Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity and the Double-Protagonist Film

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Abstract: In the double-protagonist film, a genre that has emerged in the past two decades, two male protagonists, each played by a film star, vie for narrative dominance. American manhood is depicted as fundamentally split, a split that can be understood as conflict between a narcissistic and a masochistic mode of masculine identity.

In Hollywood films from Bush to Bush—the late 1980s to the present—an unnamed genre exists. To give this new genre a name, I will call it the double-protagonist film. In the double-protagonist film, the central conflict is a complex negotiation for power between two protagonists, each played by a star, both of whom lay legitimate claim to narrative dominance (Figure 1). While it’s possible to have two female characters in the double-protagonist roles, they are most often filled by males, and, given the focus of this essay on Hollywood masculinity, my term “double-protagonists” will refer to male characters. Bush-to-Bush
Hollywood films suggest that manhood’s center cannot hold, that manhood is split, that the warring elements of manhood spill out beyond the individual subjectivity of the star-protagonist, and that the burden of male representation must be carried by two stars rather than one. This masculine split can be understood as a division or conflict between a narcissistic and a masochistic mode of masculine identity. The most obvious precursor to the double-protagonist film genre is the buddy film genre. Though related to the buddy film, the double-protagonist film differs from it in several key respects. The other antecedents of the double-protagonist film are the western, the noir, the Hitchcockian psychosexual thriller, and its imitators of the 1970s and the 1980s. The overlaps between the new double-protagonist film and these other, influencing genres as well as their differences will be considered in this essay, which will conclude with a close reading of Paul Schrader’s *Auto Focus* (2002), an exemplary double-protagonist film.

The double-protagonist film bears an interesting relationship to Hollywood history. A dyadic pairing of male stars does not occur in most Classic Hollywood films that are star driven. Some film genres, however, specifically depended upon the double-star film, such as the “road” movies of Bing Crosby and Bob Hope and, most notably, westerns, which often placed two powerhouse stars, such as John Wayne and Robert Mitchum, in the same film. Though not, in male-male terms, “double-star” films, film noirs often made the theme of the double central. Certainly, many Classic Hollywood films pair a major male star with a major female one—*It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946), *An Affair to Remember* (Leo McCarey, 1957), et al.—a tradition that endures to the present. (Because my focus is on male-male relationships, I will set aside discussion of Hollywood’s extraordinarily intricate construction of heterosexuality.) And there were sometimes elephantine all-star productions—*The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), *How the West Was Won* (John Ford, Henry Hathaway, George Marshall, 1962)—that swirled numerous stars into their mix. But for the most part, what we envision when we consider the men of Classic Hollywood is the lone, solitary star making his way through a complex and challenging special world. (The same is true for the female protagonist of the woman’s film, the genre in which a female star dominates.)

We think of the star in isolation, the star fighting his way through the complications of plot to a resolution that relieves him of his narratively imposed anxieties. We think of Humphrey Bogart’s caustically cynical Sam Spade, John Garfield’s lustrously sweat-drenched boxer, Gregory Peck’s impeccably unruffled man in the gray flannel suit, Gary Cooper’s embattled sheriff, James Stewart’s increasingly manic, agitated, suffering Everyman, John Wayne’s Ethan Edwards in John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), famously detached from family and future in the film’s memorable closing shot of Ethan walking away from the reunited family and heterosexual coupledom. Often there is a heavy in these films, a villain, but the villain is never thought of as the other protagonist, only as the ancillary plot-necessitated figure who makes trouble for the protagonist. (Sometimes, of course, the villain will have such zest that he will threaten to overtake the narrative—examples include Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death* [Henry Hathaway, 1947], Jack Palance in *Shane* [George Stevens, 1953], Lee Marvin in *The
Man Who Shot Liberty Valance [John Ford, 1962]). There may also be a supporting male role, such as Jeffrey Hunter’s young, mixed-race Martin Pawley in The Searchers, who is Ethan’s conscience but, more importantly, his sidekick—no one would ever think of Jeffrey Hunter as John Wayne’s co-star, much less his leading man. “A man don’t go his own way, he’s nothin’,” says Montgomery Clift’s Robert E. Lee Prewitt in Fred Zinneman’s 1953 From Here to Eternity, a statement that resonates even for this film studded with major stars (Clift, Burt Lancaster, Frank Sinatra). Of the core identity of American manhood, D. H. Lawrence’s description remains exact: “The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.” And this is the crucial next line: “It has never yet melted.”

