of multiple personality from the 1980s onward demonstrates that the condition was emblematic of the era. As Ian Hacking observed in his 1995 study *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, “twenty-five years ago one could list by name the tiny number of multiple personalities recorded in the history of Western medicine, but today hundreds of people receive treatment for dissociative disorders in every sizable town in North America” (Hacking 1995, 8).

One matter that Hacking, Showalter, and Herman are all in agreement upon is that this epidemic is a highly gendered one: in the overwhelming majority of DID cases the patient is a woman. From our contemporary vantage point, the cases of hysteria studied by early psychiatrists such as Janet, Breuer, and Freud clearly seem to be forms of somatic protest against patriarchal society, and the restrictions it places on women’s bodies and lives. It would seem to follow that the late twentieth century phenomenon of multiple personality or dissociation is a similar sort of hysterical protest. In this case, the multiplication of the self that occurs as a response to unbearable trauma can be seen as a particular type or genre of abuse and survival narrative within the larger realm of the “cultural memory” of recovered memories of sexual abuse (Sturken 1999, 231).

For white straight American men, then, double-consciousness goes hand-in-hand with the dissipation of their blocked reflexivity (Bhabha 1995; Giroux 2001). As the white straight male subject squirms under the critical gaze of its racial, sexual, and gendered Others, traditional masculinity no longer seems as natural as the skin he moves in, but a potentially uncomfortable garment that may be due for replacing. Sexuality certainly is a key cause of this anxiety, as the increasing visibility of men as sex objects in advertising and other mass media forms quite literally subjects them to an erotic gaze at odds with the active and unseen voyeur role characteristic of traditional male heterosexuality (Simpson 1994, 4-6). Viewed in this light, the sardonic question that Tyler Durden poses about an image of a male underwear model—“Is this what a real man looks like?”—acquires a deeper meaning, though his bitter rejection of metrosexual beauty standards rings hollow when coming from the mouth of a character played by one of Hollywood’s most adored male sex symbols.

For the protagonist, the answer to Tyler's question about what a real man looks like is that a real man looks like Tyler Durden. After revealing himself to be merely the protagonist's hallucinated alter ego, Tyler explains that "All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you want to look, I fuck like you want to fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not." What remains unspoken here is the narrator's real dilemma: does he want to fuck like Tyler—that is, keep up the vigorous and satisfying sexual performances he brought to his trysts with Marla—or does he actually want to fuck Tyler? This is not merely a choice between completing the oedipal trajectory or narcissistically refusing the social integration of a marriage type union (cf Mulvey 1981/1989). The spectre of homoeroticism haunts any markedly homosocial milieu (the rugby team, the fraternity house, etc), especially ones devoted to contact sports and martial arts. Fincher's fight club scenes—hand to hand conflict between shirtless men in the basements of bars after closing time—are nearly as likely to bring fist-fucking to mind as fist-fighting, and in his voice-over the narrator underscores the overflowing ecstasy in these scenes of mutually consenting violence: "Fight Club wasn't about winning or losing. It wasn't about words. The hysterical shouting was in tongues like at a Pentecostal Church." In the ecstasy of fighting, there is a joyous feeling of liberation—dissociation—from the self, and the normal social and moral obligations that the narrator and many other men perceive as suffocating strictures. Arguably, the violence of fighting provides the narrator with a greater dose of such redemptive ecstasy than actual sex—whereas fighting takes him and his followers to a place beyond "winning or losing," sex with Marla is, in Tyler's terms, "sport fucking", the antithesis of love. The term is suggestive of a hyper-phallic porn star level of male sexual prowess—gold medal achievement in a contest of endurance that is achievable only through a masculine fostering of antagonism between body and mind/soul. The emphasis is not on sexual love, but sexual performance, with the second word of the phrase being the operative term. Unable to break free from his "performance" as Tyler, the narrator (and presumably his co-combatants as well) paradoxically only feels capable of escaping the perceived strictures of masculinity while subjecting his body (and others' bodies) to violence: "When the fight was over," he explains, "nothing was solved, but nothing mattered. We all felt saved."

The protagonist's confusion—torn between a heterosexual intimacy that seems to him at least as threatening as it does enticing, and a homoerotic violence that he definitely sees as more alluring than menacing—sketches in caricatured form the wider culture's more general ambivalence about the problems and opportunities afforded by changes to social expectations about masculinity. Caught between emotional constipation and a state of gender-egalitarian emotional vulnerability, the protagonist of *Fight Club* retreats into a fantasy world where his imagined ego-ideal rules, and he can safely navigate what in reality is an impossibly treacherous course. To do so, he must make some sort of confession—complete failure to do so would leave him in the traditional emotionally constipated position—but a real confession is possibly an even more frightening prospect. In *Symptoms of Culture*, Marjorie Garber (1998) describes how the symptom is “a sign of inner conflict [and] a symbol of conflicting desires. ‘I want to/but I am forbidden to’; ‘I desire it/but I fear the consequences’” (4-5). The dissociative fugue that comprises the narrative of *Fight Club* is a symptom of what the narrator deems an unbearable desire. He acts it out through the charismatic persona of Tyler Durden and cultivates physical wounds (the chipped teeth and black eyes he acquires in the consensual violence of the Fight Club) to avoid disclosing the psychological wounds caused by paternal neglect and emotional alienation. To further probe the causes of this pathology, the next chapter will investigate more closely contemporary developments in cultural memory, including coming to terms with the complex imbrications of emotion and memory and their impact on male sexuality.

Chapter Eight

“The Only Thing Worse Than Losing Your Mind is Finding It Again”: Memory and Male Sexuality in *Spider*

*We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm beginning to wonder if another
woman is what we need.*
—Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*

Oh, what a tangled web we weave / When first we practice to deceive!
—Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion*

If for Tyler Durden fathers are a severe disappointment, his esteem for mothers is not much higher. The rejection of marriage—the “flight from commitment” observed by Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) in her work *The Hearts of Men*—that is articulated in the above epigraph is a perennial symptom of crises of masculinity. Through American culture of the last two centuries—from the homosocial (and homoerotic) adventure spaces of Herman Melville’s novels, through *Playboy* magazine’s celebration of the bachelor lifestyle, to the ascetic all-male spaces of *Fight Club* and the bleak sexual predations of early twenty-first century PUA (Pick-Up Artist) communities—there runs a particular type of masculinist disposition that deems women a necessary evil at best, tolerable only in small doses when sexual or domestic services are needed. As noted in my discussion of *Lolita* (chapter five) and *Magnolia* (chapter six), male (hetero-) sexuality, even in some of its most socially normative forms, sits uncomfortably close to sexual aggression—it is not an innocent quirk of the English language that a promiscuous heterosexual male can be called a “ladykiller”. Male sexuality has often been framed in terms that render their female partners as quarry or prey, and men’s pursuit of women with whom they can “score” (the competitive or aggressive sporting metaphor here is also telling) is arguably the pinnacle achievement of male sexuality, as the “sport-fucking” endorsed by Tyler Durden is preferable to more lasting and emotionally intimate forms of commitment.

As noted throughout this thesis, regressive masculinity requires a heavily fortified male ego, thoroughly resistant to emotional intimacy. Researchers working in the field of critical masculinity studies such as Antony Easthope (1986), and Victor Seidler (1989 and 1994), as well as film masculinity studies scholars such as Richard Dyer (2002)

and Frank Krutnik (1991), have noted how regressive masculinity requires a characteristically instrumental approach to interpersonal relations. Discovering the reasons for such emotional detachment has been a key project for both men's movement leaders as well as men's studies academics. The insights of feminist object relations theorist Nancy Chodorow (1978 and 1989) have been adopted by many writers on masculinity to explain these stereotypical male issues (McMahon 1993; Clare 2010). Anthony Clare (2010), for example, underscores how Chodorow (1989) in *Feminism and Psychoanalytical Theory* stresses a very gender-differentiated process of identity formation: daughters forming a caregiving identity through identification with their mother, while sons are forced to consolidate their sense of self by breaking away from the female parent and primary child carer (Clare 2010, 199). The male child's growth into a properly masculine gender identity is dependent upon overcoming "an early, non-verbal, unconscious and almost somatic sense of primary oneness with the mother" (Chodorow 1989, 109; quoted in Clare 2010, 199).³³ Consciously or unconsciously, the boy's progress to a male identity is haunted by this memory of his earlier identification with his mother. He resigns himself to castration if he fails to overcome this attachment—if he remains, as it is sometimes expressed, "tied to the apron-strings" of his mother, though pathological separation can also result in an adult sexuality marked by insecurity, sadism and misogyny (Clare 2010, 198-99).

There is perhaps no better cinematic illustration of the hazards in navigating this path to male maturity than the turn-of-the-millennium "mindfuck" (Eig 2003) or "mind-game" (Elsaesser 2009) film *Spider* (David Cronenberg, 2002). In Cronenberg's film, one scene in particular allegorises the fate of mothers in patriarchy. As the young Dennis "Spider" Clegg (Bradley Hall) brushes his mother's (Miranda Richardson) hair, he asks his mother to retell one of his favourite stories—her recollection of the many spiders' webs in the meadow near her childhood home in Essex. When she pauses during the story, Spider demands that she continue with the tale's resolution, which is the fate of the mother spider that had laid so many egg sacs. "You love this part," his mother remarks, before recounting how the mother spider simply went away and died

³³ In the context of poststructuralist feminism, this unity with the mother has been theorised by Julia Kristeva (1984), who posited the idea of a chora, a stage of pre-symbolic (in Kristeva's terms, "semiotic") bond between child and mother.

because “her work was done.” Cronenberg’s film turns on the fate of the mother in patriarchal culture: her anonymity (for example, in *Spider* she is never identified by name); her desirability (the mother is the prize in the father-son Oedipal struggle); and, ultimately, her disposability (the son’s eventual disavowal of the mother and rejection of the interpersonal intimacy against which he builds his identity).

The most fascinating aspect of Cronenberg’s investigation of mothers and men is the hallucinatory and delusional framework through which the mother-son bond is remembered. The titular protagonist of Cronenberg’s film is Dennis “Spider” Clegg (Ralph Fiennes), a middle-aged East Londoner adjusting to life in a halfway house after being discharged from a psychiatric hospital. His newfound freedom allows him to visit the sites of his boyhood that continue to haunt him, and the film’s narrative becomes, for both Spider and the viewers, a quest to understand what traumatic event or events are responsible for Clegg’s insanity. The fragmented and surreal distortions of Clegg’s memories function for the viewers as a “productive pathology,” a narrative focalisation that deconstructs conventional oppositions of action/passivity and sanity/madness (Elsaesser 2009, 24-25). As in *Memento* (chapter two), *Fight Club* (chapter seven), and many other “productive pathology” films, the viewer of *Spider* is only temporarily or partially aligned with this askew perspective. At some point in each of these films (often but not always at the film’s climax), the viewer becomes unmoored from the very restricted perspective of the focalising protagonist, whose social and emotional alienation is thus underscored. It is no coincidence that so many of the “mindfuck” or “mind-game” films centre around men struggling with insanity; in an era in which traditional masculinity is in deep crisis, the realist narrative paradigm of Hollywood cinema has become increasingly untenable, and this instability serves as the formal correlative to the “madness” of contemporary gender relations.³⁴ In *Spider*, the search for an explanation to Clegg’s psychosis turns in on itself, and it becomes clear that there can be no catharsis that will free Spider from his suffering. This chapter provides a close reading of *Spider* to investigate how trauma can illuminate the pathological character of “normal” male sexuality. Through his estrangement of the act of remembering,

³⁴ Among the many Hollywood films that Eig (2003) and Elsaesser (2009) discuss, only *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) and *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) feature female protagonists forced to question their grip on reality.

Cronenberg demonstrates that the fetishistic character of male desire aids in the misremembering or forgetting of the origins of male sexual desire. In *Spider*, the search for an explanation to Clegg's madness turns in on itself, and it becomes clear that there can be no catharsis that will free Spider from his suffering. Instead, it is the remembering itself that becomes traumatic for Spider Clegg, a trap to be avoided at all costs. As Cronenberg's protagonist becomes more ensnared in the narrative web spun by his memory, it becomes clear that, as the film's promotional tagline puts it, "The only thing worse than losing your mind is finding it again."

Screens and Fetishes: Defences against Memory

Upon first consideration, the narrative of *Spider* seems straightforward enough; after being discharged from a psychiatric hospital, Dennis "Spider" Clegg struggles to recall the events that led to his mental illness. Viewers see Clegg struggle with this information in a secret journal in which he writes and are also privy to the content that he records in a succession of unconventional and enigmatic flashbacks. The accumulation of implausible details in these flashbacks, as well as Spider's palpably disturbed and incoherent demeanour, suggests that the former asylum inmate has a very frail and delusional grip on his past. In a more conventional film about memory—Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and *Marnie* (1964) are paradigmatic examples—viewer expectation would be oriented toward the revelation of an event that would restore the protagonist's memory and diagnose the cause of the protagonist's mental affliction. The flashbacks in *Spider*, however, pointedly violate the codes and conventions of cinematic realism and are therefore limited in their explanatory power. Spider's memories do not explain what happened in his childhood to make him the adult he is now; rather, his flashbacks indicate how desire colours his recollection of the past and invite viewers to interrogate why Spider might unconsciously distort his childhood memories.

This distinction reveals how the representation of recollection in *Spider* is at odds with many turn-of-the-millennium views on memory. In his book *Presenting the Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering*, the psychiatrist Jeffrey Prager (1998) laments his profession's newfound emphasis on traumatic aetiologies: "If

wartime experiences or childhood incest cannot be identified in the history of any given patient, we scan for ‘trauma-like’ experiences to account for the patient’s psychological distress” (132). In other words, the study of the psyche no longer requires a psychoanalytic investigation of a subject’s agential “symbolic mediation” of the world, but rather, understanding “of how the individual’s environment defines subjective experience”—psychiatry, in short, has become “largely identical to traumatology” (Prager 1998, 133). Implicit within such a view is a belief that memory operates like a video camera, and that recollection is simply a process of rewinding the tape until the appropriate scene or frame is accessed (Radstone 2010; Sabbagh 2009). This view is not supported by experimental psychologists and is also out of favour with psychoanalysts such as Prager, whose comments suggest the importance of the conscious and unconscious mind in people’s attempts to narratively reconstruct past events.

Furthermore, aside from its misguided faith in transparent access to the past, the “traumatology” view is problematic in its emphasis on a singular critical moment that explains a patient’s current state of mind, discounting the influence that a series of past events—or an inferred relation or pattern between events—could later have on the present-day psyche. Freud (1899) famously argued that what appeared to be a significant childhood memory may in fact be a “screen memory,” a memory that “owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed” (319). The “screen” part of “screen memory,” it should be emphasised, functions like that rare type of word, the *auto-antonym*, the single word that can mean one thing as well as its opposite (such as *to cleave*, which can mean either to separate or to stick together) (Sheidlower 2005). To speak of a screen memory is to speak of how one memory screens or blocks another from view, while at the same time displaying or screening (as when a film is screened) an overdetermined account of the past, the condensed symbolism of which offers the possibility for uncovering the existence and significance of the other, hitherto obscured event. Within the pictures in our memories there can be blind spots, the forgotten content of which is cryptically inscribed within the consciously recalled content.

As should be clear by now, this rather uncanny zone of blind spots and doubles, of cryptic inscriptions and misleading memories, is typical of contemporary explorations

of masculinity. The preceding chapters, especially the ones devoted to *Memento* (chapter two) and *Fight Club* (chapter seven), have revealed how frequently such an investigation turns back on the investigator himself. No longer constituted as an unseen eye, a transcendent “view from nowhere” (Bordo 1990) immune to scrutiny or challenge, the men at the centre of such plots are unsuccessful in their attempts to master their memories because doing so would lead them to self-knowledge that they would rather disavow. In its meaningful but indirect reference to a significant trauma in the subject’s past, the screen memory is characterised by both lack (what is consciously remembered is not the important memory) and excess (in providing something other than or surplus to the relevant event). By putting this dynamic front and centre of Spider’s sexually charged recollections of his childhood, Cronenberg’s film draws attention to the way that the phallic excesses characteristic of hegemonic male sexuality generally conceal men’s anxieties about the adequacy of their masculinity. A rather eccentric case study of such overcompensation is on display in a brief bit of dialogue involving Spider Clegg, the hostel warden Mrs Wilkinson (Lynn Redgrave), and fellow hostel inmate Terrence (John Neville). When Mrs Wilkinson discovers that her newest resident is wearing five shirts at one time, she asks him whether wearing so many shirts is necessary. Answering for Clegg, Terrence replies, “Indeed, it is. Clothes maketh the man. The less there is of a man, the more the need for clothes.”

Ostensibly a story about the childhood memories of a schizophrenic, *Spider* also offers a powerful dramatization of the conflicts that plague the development of male sexual desire. In doing so, Cronenberg’s film evokes a principal tenet of Freudian theory: that memory is instrumental to the development of sexual desire (Freud 1899/2010). As Jeffrey Weeks (1985) puts it:

Centrally for Freud desire relates to the experience of satisfaction. The experience of the satisfaction of a need gives rise to a memory trace in the form of a mental image. As a result of the link thus established, next time a similar need arises, it will give rise to a psychical impulse which will seek to recathect or re-energise the image to re-evoke the feeling of satisfaction. This is a wish or desire wishes or desires are linked to memory traces of previous satisfaction and are fulfilled through hallucinatory reproductions of the perceptions, which have become signs of the satisfaction (131).

The sexual nature of Spider's remembering is first demonstrated in indirect fashion in the film, through representation of the adult Spider's fetishistic attachment to his personal belongings. In the film's very first scene, Dennis "Spider" Clegg haltingly disembarks from a train. As rushing commuters purposefully stride off, Spider is momentarily frozen in place, seemingly uncertain of where he is and where he is meant to be going. He then reaches down the front of his trousers and pulls out a sock—the dishevelled Clegg's makeshift wallet—from which he retrieves a scrap of paper listing the address of his destination. In the scenes that immediately follow, as Clegg settles into the hostel that will be his new home, it is revealed that Spider anxiously guards his possessions: he insists upon carrying his own suitcase and carefully hides his journal underneath the linoleum flooring of his bedroom, while his smaller personal effects (principally his tobacco, cigarette papers, and lighter) are all kept in the trouser-front hiding place first shown at the railway station.

Coupled with his nearly catatonic manner, these strange habits suggest a very disturbed psychological state, an alienation from the pace and rituals of mainstream society. His vigilance about his belongings might seem merely the reasonable adaptation of a man who has surely slept many nights in less than secure surroundings, but the intimate placement of his belongings hints at a sexual cause or context for his feelings of anxiety and dislocation. Put bluntly, Spider Clegg's unorthodox relation to objects seems motivated by a sort of perversion—that is, by “a psychological strategy characterized by a certain set of concerns, a specific mode of object relations, and a characteristic set of defences” (Eby 1999, 9). For the spectator, Spider's perversion manifests itself in a way typical of the “productive pathology” of the millennial cycle of “mind-game films” (Elsaesser 2009, 24-25). Carl Eby (1999) notes that a perversion typically “involves the deployment of infantile gender stereotypes in a never-ending attempt to regulate identity and negotiate a self-cure through the undoing of infantile sexual trauma” (9). As will become clear in this chapter, this generic sketch is very relevant to *Spider*, and in mapping the unusual terrain of the titular protagonist's memories of childhood, we learn a great deal about the perverse and pathological features behind the façade of “normal” male sexuality. Clegg's possessions in many ways resemble an infant's “transitional object,” the blanket, soft toy, or other special

first possession used for security and self-soothing (Winnicott 1971, 1). For most children, the transitional object becomes obsolete, and the “permitted madness” of this early childhood period, when the object paradoxically represents both the mother and the infant simultaneously, is soon outgrown (Winnicott et al 1989, 285; Eby 1999, 142). In some (primarily male) individuals, however, separation-individuation problems are never completely overcome, and the transitional object is reincarnated in the form of a sexual fetish object (Eby 1999, 142).