The double-protagonist film has profound implications for both the cinematic construction of American masculinity generally and for the historical development of representations of queer sexuality. The double-protagonist film signals several important shifts: in the construction of the essentially isolate male protagonist, the chief embodiment of which is Wayne’s Ethan Edwards in Ford’s 1956 film; in the construction of the heterosexual couple, the focal point and the achieved goal of traditional film narrative; and in the construction of cinematic male-male relations. With the rise of the double-protagonist film, Classic Hollywood isolate manhood is transformed into dyadic manhood. Dyadic manhood threatens to topple the reign of the heterosexual relationship presumably central to Hollywood film; and male-male relations of all kinds must now account for, contend with, and orient themselves around a central, often contentious, always complex relationship between two male protagonists played by two male stars of commensurate stature, who therefore demand equal attention and narrative importance.


these films, only *The Hard Way* and *Miami Vice* correspond to the “buddy film” genre of which the *Lethal Weapon* series has been the emblematic model. *L.A. Confidential* and *The Black Dahlia* self-consciously recall classic noir by placing themselves back in the noir time and space of Classic Hollywood Los Angeles, and films such as *Se7en* and *The Departed* modernize the noir genre. While several of these films can be seen as, in Robert Ray’s phrase, “concealed westerns,” none of them explicitly evokes or characterizes itself as a western. Though it contains the shards of earlier genres and ways of thinking about male-male cinematic relations, the double-protagonist film innovates these genres and the nature of these relations (Figure 2).

The films listed above represent the new kind of manhood film in which two stars share and compete over narrative power. Probably the simplest explanation for the rise of the double-protagonist film is an economic one—an increasingly desperate Hollywood employs two major actors to sell one film. Yet, without dispensing with the economic factor, the psychosexual significance of the double-protagonist film bears scrutiny. Each male star doubles the other, in his battle over narrative dominance, sexual objects, and audience sympathy. Several of these films pit the protagonists against each other, but several of them demonstrate the merging of the two central males into one; the males are always complementary halves of a dyad that suggests not two individuals but two warring halves of one consciousness, a psychic doubling that recalls Ingmar Bergman’s haunting, disturbing woman-centered *Persona* (1966), albeit in masculine terms. (Perhaps the most obvious male-male version of Bergman’s film is Fincher’s *Fight Club*.)

To understand how the double-protagonist film differs from its cinematic antecedents, we should contextualize it by contrasting it to other films that make male-male relations central: noir, westerns, the psychosexual thriller, and buddy films.

**Doubles Redoubled: Doubles in Noir and Westerns.** Noir films present us with masculine heroes in whom divided natures wage war; the masculine split of the noir is primarily psychic, internal, and embodied not by double male protagonists but by female characters who represent competing points of identifications or narrative

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possibilities for the tortuously split noir hero. “Although in [noir] films like Out of the Past the woman may represent a disturbance of the hero’s attempt to achieve a position of mastery and knowledge, and a concomitant disruption of the linear, investigative narrative,” writes Frank Krutnik, “the cause of this disturbance and disruption lies . . . in the ‘nature’ of masculinity itself. Masculine identity and sexuality are never stable and unified but rather are in flux between conflicting positions of desire; masculinity is hegemonic rather than homogeneous.” Noirs, then, do not simply reiterate notions of coherent masculinity but, instead, “negotiate conflicting and contradictory positionings of male desire, identity, and sexuality, and consolidate masculinity as unified.” 3

In his famous essay “Notes on Film Noir,” Paul Schrader wrote that noir reflected the postwar disillusionment experienced by those returning home after World War II. “The disillusionment many soldiers, small businessmen and housewife/factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film.” 4 One of the sources of the pain and conflict in noir manhood is repressed wartime trauma and the situational development of feelings of intense male-male intimacy, homosocial bonds that had to be suppressed in the postwar social order. Many film noirs, Steven Cohan points out, “recount a veteran’s successful transition from male bonding to heterosexual romance.” 5 But not without considerable difficulty: as Cohan demonstrates in a discussion of Humphrey Bogart’s noir vehicle Dead Reckoning (John Cromwell, 1947), the film “openly foregrounds the organization of Bogart’s tough masculinity out of two coordinates which his films with [Lauren] Bacall tame through their heterosexual narratives. [Bogart’s] Rip Murdoch is overtly misogynistic . . . and covertly homosexual.” 6