In *Spider*, the titular protagonist’s peculiarity is evident not only in his fetishized personal effects, but also in his very disoriented behaviour within the bustling railway station. While the rest of the train’s passengers purposefully disembark from the train and begin striding toward their destinations, Spider Clegg very hesitantly alights from the train and stands aimlessly on the station platform. Shabbily dressed, with fingers stained by nicotine and hair skew-whiff, Clegg cuts a distinctly confused and forlorn figure, quite literally out of step with the rest of society. The deliberate framing of the scene in the style of *L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Auguste and Louis Lumiere, 1895) gestures at the central place that traumatic memory will have in the narrative. The Lumiere Brothers’ notorious early film, or more precisely, the apocryphal story of the panicked reception at its debut, points simultaneously to the genesis of traumatic memory as well as to the rather cryptic and unreliable ways that images of the past can be remembered in the present. As Ian Hacking (1995) has pointed out, our contemporary understanding of psychological trauma derives in large part from the birth of the railways in the nineteenth century, and the discovery of hysteria-like symptoms among passengers who had initially appeared to escape unscathed from train crashes (185). In introducing his haunted protagonist in the context of the Lumiere Brothers’ film, Cronenberg suggests that the power of trauma comes in large part from the *interpretation* of the traumatic image, a point also suggested by the use of Rorschach-like images in the opening credits that immediately precede this scene. The railway station scene foreshadows what viewers will come to learn about Spider—that he is estranged from his present adulthood and marooned instead in (unreliable) memories of an oedipal drama that took place decades earlier. As the film’s narrative unfolds in a series of disorienting flashbacks, it becomes apparent that the childhood memories “lost” by Spider Clegg persist unconsciously in

his adult perversions, the major symptoms of the madness that is permitted—indeed, that is required—to screen out the past that he is incapable of facing.

Haunted House, Dark Continent

Focalised through the point of view of the profoundly damaged Spider, the film's narrative unfolds at the same plodding pace and apparently purposeless manner with which the protagonist engages with the world. The major disclosure of the first act of the film is that Spider's journey from what we can only assume is a mental hospital to the halfway house is paralleled by an inner journey of self-discovery, riding his train of thought from his (traumatised) present to the (defining traumatic incident in his) past. The city streets through which Spider wanders seem to trigger memories that are characteristically post-traumatic in their ability to unsettle and in their resistance to psychical integration. Where Cronenberg's film differs from conventional cinematic treatments of trauma, however, is in the endpoint of its investigative trajectory; by the end of the film, Spider Clegg's investigation of his past reveals that he was the perpetrator, rather than the victim or witness, of an act of violence, the traumatic aftereffects of which will continue to haunt him decades later.

Soon after Spider's arrival at the halfway house, he is shown keeping a journal, which he takes great pains to hide from Mrs Wilkinson. As he writes in the journal, the camera cuts unexpectedly to a laneway, down which Clegg slowly walks before stopping to peer through the window of house, looking into a kitchen where a young boy sits at a table playing with string while his mother peels potatoes for dinner. The viewer soon becomes aware that the boy whom Clegg sees is the young Dennis Clegg, who in this scene is providing a first glimpse of the fascination with string that gives him his nickname. Sent to the pub by his mother to bring his father Bill (Gabriel Byrne) home for dinner, the boy Clegg runs obliviously right past the adult Clegg, confirming that the simultaneous appearance of the two ages of Clegg within the same frame is an expressionistic rendering of the memory of the adult Clegg (before the abrupt switch in timeframes, the shot of Clegg writing in his journal is lit in a low-key manner that foreshadows the disturbed Caligari-esque perspective about to unfold). Even in a contemporary screen culture in which unpunctuated "third-wave" flashbacks are

increasingly the norm (Gabbard and Greenberg 1999), the representation of memory in *Spider* is startling. The simultaneous appearance of both the adult and child Spider suggests a very porous border between the present and the past, a cinematic illustration of William Faulkner's (1951) famous dictum that "The past is never dead; it is not even past" (85).

Highly disturbed by his past's continual intrusion on his present-day existence, Spider's journal keeping seems to be an effort to obtain mastery over the traumatic events of his childhood. Freud (1920) addressed this "compulsion to repeat" unpleasant past events in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a work in which he also observed another child's habitual playing with string. The *fort-da* game that Freud believed was a way for the infant to overcome—at least in his imagination—the crisis of maternal separation constitutes the child's first narrative, enacted or written through the medium of the spool of string that is in turn discarded and then rewound and retrieved again (8-10). Donald Winnicott (1971) likewise begins *Playing and Reality* with a case study in which a young boy's obsessive play with strings and cords are interpreted as ways of working through his (dis)connection to his mother (15). These ligatures offer ontological security as the child experiments with the notion of "separateness" from the mother—functioning as the thread that safely marks the explorer's progress so that a seemingly labyrinthine world can be safely navigated.

Fittingly, the film abounds in references to exploration. When Clegg first arrives at his new home, his mumbled attempt to introduce himself to the warden is met by Mrs Wilkinson's response of "Mr Clegg, I presume?"—a rather affected rejoinder that recalls Henry Morton Stanley's famous greeting to David Livingstone. As Wilkinson prepares to show Clegg to his room, he is greeted by the plummy-voiced Terrence, who is perusing an issue of *National Geographic*. "Good evening to you, sir," Terrence begins. "You're familiar with the scorpion, I take it?" His strange question is met with a softly mumbled "No" by the already perpetually confused Clegg. Terrence continues: "Not from Africa, then? I had you down as an old African hand. Africa—now there's a dark continent for you." He then returns to the topic of the scorpion. "I knew a man once who had been told never to go barefoot because of the scorpion." At this point, Mrs Wilkinson re-enters to escort Clegg to his room. "Oh, getting acquainted with the residents, Mr Clegg? Good. This is Terrence—but I'm afraid we're not to be trusted, are

we, Terrence?” As the imperious Mrs Wilkinson leads Clegg up the stairs, Terrence finishes his story: the man of which he had been speaking “got out of bed in the middle of the night, put his shoes on—[and was] stung by a scorpion, sleeping in one of the toecaps. Died in agony. Seventeen hours!”

The “dark continent” spoken of by the armchair explorer Terrence is, of course, a reference not only to Africa but also to Freud’s description of the frightful and uncharted territory of female sexuality (Freud 1926, 212). As with the first scene in the railway station, this encounter also obliquely foreshadows the film’s narrative as a whole; the scene turns on a recollection (an allegedly untrustworthy one) of a man on a quest who, despite careful precautions, comes to grief due to a surprising turn of events. Moreover, Mrs Wilkinson’s role is significant here, for the way that her female presence pointedly disrupts this tableau of homosocial bonding by declaring that the source of this narrative (and presumably the tale itself) is unreliable. As already noted, this sort of epistemological confusion is typical of the millennial “mind-game” film, a cinematic cycle that *Spider* easily fits into (Elsaesser 2009). In his very brief discussion of *Spider*, Elsaesser (2009) notes that:

the protagonist is schizophrenic, a condition made clear both by plot and behaviour, but the fusion of memory and delusional fantasy engenders its own kind of unframed vision, increasing the spectatorial discomfort, as we realise the nature of the delusional labyrinth we have come to share. It provides the film with an unreliable narrator, whose unstable mind and oedipal obsessions create a state of tension and suspension, without endowing the hero with special insight ... (27).

The schizophrenia that Elsaesser diagnoses is also remarked upon by most other critics of the film, as well as by Cronenberg (2003) himself on the DVD commentary track, though the director stresses that this pathology is of secondary importance in his adaptation of Patrick McGrath’s novel. Instead, Cronenberg insists, his film focuses on the normality of the Oedipal conflicts that disturb Spider Clegg and that are both symptom and cause of “cramped” and “sordid” normal male sexuality (Dyer 2002, 99). Viewed in this light, it becomes clear that the “mind-game” in *Spider* is the puzzle of male sexuality, that other terrifying “dark continent”, a point most clearly illustrated through Cronenberg’s unconventional casting strategies. In the first flashback

sequence, Spider recalls being sent by his mother to the local pub to tell his father that dinner is ready. Inside the predominantly masculine space of the working-class pub, Spider notices a brassy peroxide-blond named Yvonne Wilkinson (Alison Egan), who flashes a bare breast at the shy young boy. Yvonne comes to play a key role in the family history the adult Spider recalls, though from her second scene on she is played by Miranda Richardson, the actor we have already seen playing the role of Spider's mother. Both Elsaesser (2009) and Jonathan Eig (2003) have suggested that Luis Buñuel is the founding father or patron saint of the "mind-game" or "mindfuck" film for his surreal destabilising of narrative logic and consistency, and his influence can be seen here. Cronenberg's decision to have one actor eventually take on the identity of all three of the film's female characters—during the film's final act Miranda Richardson also plays the role of the halfway house caretaker (through the rest of the film played by Lynn Redgrave)—is a sort of variation of Bunuel's tactic of having two different actors take turns playing the love interest in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). In both cases the subjectivity of the female character is disavowed, and her presentation to the viewer is focalised through the unstable and delusional lens of male desire.

Uncanny Women

This sexual confusion, however, is not the sole property of psychotics such as Spider Clegg. It is also evident even in ordinary male neurotics such as the titular protagonist of Philip Roth's (1969) *Portnoy's Complaint*. This most famous of male sexual bildungsromans begins with the sexually tormented Portnoy's recounting how his mother played every role in the psychical drama of his childhood:

She was so deeply imbedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise. As soon as the last bell had sounded, I would rush off for home, wondering as I ran if I could possibly make it to our apartment before she had succeeded in transforming herself. Invariably she was already in the kitchen by the time I arrived, and setting out my milk and cookies (1).

For both Portnoy and Spider, the omnipresence of the mother means that she is seen everywhere, a delusion that in a sense means she is not really seen at all. Her introjected

omnipresence—as a voice of admonition and/or as an object of desire—for the male child means that she is never seen as an actual sovereign individual (as evidenced in *Spider* by the fact that she is never referred to by a given name).

In contrast to the way in which David Fincher in *Fight Club* obscures the delusional nature of his protagonist's perception of Tyler Durden, Cronenberg's representation of Mrs Clegg underscores the madness of his film's protagonist. The non-transparency of the narration in Cronenberg's film adumbrates the patriarchal framing of the mother in *Spider*. In his article on unreliable narration in films of this era, Volker Ferenz (2005) argues that in films such as *Spider*, *Fight Club*, *The Usual Suspects*, and *Memento* the revelation of the narrator's unreliability causes "surprise or even shock" for the viewer and triggers a re-evaluation of the events that preceded this disclosure (143). What Ferenz does not account for, however, is the degree to which *Spider* differs from other examples of unreliable cinematic narration. The incoherence of Spider Clegg's mumbling commentary, as well as his remote and near-catatonic demeanour and his other florid symptoms of psychiatric illness, seem likely to engender in viewers a suspicion of events at the very moment that they transpire on screen. In other words, the unsurprising fact of Spider's delusional perceptions poses distinct problems for the viewers. The mystery is not whether his memories of childhood are accurate, but rather, what is causing these distortions of his memory, particularly with respect to the misrecognition of his mother. Indeed, it is Spider's second glimpse of Yvonne—the first scene in which the role is played by Miranda Richardson instead of Alison Egan—that definitively proves the unreliability of his memories. While prior clues—his obvious psychological instability, the simultaneous occurrence of adult Spider and child Spider within the same frame—suggested something less than a faithful recollection of his childhood, it is the adult Spider's "casting" of his mother in the role of Yvonne that definitively establishes that the diegesis of the flashback sequences is a fantasy of the past written and directed by the adult Spider. Cutting from the flashback sequences back to the present day, Cronenberg focusses on the strange symbols which Spider uses to record his memories, an idiosyncratic cuneiform which, appropriately enough, only he can write and read.

The film's second flashback begins with Spider's mother's childhood memory of fields covered in spider webs. When the story ends, Spider's father appears and the

couple head out to the pub, leaving the boy at home. From his bedroom window, Young Spider then watches his mother and father canoodling in the garden, a scene followed by his parents' arrival at the local pub. As they enter the building, they obviously walk past a table at which Adult Spider is seated. This scene, along with many of the film's subsequent flashbacks, clearly belongs to the realm of fantasy rather than factual recollection, as unlike the scenes at the Clegg house, Young Spider is not present. In other words, the scene represents a *conjectured* recreation of what happened after Mr and Mrs Clegg left Young Spider home alone. Within the pub, two sets of point-of-view shots triangulate the interior space, with Adult Spider placed between Mrs Clegg (at her table while her husband orders drinks) on his right and Yvonne (played by Miranda Richardson) at a banquette on his left; eyeline matches likewise centrally position Bill Clegg at the bar, roughly equidistant between the two women. The result is an oedipally charged division of cinematic space, with the Adult Spider, in a state of arrested sexual development, anxiously poised to inherit the Madonna/Whore distinction at the heart of patriarchal male sexuality. The tension in the scene is too much for Adult Spider to bear, and he storms out of the pub. The narrative returns briefly to the present, and then to a flashback from a not so distant point in Spider's past. Here we see the Adult Spider again, along with two other psychiatric patients engaging in a bit of masculine banter while on a break from a work detail. Contemplating a pornographic photo of two naked women, Spider covers the photo with his hands and closes his eyes in bliss; when he removes his hands, the face of his mother replaces that of each of the nude models.

For Spider, then, the idea of his mother as a sexual being is both repellent and alluring. To contemplate her within the realm of adult sexuality, Spider must misrecognise her as the brazen Yvonne; to be sexually attracted to any other woman or image of a woman, however, he must misrecognise her as a version of his mother. Spider's difficulties here bring into the open the usually unnoticed difficulties inherent in the attainment of adult male sexuality. As R W Connell (1983) explains:

... one of the most striking features of hegemonic masculinity as an organisation of emotions [is] ... that it allows the cathexis only of women, but of almost any member of that category. Freud talks vaguely in the *Three Essays* ... of a transfer of desire for the mother into desire for other women, but treats it teleologically, as a goal that normal development has to reach by hook or by crook. It is not in itself a matter to be puzzled about. The

abstractness of the cathexis of women, what we might call the fetishistic character of male desire ... is left unaccounted for (27).

While we may be accustomed to thinking of a fetish only as some sort of unusual supplement or fixation—some *thing*, in other words, be it shoes, lingerie, or an overvalued body part (feet or hair, for instance)—that an individual finds necessary for sexual gratification, the motivation for the use of such objects (warding off castration anxiety) is also evident in a dominant mode of male sexuality in which men must objectify women to find them sexually desirable. Spider's fetishistic perversion—the way that his psyche is organised around “a certain set of concerns [the operations of adult sexuality], a specific mode of object relations [obsessive cathexis of and identification with the mother], and a characteristic set of defences [ritualistic use of ligatures, clothing, and other possessions]” (Eby 1999, 9)—parallels the larger phenomenon of “cultural fetishism,” in which “the male experience of inadequacy is projected on to the female body which is produced as the key phallic fetish” (Stratton 1996, 24).

Spider's sexual inadequacy is evident in his estrangement from mature male sexuality, as he imagines it. Spider's “memories” of events that he could not have witnessed—his parents' date at the local pub and Bill Clegg's adulterous trysts with Yvonne—show his (continuing) exclusion from the world of adult sexuality. Spider's imaginative reconstructions of Bill and Yvonne's sexual relationship—an affair which in all likelihood was a wholesale invention of the younger Clegg—are characterised by a puerile phallic obsession with the mechanics of sexual intercourse; Yvonne's crude flirtation with Bill Clegg, in which she asks if as a plumber he can fix her pipes, is straight out of the Benny Hill school of coarse English humour, a child's quasi-pornographic reverie about the world of adult sexuality. Likewise, Spider's supposed recollection of Bill and Yvonne's murder of Spider's mother shows the imprint of a child's imagination, with the adulterous couple interrupted mid-tryst and rather effortlessly dispatching Mrs Clegg with a handy garden spade.

In the flashback scenes that follow, the perceptual fissure between Spider and the viewer irrevocably widens. After “Yvonne” (as Spider now perceives his mother) moves into the house following the imagined murder of his mother, Spider openly accuses the couple of murder, projecting onto his father the crime that he has fantasised and which

at the film's end he will commit: the murder of a mother who has transgressed the firm boundary between Madonna and Whore archetypes. Confronted with Spider's accusation of murder, the dumbfounded Bill Clegg initially responds with anger, but then with perplexed concern for his son. Attributing Spider's fantasies to a childhood imagination running wild, Bill wonders if his son's loneliness is fuelling these delusions. "Why don't you have any mates?" he asks his son. "When I was your age, I had mates." Spider's isolation from his peers seems to be yet more proof of his insufficient masculinity, anxiety over which triggers his childhood murder of his "impure" mother. His fetishism in turn arises as a futile strategy for forgetting his culpability in her murder, for the ligatures with which as both an adult and a child he obsessively plays are at the film's end transformed into the weapon he uses to gas his mother, in punishment for what he perceives as her sexual treachery.

The sexual jealousy that fuels Spider's matricide and the fetishism that he employs to try to forget the event firmly site Spider Clegg's traumas on the haunted terrain of male sexual development. The relevant "dark continent" that Terrence spoke of in his first meeting with Spider is not, *contra* Freud, female sexuality, but its ostensibly all-too-familiar male counterpart. Richard Dyer (1992) has described male sexuality as being "a bit like air—you breathe it in all the time, but you aren't aware of it much" (111). He goes on to suggest that it is only when this air is altered or polluted that we become aware of its presence: "Until quite recently, what was talked about was the mysterious topic of female sexuality, or else the subject of deviant male sexual practices. Ordinary male sexuality was simply sexuality and everyone knew what it was" (111). Male desire may be the privileged norm in patriarchal culture, but it is "none the less a cramped, sordid, compulsive little place with its hard-edged contours and one-off climaxes" (Dyer 1992, 121).

Dyer's characterisation of the male libido as a kind of bleak garret with palatial pretensions certainly resonates with the film's representation of Clegg's confused perspective on his inner and outer worlds and on his present and his past. Unable to "man up"—that is, to live up to the demands of sexual maturation—Spider cannot even in simulated form manage to master attachment and separation in the way that Freud (1920) observed at work in the *fort-da* game. Instead of the linear narrativity shown in Freud's grandson's ritualistic play—the reel of string goes away, and then is wound

back—Spider constructs elaborate and tangled networks of strings which, unlike transitional objects, cannot be outgrown and discarded. Rather, these convoluted threads of memory only lead back to a tableau of violence (his murder of his mother) that at the film's end he nearly reprises (when he misrecognises Mrs Wilkinson as his mother/Yvonne and attempts to kill her). The boyish belongings kept by the Adult Spider, the bits of string and odds and ends stowed down the front of his trousers, are *non*-transitional objects, forever leading back to a memory that he would rather not find again—charmed symbols of the tangled web of self-deception that Spider continually reweaves.

Chapter Nine

Masculinity, Romantic Love, and Social Memory: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

In Search of Lost Love

When Harry Met Sally ... (Rob Reiner, 1989), perhaps the most famous popular Hollywood romantic comedy of the past thirty years, begins with an elderly husband and wife telling the story of how they met:

Wife: We fell in love in high school.

Husband: Yeah, we were high school sweethearts.

W: But, after our junior year his parents moved away.

H: But I never forgot her.

W: He never forgot me.

H: No, her face was burned on my brain. And it was thirty-four years later that I was walking down Broadway, and I saw her ...

W: We both looked at each other, and it was just as though not a single day had gone by.

H: She was just as beautiful as she was at 16.

W: He was just the same. He looked exactly the same.

The film is punctuated with such scenes, as long-married couples recount to an unseen interviewer their first meetings and the general course of their lives together. In Reiner's film, the desirability—indeed, the inevitability—of this trajectory toward fulfilled coupledom is evinced by the titular characters' ascension to this lofty status; in the film's last scene, a finally united and married Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally (Meg Ryan) relate, in the same exact manner, the story of their wedding, with the implication that they went on to live happily ever after.

Though the testimonies of the elderly couples are no doubt intended to suggest the vitality and longevity of romantic love, a more jaded reading might infer the exact

opposite—that is, that marriage has become so outdated an institution that, like a mangler or girdle, only the very aged can recall its purpose and correct operation. John Alberti (2013) suggests something of this sort when he notes that the twenty-first century romantic comedy is characterised by a generic “crisis”, one inextricably linked to America’s gender crisis; in short, telling a story that begins with “boy meets girl” has become increasingly difficult in an era when our conceptions of “boy” and “girl” (that is, the socially normative definitions of masculinity and femininity) are up in the air (12). Pointing to some of the same non-fiction bestsellers about masculinity in crisis that I mentioned in my Introduction, Alberti notes that anxieties about contemporary men’s obsolescence are now registering in the rom-com:

as an uneasy but productive tension between the poles of neorealism and parody, between cinematic expressions of gender genre and narrative genre that stake a claim for the congruence between artistic representation and cultural reality and movies that aim for the comic exaggeration of gender and narrative stereotypes (3).