Though the theme of doubling is crucial to the noir film, as Raymond Durgnat points out (though he gives largely female examples), 7 noir’s filmic world chiefly evokes the hero’s essential isolation and alienation. “To a large degree, every noir hero,” writes Robert G. Porfirio, “is an alienated man. . . . The noir hero is most often ‘a stranger in a hostile world.’” 8 Noir films emphasize the impossibility of authentic male-male bonds, the inherent impasse between men and women in patriarchy, and the barren aloneness and heightened vulnerability of the postwar urban American male.

If noirs emphasize the loneliness and isolation of their protagonists, the western is the genre most likely to feature a double-protagonist relationship. In “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s Duel in the Sun (1946),” Laura Mulvey discusses the “common splitting of the Western hero into two,” a deviation from the patterns described in a text Mulvey draws on here, V. Propp’s Morphology of the Folk-tale. 9 “A folk-tale story,” writes Mulvey, “revolves around conflict

6 Ibid., 89.
7 Raymond Durgnat, “Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the Film Noir,” in Film Noir: A Reader, 47.
8 See Porfirio’s essay “No Way Out: Existential Motifs in Film Noir,” in Film Noir: A Reader, 87.
between hero and villain.” But in the split-hero western, the “issue at stake is no longer how the villain will be defeated, but how the villain’s defeat will be inscribed in history, whether the upholder of the law as a symbolic system will be seen to be victorious or the personification of the law in a more primitive manifestation, closer to the good or the right.” Mulvey uses John Ford’s famous, elegiac western The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), with its deployment of John Wayne’s rancher Tom Doniphon as an exemplar of the romantic, fading spirit of the Wild West and James Stewart’s idealistic lawyer Ransom Stoddard, who brings book-learning and civic values to frontier anarchy, as a key example. “This narrative structure,” writes Mulvey, “is based on opposition between two irreconcilables. The two paths cannot cross.” For Mulvey, manhood in the western—which I view as a template for more recent double-protagonist films—is represented, then, by two diverging styles of masculinity, the narcissistic and anachronistic social outsider (Tom Doniphon, the personification of the law) and the figure (Ransom Stoddard, the upholder of the law) who attempts to civilize him and represents the social order, chiefly symbolized by marriage. The “rejection of marriage,” Mulvey writes, “personifies a nostalgic celebration of phallic, narcissistic omnipotence.” This rejection reverses the resolution of the Proppian folk tale, which culminates in marriage, and the proper resolution of the Freudian Oedipus complex, which integrates the subject into the symbolic. The split hero in the western, then, represents “a tension between two points of attraction, the symbolic (social integration and marriage) and nostalgic narcissism,” which Mulvey associates with a “phase of play and fantasy difficult to integrate into the Oedipal trajectory.” Marriage, then, emerges as “repression of narcissistic sexuality.”

Using Bush-to-Bush double-protagonist films, I argue for a different way of thinking about split masculinity than Mulvey’s. While the alternate star does often represent civilization—the social order, marriage, responsibility, all those things Leslie Fiedler argued, in Love and Death in the American Novel, that American men always attempt to escape, through homoerotic interracial fraternity—that is not his consistent function. Rather, his function is to react to and register the overpowering and seductive appeal of the main star. If the alternate protagonist’s tie to the law—Keanu Reeves in Point Break, Paul Walker in The Fast and the Furious, even Brad Pitt’s guilty vampire Louis, who pleads with brazen Lestat (Tom Cruise) to exsanguinate rats rather than humans in Interview with the Vampire—leads him to attempt to impose the law on the lawless lead, that attempt to capture the lead only allegorizes the desiring male’s efforts to ensnare his beloved. The attempt to capture the main protagonist outside the law principally functions as a metaphor for the lover’s erotic designs on the beloved, who most often mightily resists the lover’s advances, in an aching realization of Carson McCullers’s memorable observation in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe: “the state of being beloved is intolerable to many.”


Masculinity and the Buddy Film. The so-called buddy film has been the most widely discussed example of cinematic male-male relations. But the double-protagonist films cannot be called buddy films: the men in them are not, for the most part, buddies. In his characteristically incisive essay “From Buddies to Lovers,” Robin Wood discusses the buddy films of the 1970s and their concomitant problems with both misogyny—in that the films were often hostile reactions to feminism—and homophobia—in that the possibility that homosocial bonds might include homosexuality had to be rigorously and violently denied. To a certain extent, Wood attempts to recuperate these films, but without losing sight of their ideological difficulties and limitations. He locates the central problem in them not as the “presence of the male relationship but as the absence of home.” By “home,” Wood refers not only to a physical location but to the home as both a “state of mind and an ideological construct, above all as ideological security. Ultimately, home is America. . . . [The 70s buddy] films are the direct product of the crisis in ideological confidence generated by Vietnam and subsequently by Watergate.”

Given that the films suggest but can never allow the consummation of male-male relationships, “the films are guilty of the duplicitous teasing of which they have often been accused, continually suggesting a homosexual relationship while emphatically disowning it.” Citing such films as Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969), Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (George Roy Hill, 1969), Mean Streets (Martin Scorsese, 1973), Scarecrow (Jerry Schatzberg, 1973), California Split (Robert Altman, 1974), and Thunderbolt and Lightfoot (Michael Cimino, 1974) as examples, Wood theorizes that the popularity of the buddy film genre “testifies, no doubt, to the contemporary ‘heterosexual’ male audience’s need to denigrate and marginalize women, but also, positively, to its unconscious but immensely powerful need to validate love between men.” The “strategies of disownment” are necessary to appease the panic of the heterosexual male spectator and ensure his satisfaction.

Robert Kolker writes of 1980s action films that an oft-repeated convention in them “is to provide the hero with a ‘buddy.’ The ‘buddy’ is an extension of the cultural cliché of ‘male bonding,’ a situation in which men can fantasize about being released from the repressions imposed by the company of women. In film, the ‘buddy’ allows adventure, joking, safe community, marginalization of women, and an apparent absence of sexuality. The ‘buddy’ complex views sexuality as an obstacle to manly acts. But this denial of sexuality carries a covert admission of the possibilities of homosexuality, which, of course, is inadmissible.” To play it safe, one of the buddies has an accommodating wife or girlfriend largely rendered invisible. “Men engage in rigorous activity together; the sexual tensions between them are never stated.”

The buddy film of the 1980s looks remarkably, then, like its 1970s incarnation, albeit now in a culture of what Susan Jeffords has described as the hard-body hypermasculinization of the Reagan era. For Jeffords, the principal difference between

12 Ibid., 204–205.
1970s manhood and its 1980s version lies in each decade’s representation of manhood in the context of the social order. To take Eastwood’s iconic psycho-cop Dirty Harry as an example, the institutions that enable the activities of the criminals Harry kills off retain their power, resulting in a nihilism “that cannot reassure the audience that any of [Harry’s] actions have mattered or have changed the social order in any way.” Jeffords continues:

In contrast, the heroes of hard-body [Reaganite] films suggest a different kind of social order, one in which the men who are thrust forward into heroism are not heroic in defiance of their society but in defiance of their governments and institutional bureaucracies. In each case, these heroes are shown to be representing the self-serving empowerment of government bureaucrats who are standing in the way of social improvement. . . . Unlike the Dirty Harry films, in which a lone hero is pitted against a widely corrupt society, the hard-body films of the 1980s pose as heroes men who are pitted against bureaucracies that have lost touch with the people they are to serve, largely through the failure of bureaucrats themselves to attend to individual needs.\(^\text{14}\)