Alberti’s rough sketch of this tension—generally speaking, the former (neorealist) tendency characterises the contemporary American indie romcom, while the latter (parodic) inclination is the domain of its more famous mainstream counterpart—provides a persuasive summation of the opposing tendencies, yet leaves open a particularly fruitful avenue of inquiry. Beyond the immediate purview of his study (which focuses on somewhat more recent films and on more straightforward examples of the rom-com genre), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004) is only mentioned once by Alberti, in an endnote about rom-coms characterised by extreme “generic meta-awareness” (the other example given is Woody Allen’s 1977 classic *Annie Hall*) (106 n. 18); yet Kaufman’s surreal romantic comedy, by foregrounding the role that memory and narrative play in romantic love, provides an alternative to the poles of neo-realism and parody.³⁵ In doing so, Kaufman’s film

³⁵ In referring to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as Kaufman’s film (rather than the director Michel Gondry’s), I am agreeing with the commonly held critical view that Kaufman’s work as a screenwriter is so distinctive and influential that he is the true auteur of the films made from his screenplays. Certainly, a readily recognisable strain of surrealism runs through the films made from Kaufman’s screenplays, whether they are directed by Spike Jonze (*Being John Malkovich* [1999] and *Adaptation* [2002]), Michel Gondry (*Human Nature* [2001] and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

suggests a solution for the “problems” of male social memory that have been evident throughout this thesis. In short, there is an implication in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* that a sort of “post-masculine” identity needs to be cultivated, that men’s needs for the identity-affirming character of social memory can be better satisfied through the cultivation of a romantic memory that builds bridges to women, with earnest effort toward recognising them as equal partners rather than viewing them as romantic antagonists and/or sexual playthings. To put it another way, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* maps the restrictive borders of contemporary masculinity and holds up romantic love as a possible escape route from the suffocating terrain of traditional masculinity.

Unforgettable Love: Memory and Romance

As the example from *When Harry Met Sally ...* makes clear, memory plays a key role in love. We have already seen, in the case of *Lolita* (chapter five), the centrality of memory in unhappy love stories. The doomed first love, the one that got away, the way to mend a broken heart—all these formulas are narratives of passions that are either thwarted from the start or initially satisfied but ultimately lost. Reiner’s film by contrast is important in indicating how remembering the past is key to couples living happily ever after. Memory provides one answer to that bedeviling question of romance: What sustains love after passion is gone—or, as theorists of romantic relationships might put it: what builds and sustains *storge* (affection) after the very brief stage of *eros* (passionate love) is over (Fletcher et al 2012, 556-57)?

The testimonies of the elderly couples that interrupt *When Harry Met Sally ...* effectively claim that the successful or happy couple exists as a constellation of narratives, a corpus of social memories kept alive through the shared recollection of the two members of the pairing. If this sort of reminiscence is the carrot that keeps the relationship moving forward, the stick goading coupledness on is a particular strain of ontological insecurity, an anxiety that transgressing against the relationship (through

[2004], George Clooney (*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* [2002]), or by Kaufman himself (*Synecdoche, New York* [2008]). For more on the issue of Kaufman as auteur, see LaRocca 2011.

infidelity, for example) or terminating the relationship will dissolve the trust that sustains each individual's sense of emotional well-being. The end of a relationship, of course, means the end of that emotional support and attachment. Each of the former partners can still recall, for example, the story of how they met, but these memories are unlikely to be shared between the two anymore, and even if they were, the shared reminiscences would not have the same affective charge that they once had—they would no longer be episodes in an ongoing and open-ended love story.

A break-up, then, results in a sort of anterograde amnesia for the couple. Even if the two former partners might still associate in other capacities—as friends, colleagues, or parents to offspring, for example—the relationship becomes, in the words of *Memento*'s Leonard Selby (see chapter two), unable to make new (social) memories. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* provides a surreal twist to the relationship between love and memory by imagining the possibility that, post-breakup, a sort of *retrograde* amnesia could be enacted, so that a broken-hearted lover could decide to erase the entire relationship from his or her memory. The fantastical scenario from renowned surrealist screenwriter Charlie Kaufman contemplates the intersections of (both individual and social) memory and love and underscores the degree to which male fears of emotional expression and romantic commitment are readily identifiable symptoms of the contemporary crisis of masculinity.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind recounts the unusual events that follow the breakup of Joel Barrish (Jim Carrey) and Clementine Kruscizeki (Kate Winslet). A twist on the Classic Hollywood “comedy of remarriage” (Cavell 1981), the film's surreal premise involves a firm that specialises in erasing painful relationships from the memories of the broken-hearted (Day 2011). A few days after breaking up with Clementine, Joel discovers that his ex-girlfriend has contracted the services of the aptly named Lacuna Corporation and has had all traces of him wiped from her memory. After Joel has learnt that Clementine has had him erased from her memory, he retaliates by having their relationship removed from his. Storming in to the Lacuna offices, Joel is seen by the CEO and chief memory eraser Dr Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson), who immediately frees up an appointment for Joel. His instructions to Joel on what he needs to do to prepare for the procedure are worth quoting at length:

The first thing we need you to do, Mr Barrish, is to go home and collect everything you own that has some association with Clementine. Anything. We will use these items to create a map of Clementine in your brain. So we'll need photos, clothing, gifts, books she may have bought you, CDs you may have bought together, journal entries. We want to empty your home—we want to empty your life—of Clementine. And after the mapping is done, our technicians will do the erasing in your home tonight. That way when you awake in the morning, you find yourself in your own bed, as if nothing had happened: a new life awaiting you.

Howard explains this requirement over a montage of Joel in his apartment removing photos hanging from his wall and books from his shelves, tearing pages from his journal, and so on, and collecting the entire stash of souvenirs into a couple of large bin liners. As Howard speaks these last words, we see Joel, garbage bags in hand, striding across a busy road to the Lacuna office, a car nearly mowing down the distracted protagonist in an ironic counterpoint to Howard's optimistic claim that memory erasure will give Joel "a new life". Instead, as Joel stirs during the memory erasure procedure, he regrets his decision and finds that the "lacunae" being created in his memory are destroying rather than restoring his life.

The film's narrative structure is built on the device of the unconscious Joel (at times semi-conscious, as he struggles to wake and combat the memory erasure) wandering the labyrinthine mnemonic passages of his mind, catching glimpses of past experiences that he shared with Clementine just before they are erased by the Lacuna technicians. Though representing different forms and contexts of amnesia, both *Eternal Sunshine of the Mind* and *Memento* (chapter two) are faced with similar challenges of how to represent what Thomas Elsaesser (2009) calls the "productive pathology" of their respective protagonists (24-25). In other words, wishing to represent the sensation of (partial) memory loss by having the viewer experience a similar feeling of confusion or disorientation, the filmmakers bend narrative comprehension to near the breaking point. In both cases, rather than adhering to the generally chronological narrative of what Bordwell (2005) has called the "excessively obvious" Classic Hollywood style, the filmmakers manipulate plot/story relations to a degree that a substantial part of the viewing pleasure comes from decoding the film's puzzling narrative organisation (2).

The story events of Joel and Clementine's relationship are thus retold in a roughly reverse chronological order. As the Lacuna technicians Stan (Mark Ruffalo) and Patrick (Elijah Wood) hunt down and eradicate memories of Clem in Joel's unconscious, we first see Joel hiring Lacuna, then him learning that Clementine has had him erased from her memory, and then the acrimonious quarrels just before their breakup, and so on, stretching back to the happy beginning of their relationship. There are, however, important differences in the ways that *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine* approach this strategy. In *Memento*, the intention to disorient is apparent from the start—the film's first shot, in which a Polaroid photograph is shaken until the image vanishes into a blur, inaugurates a gunshot murder filmed in reverse motion. *Eternal Sunshine*, by contrast, only begins to reveal its trickery fifteen minutes into its running time. It is not until much later in the film that viewers learn that what appeared to be a standard "rom-com" meeting in the film's opening minutes is in fact the set-up for a surreal "comedy of remarriage" (Cavell 1981; Day 2011).

Around fifteen minutes into the film, an abrupt and deceptive temporal shift occurs; in the opening sequence Joel remarks that it is Valentine's Day, but when this is immediately followed by a scene in which a neighbour remarks that it is the 13th of February, viewers are at least as likely to infer that we have bounded nearly a year into the future rather than skipping back a single day into the past. The failure to provide viewers with definitive temporal moorings here indicates that the preferred reading of the film is as surreal fantasy rather than as science fiction, as texts in the latter genre tend to be governed by realist codes of comprehensibility, despite whatever speculative strategies they display with respect to characters (e.g., androids, aliens) or settings (e.g., outer-space colonies, the planet earth one hundred years in the future). *Eternal Sunshine*, by contrast, seems governed by a particular dream-logic so characteristic of its screenwriter that the term "Kaufmanesque" gained currency as a descriptor for its recognisable strain of philosophical playfulness (LaRocca 2011, 3).

A significant aspect of Kaufman's surrealism that has not received a great deal of critical attention is the distortion or expansion of normal gendered "reality" in his screenplays, a trait in evidence beginning with his first film, the breakaway cult hit *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999). That film's major narrative complication occurs when Lotte (Cameron Diaz) enters the secret portal that her husband Craig

(John Cusack) has discovered and thereafter temporarily inhabits the consciousness of the celebrity actor referenced in the film's title. While her puppeteer husband has taken to the idea of "being someone else" as a philosophical experiment, Lotte has responded in a much more visceral manner; after her first twenty minutes as John Malkovich, she decides she has had a life-changing experience. "Being inside did something to me," she tells her husband. "I knew who I was." Returning with a fervour to the portal, she meets resistance from her husband but is not to be deterred: "Don't stand in the way of my actualisation as a man," she warns Craig. What follows is not so much a love triangle as a love quadrilateral, as Maxine (Catherine Keener)—the attractive co-worker Craig has been pursuing—begins an affair with (Lotte as) John Malkovich, and Craig resorts to physical imprisonment to separate the two women and uses his skills as a puppeteer to attempt to take over Malkovich and win the heart of Maxine.

Charlie Kaufman's inventive scenario for *Being John Malkovich* gestures towards what one critic has called the true aim of surrealism. C W E Bigsby (1972) argues that the most notorious features of surrealism—"the striking image, the irrational phrase or the dream-like texture"—are simply "the methods" of a movement that should really be recognised for its obsession "with liberating the imagination and with expanding the definition of reality" (Bigsby 1972, 78). In a similar way, in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* Kaufman expands our experience of the love story by using an amnesia plot to underscore how central memory is to the experience of romantic love. In doing so, Kaufman also augments the arsenal of representations of masculinity in contemporary cinema and provides an opportunity to explore the connections between masculinity, memory and emotional intimacy during an era in which romantic love (both onscreen and off) as well as masculinity is often considered to be in crisis.