If the social contexts of the buddy films change, along with the cinematic construction of manhood, the inherent problems of misogyny and homosexuality do not, and are now heightened by a more pronounced racialized discourse of interracial male friendship that is not so much an innovation as it is a romantic return to the codes of the early American republic. Kolker’s description of the action film–buddy film’s interracial male friendship could be a rewritten version of Leslie Fiedler’s discussion of the same relationship in nineteenth-century American literary classics, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (which would be spectacularly revisited in Michael Mann’s film version of it in 1992). Leslie Fiedler famously depicts the relationship between isolate wilderness hero Natty Bumppo and his Mohican comrade Chingachgook as “the pure marriage of males, sexless and holy, a kind of counter-matrimony, in which the white refugee from society and the dark-skinned primitive are joined till death do them part.”\(^\text{15}\)

The buddy film inherits and mobilizes the tensions inherent in a homosocialized and homosocializing society that depends on bonds between members of the same sex but also rigorously polices against any erotic dimension to those bonds. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains the matter this way in *Between Men*: “In any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence.”\(^\text{16}\) As Cynthia J. Fuchs observes, the 1980s buddy films use the “transgressiveness of black-white difference” to displace “homosexual anxiety,” thereby sustaining “the secrecy of masculine intimacy and vulnerability.” The anxiety on display in the *Lethal Weapon* films fuses


sex and violence, but most “emphatically displaces homosexuality by that violence.” Indeed, this violence comes to seem the deepest form of male intimacy.\textsuperscript{17}

In the 1990s and beyond, the much more publicly acknowledged reality of homosexuality—figured in the rise of the queer movement—radically transforms the paradigms of repressed homosexuality of the earlier buddy film of the 1970s and 1980s. This is not to suggest in any way that the double-protagonist film of the Bush-to-Bush era represents anything like a progressive movement in the cinema. What’s key about its development is that it simultaneously literalizes the metaphorical split within the tortured psyche of the divided, lonely noir protagonist and reimagines the male-male relationships of the western and the later buddy film genres, representing not so much a response to feminism and queer sexuality as the next stage in cinematic manhood after those challenges were raised.

If, as I am suggesting, Hollywood manhood since the late 1980s constructs a split image of manhood, and this split is literalized in the creation of the alternate protagonist, there nevertheless remains one star who is the dominant one, and another star who threatens his dominance. As such, the alternate star—Michael J. Fox in \textit{Casualties}, Brad Pitt in \textit{Interview}, Guy Pearce in \textit{L.A.}, Jake Gyllenhaal in \textit{Brokeback}, Aaron Eckhart in \textit{Dahlia}—is in an essentially secondary position, one that chafes against the major star’s dominance. The alternate protagonist falls somewhere between double and co-star, between female-lead stand-in and buddy-film buddy. Given that, in film-theory discourse generally, the subjectivity of the cinematic male protagonist has been described as narcissistic, this secondary male lead can be seen as being in an essentially echoistic relation to the narcissistic male—a male-male version, in other words, of the famous and infinitely suggestive Ovidian myth of Narcissus and Echo. The words used to describe his double by the titular protagonist of Edgar Allan Poe’s great 1839 story of the doppelganger, “William Wilson,” tellingly synthesize these relational dynamics:

\begin{quote}
His cue, which was to perfect an imitation of myself, lay both in words and in actions; and most admirably did he play his part. My dress it was an easy matter to copy; my gait and general manner were, without difficulty, appropriated; in spite of his constitutional defect, even my voice did not escape him. My louder tones were, of course, unattempted, but then the key, it was identical; and his singular whisper, \textit{it grew the very echo of my own}.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

To fully understand the double-protagonist film, it will help to recall some of the elements of the Ovidian myth of Narcissus and Echo, consider its continuing usefulness to film theory, and use it to theorize the echoistic role of the alternate male star.

\textbf{Narcissus and Echo: The Movie.} Ovid’s version of the Narcissus myth helps us to understand women’s place in patriarchy. Desired by both females and males, the beautiful Narcissus is cursed by being forced to suffer the same fate to which he subjected


all of his admirers, to love a beautiful boy who cannot return his love. Obsessed
with Narcissus, Echo is constantly “following him,” as Robert Graves limns the myth,
“through the pathless forest, longing to address him, but unable to speak first,” forever
iterating her plea “Lie with me!” In terms of the themes of this study, Narcissus’s
rough shaking off of poor Echo, and adamant dismissal of her advances—“I will die
before you ever lie with me!”—are eerily relevant.19

Echo becomes Echo because of female rage against male power. A giggly, charm-
ing nymph, Echo distracted Juno while Juno’s spouse Zeus was off philandering with
another nymph. Upon discovering Echo’s duplicity, Juno punishes her by denying her
the ability to speak—now, Echo can only repeat what someone has said to her. One of
the most poignant figures from Classical myth, Echo can be used, in feminist terms,
as a figure to represent women’s problematic role within patriarchy. If the position
of Woman in the West, as Hélène Cixous argues, is one of decapitation—the denial of
mind and voice—the myth of Echo encapsulates this position.20 If Narcissus, the beau-
tiful man who falls in love with his own reflection, stands in for the conventional male
protagonist, Echo, the nymph denied her own voice, and able only to echo the words
spoken by others, has provided the template for the cinematic version of Woman, who
can ostensibly only support, reflect, echo narcissistic male leads. But what happens if
a male character occupies the echoistic position?

As an essentially feminine, not exactly passive but also not quite active position, the
alternate male protagonist’s echoistic role places him in a position of submission to
the narcissistic lead, whose dominance the alternate lead resists but also, in opposing,
enables and enshrines; it is precisely by his relatively inferior, uncomfortable, resistant
disposition that he allows the main protagonist to recognize, establish, and maintain
his dominance. In the terms of psychoanalytic and queer film theory, the only sub-
ject position into which the alternate lead can fall is that of masochism. The double-
protagonist film of recent Hollywood history is therefore most accurately understood
as an agon, or contest, between narcissistic and masochistic modes of masculine sub-
jectivity for narrative dominance. To my knowledge, though these concepts occupy,
respectively, a mutually central position within several overlapping debates in psycho-
analysis, queer theory, and film theory, no one has yet theorized about a conflictual
relationship between the narcissistic and the masochistic male (Figure 3).21

Another male is now most often placed in the echoistic position. As a male in
the feminine/subjugated position, the echoistic male bears many of the same char-
acteristics. But he also represents something else, a greater access to the narcissistic

20 Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” in Contemporary Literary Criticism, ed. Robert Con Davis and Robert
21 In her seminal 1975 “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey argues that the film spectator, gendered male,
identifies with the onscreen male protagonist and joins him in a project of shared narcissistic omnipotence. Such
critics as D. N. Rodowick, Steven Neale, Gaylin Studlar, Kaja Silverman, Tania Modleski, and Carol J. Clover have
enlarged Mulveyan paradigms to include an economy of masochism within the theorization of both the spectator-
protagonist relationship and the representation of gender. Since Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure,” narcissism and mas-
ochism have emerged as crucial concepts for considering film spectatorship and gendered representation within the
ever-contentious debates the Mulveyan position continues to inspire.
potentialities of the main lead, one that can potentially help him to transcend the
maiming confines of the female echoistic position, or at least complicate her prescribed
fate. In part, this is because of the conventional privileges afforded the masculine over
the feminine position, and hence a component of Hollywood’s enduring misogyny; but
in another way, the implicitly feminized position of the echoistic male opens up a ho-
moerotic tension between the two male leads that both reinscribes, in the terms of con-
ventional mainstream film practices, female subjugation and also potentially and posi-
tively challenges traditional modes of masculine subjectivity. In *The Fast and the Furious*,
Paul Walker’s undercover detective and street racer Brian O’Conner occupies the
dominant position, in terms of narrative focus, over Vin Diesel’s Dominic Toretto, the
Hades of his street-racing underworld. But in terms of male representation, Walker’s
conflicted Brian—torn between his allegiance to the superegoic world of the law that
he serves and the thrilling secret world of street racing Diesel’s Dominic embodies—is
clearly in the echoistic position with respect to Dominic, around whose magnetic cha-
risma the film is organized. Diesel, here as in several other films, occupies the narcis-
sistic subject position, the one that all of the other characters desire, while conflicted
Brian masochistically struggles over his desire to uphold the law and identify with the
charismatic Dominic, an identification with strong erotic undertones. In one
shot of Rob Cohen’s film, we see both men’s faces in
huge two-shot close-up as they sit side by side in one
car, the black sunglasses on each of their faces
barring their eyes and whatever desiring secrets
may exist within them from our own. In the cli-
max, Cohen—borrowing from Ridley Scott’s lan-
guorous use of montage to suggest the homoerotic
merging of Susan Sarandon’s and Geena Davis’s distinct identities in *Thelma and Louise*—opts for a lyrical use of
montage to depict the men as they race against each other in a vehicular version of a
duel in the sun. The poetically, sensually blurring faces of these distinctly beautiful men
confuse the parameters of identity and desire, narcissism and masochism, merging into
an ode to a general atmosphere of narcissistic abandon.