Both *Being John Malkovich* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* explore the violence that desire can wreak upon reason, a reanimation of the notorious *l'amour fou* trope of the original surrealists. Kaufman's fixation on socially and romantically inept protagonists lost in surreal worlds has brought to screens a very different mode of masculinity from those generally analysed in screen gender studies. Kaufman's films do not feature war heroes (as in *Flags of Our Fathers*) or charismatic cult leaders (as in *Fight Club*) or murderous widowers bent on vengeance (as in *Memento*); unlike Tom Cruise's hardened pick-up artist in *Magnolia*, Kaufman's protagonists show no

prowess at the pursuit of casual sex, one of the few remaining ways of boldly displaying masculine status in contemporary culture (Illouz 2013, 102). Instead, Kaufman gives us men such as the aimless and dishevelled Joel Barrish, who cuts such a forlorn figure in the opening minutes of *Eternal Sunshine* that even his impulse decision to skip work seems almost entirely joyless; and the train ride to Montauk that follows is given over to the sort of neurotically morose and introspective voice-over that Kaufman both featured and reflexively critiqued in his earlier film *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002). In contrast to the self-possessed narcissism noted by Steve Neale (1993) in his discussion of certain cinematic gangsters and cowboys, the men in Kaufman's films are palpably uncomfortable in their skins. By dropping his cringing (and cringe-inducing) protagonists such as Joel in surreal scenarios that would test the mettle of much smoother and more capable men, Kaufman illustrates Bergson's famous formulation of the comic sensibility as an awkward blend of the mechanical and the organic. The comic, Bergson claims, can be found whenever "*something mechanical [is] encrusted on something living*" (1911a, 17): "*we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing*" (1911a, 18).

It is easy enough to see the relevance of Bergson's theories for *Being John Malkovich* (whose puppetry obsession is played more for comic than uncanny effects), but Kaufman's work as a whole shows the influence of this Bergsonian conceit on the filmmaker's treatment of gender—that is, one way that this symbiosis of the mechanical and living is represented in Kaufman's work is through the exploration of male subjectivity as a sort of prosthetic consciousness that can be temporarily either put on or discarded. Thus, in *Being John Malkovich*, we see Craig don the wearable Malkovich in a stereotypically masculine fashion, dressing for erotic success in a most instrumental style (setting out to score sexually and to even the score against his wife-turned-love rival Lotte), in contrast to Lotte and Maxine, who are instantly open to the erotic and sensual possibilities this prosthetic masculinity offers.

In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Kaufman's Bergsonian gender subversion takes the form of the memory erasing service offered by the aptly named Lacuna Corporation. The oversized hairdryer-like helmet worn during the procedure, as well as the slacker technicians administering the procedure through a haze of alcohol and marijuana, lends a distinctly comical air to the proceedings. In a sense, this invention

of Kaufman's brings out the Bergsonian humour inherent in ordinary understandings of remembering and forgetting, which tend to treat human memories as computers or similar recording/archival devices with discrete places from which memory can be stored and later retrieved (Draaisma 2000, 3). To bring to the fore this assumed but largely unarticulated model of human memory is to lampoon through exaggeration the common belief that memory, the very core of what makes us human, is essentially a sophisticated version of a computer hard drive.

This belief is very much in evidence in Joel's preliminary appointment for his Lacuna procedure. Before his memory of Clementine can be erased, Lacuna's technician Stan must use the souvenirs from the relationship to map Clementine's location in Joel's memory. When Joel attempts to provide commentary about a souvenir during this procedure, Stan quickly cuts him off, explaining that he can form a better "memory map" if the patient does not talk. The implication is clear: to the agents of Lacuna, the memento is a pure, direct link to a distinct spot within Joel's mind. Lacuna cannot contemplate the notion that memory is constituted in language; to Lacuna, the patient's symbolic rendering of the memento and its relation to the past is just so much noise, needing to be filtered out to provide an accurate reading of memory. The idea of "mapping" memory becomes more significant as the film unfolds, as it becomes clear how Gondry and Kaufman aim to render memory, that most intangible of concepts, as inhabitable and traversable inner unconscious space. Memory in the film seems only to concretise at the moment just before its erasure: thus the city streets and other haunts of the former lovers suddenly appear and then, within an instant, fragment and disappear forever.

In contrast to Lacuna's view of memory as a privately contained affair, transparent to the world without symbolic mediation, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* argues that even personal memories are inextricably inter-subjective and bound up in language. Moreover, as a love story, the film presents the romantic couple as a particular kind of group identity that is maintained through shared memory, which thus stands in stark contrast to the sort of masculinist collective memory work represented in *Fight Club*. As unabashedly romantic as *When Harry Met Sally ...* or any other romantic comedy, *Eternal Sunshine* upholds the myth of soul mate pairing as the highest form of adult interpersonal relationship. It is a film entirely devoid of

meaningful glimpses of friendship or other forms of beneficial human companionship. Indeed, with a narrative trajectory that runs through the extraordinary complications of amnesia yet still ends in eventual reunion, *Eternal Sunshine* re-enacts the myth of the soul partner or other/better half that is a cornerstone of the dominant ideology of romantic love.³⁶

The sheer ubiquity of the marital happy ending in Hollywood films—as discussed most famously by Raymond Bellour (2000)—means that the culturally contingent emotional and communicative labour undergirding such “successful” resolutions for the most part remains concealed. The self-help truism that relationships require work obscures the much more fundamental sense in which labour is required in relationships—that is, that this sort of coupling is anything but natural or inevitable, but comes about through emotional and communicative acts. The word “relationship” derives from the Latin *relatus*, a “past participle of *referre* to tell of, to refer” (Conville and Rogers 1998, ix). Traces of this etymology can still clearly be seen when the English verb “relate” is used to refer to an act of communication: when, as in the examples from *When Harry Met Sally ...*, members of couples *relate* (that is, recount or narrate) the foundation stories of their lives together. Thus, one way that sociologists can define a social relationship (romantic/sexual or otherwise) is as a sort of “association [between people] that is instantiated by talk,” often in the form of “conversation that retrieves human connections from memory and restores them to the present, something akin to storytelling” (Conville and Rogers 1998, ix).

Mapping Memory and Intimacy

The memory work that romantic relationships require, however, is a more or less continual maintenance project, and a labour notoriously incompatible with the intimacy-shunning character of traditional masculinity. In my discussion of *Fight Club* (chapter seven), I noted how traditional Western masculinity recoils from emotional intimacy—in Fincher’s film, it is the prospect of love that sends the protagonist fleeing

³⁶ In Plato’s *Symposium* it is proposed that humans had originally been eight-limbed creatures until Zeus separated them, and now “each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish, is but the indenture of a man, and he is always looking for his other half.”

to the all-male fight club—as a threat to its fortified ego defences. In *What a Man's Gotta Do*, Anthony Easthope (1992) contrasts the male and female ego with a pair of architectural metaphors. The male ego, Easthope suggests, has the character of a typical fortified castle, such as that in Leonardo da Vinci's sketch *Designs for a Castle* (1504): "The purpose of the masculine ego, like that of the castle, is to *master* every threat, and here the male term is particularly appropriate. The castle of the ego is defined by its perimeter and the line drawn between what is inside and what is outside" (39-40). The female ego, in contrast, for Easthope is like the slowly dilapidating seaside house in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which has "a boundary between outside and inside but it is one which is constantly crossed and which does not hope to close its frontier completely" (37).

Easthope's comparisons seem particularly apt in the context of *Eternal Sunshine*, for it is at the seaside where Joel and Clementine first meet, and a vacant house figures prominently in their introduction. As remembered by Joel during the memory erasing procedure, the moment they met is characterised by Clementine's brashness and Joel's shyness. He is taken with—and taken aback by—Clementine's boldness, particularly with the liberties with personal space she takes, such as grabbing food from his plate without waiting to be given permission. Later at the same event, the two wander off, and Clem breaks into a holiday house. As a mortified and fearful Joel voices his reservations, Clem delights in her surroundings, pilfering from the owners' liquor cabinet and inspecting their belongings.

Joel: I think we should go.

Clem: No, it's our house! Just for tonight ... [she looks at an envelope she finds on a table] we are David and Ruth Laskin. Which one do you want to be? I prefer to be Ruth, but I'm flexible.

Here Joel encounters Clem's brazen and impulsive behaviour for the first time and runs away. When he and Clem return to the house in his flashback, he admits to being scared: Clem's intimacy feels like a trespassing against his masculinity, a transgressive unmanning underscored in her jibe about being flexible as to which (gender) role he will perform when they "play house".

The vanishing seaside house in Joel's memory, then, is significant for the way that it represents the problem of intimacy that would become a major point of contention in Joel and Clem's later relationship. As such, the film's exploration of love and memory is illuminated by the idea of the pure relationship as advanced by the noted British social theorist Anthony Giddens, most notably in his work *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992). The pure relationship is pure in the sense that it is an association that is disembedded from tradition and from coercive external social arrangement, and accordingly exists and persists solely at the pleasure of each member of the association. A pure relationship, Giddens (1992) writes, is:

a social relation ... entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it. Marriage—for many, but by no means all groups in the population—has veered increasingly toward the form of a pure relationship ... (58).

The pure relationship is sustained through emotional intimacy, in which "each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other" (Giddens 1992, 61). The pure relationship, then, is structured upon an inherent tension:

It is a feature of the pure relationship that it can be terminated, more or less at will, by either party at any particular point. For a relationship to stand a chance of lasting, commitment is necessary; yet anyone who commits herself without reservations risks great hurt in the future, should the relationship become dissolved (Giddens 1992, 137).

This source of tension is acknowledged in *Eternal Sunshine* when Joel, reunited with Clem during the memory erasing procedure, upbraids her for first contracting Lacuna, Inc. When she defends herself by reminding Joel of her impulsive tendencies, he is forced to acknowledge that it is this very same trait of spontaneity that made him love her in the first place. The complementary personalities of Joel and Clementine highlight the potential that each partner has to offer to the other in his or her "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens 1991, 88)—though this of course also means that the pure relationship renders each member of the pair emotionally vulnerable as well. The very

factor that makes the pure relationship attractive—the implicit “egalitarian co-participation in another’s exploratory self-development, in construction of a narrative that sustains each sense of self”—also makes it inherently risky, as there is little guarantee of permanence in these co-authored narratives (McPhee 1998, 97).

The “co-participation” referenced here manifests itself in the film through the continual blurring of the distinction between the real world and the memories in Joel’s mind. Accordingly, the film’s diegesis seems governed by its own phantasmic logic rather than by conventional narrative plausibility. This becomes most evident in Joel and Clem’s real-life reunion on Montauk at the film’s end, which would seem to be impossible given that the agreement to meet in Montauk occurred only between Joel and his imagined or introjected version of Clementine. Perhaps the only way this narrative circle can be squared is to assume that a similar conversation took place between Clementine and an imagined/introjected Joel during her own Lacuna procedure, a symmetry which would suggest a mutual acknowledgement of how each has performatively created the other through speaking (and remembering) a shared narrative into being, in accordance with Giddens’ views on the pure relationship. In that sense, Joel’s wish to keep Clem alive in his memory represents the dissolution of his masculine blocked reflexivity, a look inside himself that recognises the indispensable role she has played in his self-construction.

Prior to the epiphany that brought about his efforts to forget her, Joel’s dealings with Clementine are marred by his chronic “emotional constipation” (W Farrell 1974, 63; Robinson 2000, 132). On their first meeting—or what viewers initially assume is their first meeting, only learning later that this is the reunion of the two after their Lacuna procedures—Clem tells Joel that he is “kind of closed-mouthed.” Later, Joel recalls her gently chiding him over his introspective self-absorption, as she complains that his remoteness is unhealthy: “People share things. What do you write in your journal if you don’t have any thoughts, or passions, or love?” Clem’s idea of evading the Lacuna procedure by having Joel take her into a memory in which she doesn’t belong thus requires Joel to brave the previously unsettling terrain of interpersonal intimacy.

Taking Clem somewhere she doesn’t “belong,” then, means articulating a memory from before they met, and Joel’s recollection here is telling. Joel at first responds that he can’t remember anything without her, a sentimental claim that masks what must in

fact be a concerted effort to avoid remembering certain things. When he relents, he and Clem are transported to his childhood home, where Joel as a pre-schooler plays beneath the kitchen table while Clem becomes one of Joel's mother's friends. It is perhaps the only scene in the film to take full advantage of Jim Carrey's comic abilities, which, appropriately for the scene, depend upon his assumption of the sort of overgrown boy persona first popularised in Hollywood by Jerry Lewis. In this memory sequence in Joel's childhood home, the full-grown Joel is dressed in children's pyjamas, speaks in a sort of baby talk and sulks and pouts, alternatively demanding ice cream and his mother's attention. He fluctuates between this infantile state and his adult state, where he is able to stand back and comment on what we are seeing. "I think I'm around four years old," Joel explains. "I really want my mom to pick me up. It's amazing how powerful the feeling is."

The (pre)oedipal tone of the scene is underscored by Joel's playing with a yo-yo under the table, in a pointed allusion to the *fort-da* game that Freud (1920) suggested (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) was a rudimentary narrative created by the infant to master separation from his or her parents. In Freud's (1920) words, "The interpretation of the game ... was related to the child's great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting" (9). The *fort-da* game thus represents a very early form of remembering, using play to remember the mother and work through the trauma of her temporary absence. Playing the game enacts a wish fulfilment in which what is "lost" will not be "gone forever," to cite "My Darling Clementine," a lyrical motif that recurs in the film.

Thus, when Joel begins to have second thoughts about losing Clementine forever, he finds a way to elude Lacuna's forces of oblivion through embracing, rather than fleeing from, intimacy. This first memory of Joel, his recollection of being four years old and wanting to be picked up by his mother, is not sufficient to keep Clementine safe from erasure. As Lacuna closes in on her, Clementine desperately beseeches Joel to "hide [her] in [his] shame," which transports her into a devastatingly embarrassing memory of Joel in which he (as a teenager) is caught masturbating by his mother. But as Clementine's situation grows more desperate, even this level of mortification is not "deep" enough, and she pleads for Joel to "hide [her] somewhere really buried."

Subsequently, Clem finds herself as a little girl witnessing a Joel of a similar age being badgered by his peers into hitting a dead bird with a rock. The sequence ends with the girl Clem comforting the despondent boy/man Joel, in an image of how emotional intimacy can redeem the sins and shortcomings of the beloved.

Thus, while Joel and Clem each contracted Lacuna, Inc, on the assumption that the complete loss of (memory of) the other would give each of them a new life, it in fact turned out to be the case that *recovering* the other is the only way in which any life or memory is possible. The paradox at the heart of memory—the past mysteriously made present again—parallels the essential paradox of love, in which intimacy appears as a potential diminishing of the individual, but is in fact instrumental in the growth of the self. In contrast to both the solitary delusions of haunted men remembering past traumas (as in *Memento* and *Spider*) as well as to the empty male-only rituals where men dig through the past in order to cultivate a wounded collective identity (as in *Fight Club*), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* offers an alternative way for men to remember, one that recognises their interdependence not just on each other, but on women as well. A brighter future for men is possible, one that must begin with recognition that there must be new ways of remembering the past and new narratives of the past to be remembered.

Conclusion

“I Came in at the End”: Remembering and Surviving the Turn of the Millennium

It was the turn of the millennium, and in America apocalypse was in the air.

Even before 9/11, a pervasive sense of cataclysm marked the end of the second millennium, as anxiety about the Y2K bug led to fears of societal collapse and predictions that the United States was going to face its greatest crisis since the Second World War (Kyle 2012). This sense of dread hung over many screen narratives of the late 1990s, such as the pilot episode of “The Sopranos” (Tony’s nostalgic lament gives this conclusion its title), and, the final scene of *Fight Club*, whose falling skyscrapers eerily anticipate the attacks on the Twin Towers two years later.

Upon even the briefest of reflections, however, the apocalyptic visions in both of these scenes seems unwarranted—or, to use a more loaded and gendered term, hysterical. Tony Soprano follows up his melodramatic declaration “I came in at the end” with the rather less alarmist explanation that “the best is over”. Missing out on the best would seem to make a perfectly valid case for nostalgia, but a rather inadequate justification for suffocating anxiety. In a similar vein, the mayhem at the end of *Fight Club* arises from the narrator’s loss of his idealised alter ego and the realisation that he must face Marla Singer—and the emotional intimacy that she represents--alone. In these two cases, men’s apocalyptic fears seem, to use a heavily gendered term, hysterical.

Less commonly used synonyms for the word “apocalypse” include “revelation” and “uncovering” (Kyle 2012, 8), and it is this sense of making what is hidden visible that is perhaps most relevant to the turn-of-the-millennium crisis of masculinity. As argued in the Introduction to this thesis, recent accounts of such a crisis of masculinity must not only consider it as “a crisis of looking and looked-at-ness” (Simpson 1994b, 6), but also as a crisis of looking within—that is, as a crisis of self-reflection and memory. Memory has played a key part in attempts to resolve that crisis as men, both as individuals and as groups, have struggled to craft compelling narratives of their experiences in order to make sense of what being a man might mean in a time of great disturbances to the gender order. In screen narratives at the turn of the millennium,

narratives of remembering and forgetting have offered viewers ways of understanding recent changes to—and possible future trajectories of—masculinity.

The chapters of this thesis have traced how memory is understood as a wound, as a badge of identity and as a rhetorical trope deployed to elicit audience sympathy. In doing so, this study has uncovered and critically analysed the parallels between the loss and (attempted) recovery of the past and the loss and (attempted) recovery of masculinity. Understanding how memory is implicated within these representations of masculine introspection required exploration of some of the more prominent memory practices during the era. The burgeoning discipline of memory studies at the end of the twentieth century directly implicated masculinity through the attendant complications and revisions brought to cultural practices such as war commemoration and psychotherapy, while highly gendered discourses of trauma and recovered memory not only changed the way that the past was remembered and forgotten, but reopened social fissures and eroded unexamined traditions of male privilege.

Put another way, filmmakers at the turn of the millennium, on either conscious or symptomatic levels, mapped struggles over the meanings of masculinity onto contemporary speculations on the nature of remembering and forgetting. Films of this era wrestled with both epistemological questions about how the past can be remembered, as well as political questions about how social memories enable the formation of collective identities. The complexities of remembering and forgetting in the works analysed in this thesis parallel wider cultural efforts to come to terms with the newfound reflexivity of masculinity in the era, and the degree to which such self-consciousness can be reconciled with conventional views on men's gender identity. Beginning with *The Passion of the Christ* (chapter one), this thesis demonstrated that Mel Gibson's film was motivated by a desire to harness the sacred remembrance of Christ's wounds to restore the transcendent identity that men have lost in postmodern secular cultures. Gibson's film's investment in a conservative mode of masculinity is mirrored by a similarly traditional mode of memory, a view that the past can, in a spiritual fashion, be made wholly present again, with the film functioning as a time machine that would show events how they really occurred rather than providing an interpretive reconstruction of times long ago (Thistlethwaite 2004).

In Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (chapter two), in contrast, this restorative model of memory is undermined. A close reading of this famous narrative of amnesia underscored how the film foregrounded both masculinity and memory. The film implies that tough masculinity is mere masquerade and subversively suggests that men's appeal to memory as justification for certain types of masculinity is nothing but a fabricated alibi. Taking on a more specific mode of memory, the investigation of *The Sopranos* (chapter three) demonstrated how the series represents nostalgia as a trope that men use to speak to their current state of dissatisfaction, as well as men's dawning realisation of the inadequacy of nostalgia as a means of recalling the past and as a foundation for newer, more viable masculinities. Thus, the reflective nostalgia that is the end goal of Tony Soprano's psychotherapy requires an engagement with the past that is reconstructive in character and that is also cognizant of the mediated manner in which the past is transmitted to the present.

This knowledge that the past is *represented* rather than *re-presented* animates Clint Eastwood's World War II film, *Flags of Our Fathers* (chapter four). Expanding upon conventional ideas about the imbrications of war and masculinity, Eastwood's film considers how trauma, as well as nostalgia and commemoration, might contribute to contemporary understanding of World War II and the generation of men who fought it. By working through the contradictions between official commemorative myth-making and the private "involuntary commemorations" (Stanley 2000, 240) of traumatic memories, *Flags of Our Fathers* stresses the socially embedded character of memory, in a popular historical context that was heavily implicated in contemporary contemplations of masculinity. In a similar vein (although working with very different subject matter and genre conventions), Adrian Lyne's 1997 *Lolita* (chapter five) offered a cinematic remembering of Nabakov's classic novel, an adaptation whose production and reception was strongly influenced by the turn-of-the-millennium obsession with memory. The distribution and exhibition problems faced by the film attested to the way that its representation of a melancholic male sexuality was countered by a contemporary memory culture that centred on the recovery of women's memories of patriarchal sexual abuse.

Further tracing the contemporary indictment against patriarchy, this thesis analysed P T Anderson's 1999 film *Magnolia* (chapter six), a work that emphasised

the debilitating effects that the rule of fathers has had on men. Anderson's film speaks to a crisis of patriarchy chiefly through the character of professional womaniser Frank T J Mackey and his deceit about his life story. Mackey's circulation through the media of a false biography—claiming his mother was still alive, but his father was deceased, when in fact it was the other way around—can be read as an attempt to deny his place in the patriarchal order. His attempt to hide from the truth about his father (whose own relationships with women seemed to have been as emotionally stunted as his son's) and his own life story (Frank cared for his mother when his father abandoned her after she contracted terminal cancer) is an attempt to forget the male emotional neglect that has long run through many families, despite whatever façade of benign paternalism fathers might project. *Magnolia* thus uncovers the nature of patriarchal masculinity at its turn-of-the-millennium moment of crisis and argues that patriarchy is the poisoned source for the great rivers of toxic masculinity at the century's end, and that men as well as women have been victims of its malignant powers.

The gestures in *Magnolia* toward all-male group memory work and contemporary reflexive masculinity are underscored in David Fincher's 1999 film *Fight Club* (chapter seven), a work which ties together many of the strands of analysis running through this thesis. As in *The Sopranos*, *Fight Club* sites its contemplation of the imbrications of masculinity and memory on the terrain of late twentieth-century confessional discourse—the psychotherapy-influenced mode of speaking and remembering prevalent in self-help books, afternoon talk shows, and recovery groups. Moreover, as with *Memento* and other “mind-game” films (Elsaesser 2009, 13), *Fight Club* dramatises the impediments that men put in the way of their own self-reflection, the emotional blockages that frustrate men's efforts to make interpersonal connections and leave them to a masochistic fetishization of wounding.

Building upon the observation that the male hysteria on display in *Fight Club* is precipitated by anxiety about heterosexual desire, the final two chapters of this thesis explore the relations between memory and emotion in two complex film narratives of the period. The analysis of *Spider* (chapter eight) traced Cronenberg's exploration of the imbrications of memory and male sexuality, while the final chapter of this thesis investigated the representation of memory and intimacy in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (chapter nine). In both films, complex narratives of remembering and

forgetting attest to the emotional dimensions of masculinity's newfound reflexivity at the turn of the millennium. While Thomas Elsaesser's (2009) reading of *Spider* privileges a diagnosis of schizophrenia, this thesis' reading of the film argued that the essential "productive pathology" (26) of the film is the fetishistic character of hegemonic male sexuality.

What this state of affairs reveals is that the key to understanding and overcoming men's crises of alienation and self-identity must lie outside the bounds of both individual men and exclusively male groups, and this position undergirds the reading of the final chapter of this thesis, which is dedicated to an analysis of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. An iconic text of early 21st century cinema, and, along with Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, one of the era's most notable films about memory, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* breaks new ground in the depictions of masculinity and memory by siting its representations on the less macho generic terrain of the romantic comedy. While in recent years the romcom genre has itself been embroiled in a crisis of identity (one clearly related to contemporaneous crises in the gender order), this instability has opened up a space for formal and narrative innovation, which, in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, is rehearsed in a collaborative process of remembering that bridges the gender gap. Starting from the premise that the contemporary romantic relationship is narrated into being through the couple's collaborative remembering, this investigation of Gondry's and Kaufman's film pinpoints how the narrative lacunae within the film's flashbacks can only be filled by the complementary memories of each partner's Other.

In doing so, this surreal romcom provides a fitting summation of the most hopeful future trajectory for masculinity. This thesis has delineated the ways in which key screen narratives at the turn of the millennium have variously embraced or rejected the myth of a "real" masculinity, adrift in the currents of time and waiting to be rescued before it plunges into the depths of oblivion. The alternative to this wistful essentialism is for men to recognise masculinity as a constructed formation designed to maintain male dominance in love and family relationships as well as within the larger society. A recognition and rejection of the restrictive myth of masculinity offers a surer path through the crises of the present and future than misguided nostalgia for an imaginary time when men were simply men.

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American Beauty. Directed by Sam Mendes, DreamWorks Pictures, 1999.

American Sniper. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros Pictures, 2014.

Annie Hall. Directed by Woody Allen, United Artists, 1977.

Apocalypse Now. Directed by Francis Coppola, United Artists, 1979.

Being John Malkovich. Directed by Spike Jonze, screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, USA Films, 1999.

Blade Runner. Directed by Ridley Scott, Warner Bros, 1982.

Blood Work. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros, 2002.

Braveheart. Directed by Mel Gibson, Paramount Pictures / 20th Century Fox, 1995.

Brokeback Mountain. Directed by Ang Lee, Focus Features, 2005.

The Butterfly Effect. Directed by Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber, New Line Cinema, 2004.

Casualties of War. Directed by Brian De Palma, Columbia Pictures, 1989.

Dead Presidents. Directed by Albert and Allen Hughes, Buena Vista Pictures, 1995.

The Deer Hunter. Directed by Michael Cimino, Universal Pictures, 1978.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. Directed by Michel Gondry, screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, Focus Features, 2004.

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close. Directed by Stephen Daldry, Warner Bros, 2011.

Fatal Attraction. Directed by Adrian Lyne, Paramount Pictures, 1987.

Fight Club. Directed by David Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1999.

Flags of Our Fathers. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Paramount / Warner Bros, 2006.

Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai. Directed by Jim Jarmusch, Artisan Entertainment, 1999.

The Godfather. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Goodfellas. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Warner Bros, 1990.

Gran Torino. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros, 2008.

The Green Berets. Directed by John Wayne et al, Warner Brothers Seven Arts, 1968.

Harold and Maude. Directed by Hal Ashby, Paramount Pictures, 1971.

Heaven's Gate. Directed by Michael Cimino, United Artists, 1980.

Imitation of Life. Directed by Douglas Sirk, Universal-International, 1959.

In a Lonely Place. Directed by Nicholas Ray, Columbia Pictures, 1950.

Indecent Proposal. Directed by Adrian Lyne, Paramount Pictures, 1993.

The Last Temptation of Christ. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Universal Pictures, 1988.

L'arrive d'un train en gare de La Ciotat. Directed by Auguste and Louis Lumière, Société Lumière, 1896.

Le Samourai. Directed by Jean-Pierre Melville, S. N. Prodis, 1967.

Letters from Iwo Jima. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros / Paramount, 2006.

Lolita. Directed by Stanley Kubrick, MGM, 1962.

Lolita. Directed by Adrian Lyne, Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1997.

Lost Highway. Directed by David Lynch, October Films, 1997.

Magnolia. Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, New Line Cinema, 1999.

The Man Without a Face. Directed by Mel Gibson, Warner Bros, 1993.

Marnie. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Universal Pictures, 1964.

Memento. Directed by Christopher Nolan, Newmarket, 2000.

Million Dollar Baby. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros, 2004.

Mulholland Drive. Directed by David Lynch, Universal Pictures, 2001.

Mystic River. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros, 2003.

9 ½ Weeks. Directed by Adrian Lyne, MGM/UA Entertainment, 1986.

Now, Voyager. Directed by Irving Rapper, Warner Bros, 1942.

Once Upon a Time in America. Directed by Sergio Leone, Warner Bros, 1984.

The Others. Directed by Alejandro Amenábar, Dimension Films, 2001.

The Passion of the Christ. Directed by Mel Gibson, Newmarket / 20th Century Fox, 2004.

Peyton Place. Directed by Mark Robson, 20th Century Fox, 1957.

Platoon. Directed by Oliver Stone, Orion Pictures, 1986.

Proof. Directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse, Roadshow Entertainment, 1991.

The Public Enemy. Directed by William A. Wellman, Warner Bros., 1931.

Pulp Fiction. Directed by Quentin Tarantino, Miramax Films, 1994.

Random Harvest. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1942.

Reds. Directed by Warren Beatty, Paramount Pictures, 1981.

Sands of Iwo Jima. Directed by Allan Dwan, Republic Pictures, 1949.

Saving Private Ryan. Directed by Steven Spielberg, DreamWorks / Paramount, 1998.

Schindler's List. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Universal Pictures, 1993.

The Searchers. Directed by John Ford, Warner Bros, 1956.

Sergeant York. Directed by Howard Hawks, Warner Bros, 1941.

Single White Female. Directed by Barbet Schroeder, Columbia Pictures, 1992.

The Sixth Sense. Directed by M. Night Shymalan, Buena Vista Pictures, 1999.

Space Cowboys. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros, 2000.

Spellbound. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, United Artists, 1945.

Spider. Directed by David Cronenberg, Sony Pictures Classics, 2002.

Steel Magnolias. Directed by Herbert Ross, TriStar Pictures, 1989.

Synecdoche, New York. Directed by Charlie Kaufman, Sony Pictures Classics, 2008.

Terms of Endearment. Directed by James L Brooks, Paramount Pictures, 1983.

That Obscure Object of Desire. Directed by Luis Buñuel, Criterion Collection, 1977.

Three Kings. Directed by David O. Russell, Warner Bros, 1999.

Transamerica. Directed by Duncan Tucker, Weinstein Company / IFC Films, 2005.

Unforgiven. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros, 1993.

United 93. Directed by Paul Greengrass, Universal Pictures, 2006.

The Usual Suspects. Directed by Bryan Singer, Spelling Films International, 1995.

When Harry Met Sally Directed by Rob Reiner, Columbia Pictures, 1989.

The Woodsman. Directed by Nicole Kassell, Newmarket Films, 2004.

Words on the Page. Special feature short film, *Flags of Our Fathers* DVD, Warner Bros/DreamWorks, 2007.

World Trade Center. Directed by Oliver Stone, Paramount Pictures, 2006.

Television Series

The Sopranos. Created by David Chase, 1999 — 2007. HBO.

The Wire. Created by David Simon, 2002 — 2008. HBO.