The echoistic male position contains within it a potential challenge to conven-
tional masculinity precisely through its destabilizing insertion of an often all but
explicitly manifested level of homoerotic desire (Figure 4). But I would argue that
the potential radicalism of the echoistic position lies not in its inherent masochism but in its movement away from masochism toward a shared access to the main protagonist’s narcissism. No doubt, some of my readers will hear in this argument a conservative approach to gendered representation, though that is antithetical to my intentions. Narcissism has been re-imagined and re-appropriated in some quarters, but still bears the traces of its Mulveyesque associations with traditional masculinism. But in several distinct treatments of recent years, masochism has been valorized as a male subjectivity that defies traditional masculinism. What I wish to suggest here is that, despite the valorization of masochism, it is a mode that often makes a highly unsatisfying contribution to the resistance of masculinist oppression. Further, I wish to reconsider narcissism as a potentially defiant, resistant, and even joyously heady mode of masculine performance that masochism is only right to emulate, embrace, and join; indeed, narcissism may be preferable to masochism as a mode of queer masculine performance. The double-protagonist film allows us a key opportunity to test out this hypothesis.

**Narcissistic Beauty and the Masochistic Male Gaze.** One of the most interesting consequences of the double-protagonist split is the positioning of one apparently normative male character as a diegetic spectator of male beauty who, as the audience surrogate, is also a symbolic spectator. The alternate protagonist—in his pining for...
the main protagonist and in the manner in which he chafes against male dominion, often figured as the main protagonist’s heady display of narcissistic omnipotence and concomitant efforts to maintain this reign—occupies the position of repressed homosexual voyeur, as Paul Willemen and Steven Neale put it.22

As Freud brilliantly theorized it, voyeurism is sadism in the form of the look, a desire to dominate others through the eyes.23 But repressed homosexual voyeurism—as a category of looking relations that someone, live or fictional, may occupy, or be made to occupy, regardless of sexual orientation—which implies a desire that is not so much “active” as it is concealed, while not exactly being “passive” (since it does seek out an object rather than waiting to be rendered one) is not sadistic looking but rather anguished, embattled, maimed, obscured, deflected, barred, prohibited looking. As such, it can only be described, given the narrow range of options between active/passive, sadism/masochism, as masochistic; therefore, the alternate star’s gaze is masochistic.

The masochistic gaze has powerful implications for this study as a way of thinking about straight masculinity and about how straight masculinity thinks about itself. As I have been suggesting, the scopophilic category of repressed homosexual voyeur is occupied principally by straight fictional characters in the mainstream films under discussion here, who are at least straight in that they are not figured explicitly as queer. This is the case in De Palma’s Casualties of War, in that De Palma’s construction of Eriksson’s (Michael J. Fox) gaze as masochistic functions as a metacommentary on the essential powerlessness of his position and the challenges posed to resistant manhood generally. There are, though, queer characters who wield the masochistic gaze in several important films, such as The Talented Mr. Ripley and Brokeback Mountain, and one can argue that a film like Auto Focus demonstrates a collapse between straight and queer characters figured as a collapse of the gaze. Regardless of the apparent sexuality of the male characters in the films, the occupation of the subject of the masochistic gaze is an inherently queer position.

As an inherently queer position, the masochistic gaze performed by a normative male star/protagonist revises straight masculinity, makes straight masculinity a kind of disavowal of kinship with heterosexuality while also the double of homosexual masculinity. The straight male subject of the masochistic gaze, therefore, liminally stands between normative heterosexual manhood and abjected queer manhood, representing alternately a fusion of both modes and an inability fully to embody either, while ostensibly maintaining a tie to straight manhood that comes increasingly to seem like an odd parody—and sometimes also a stringent critique—of that normative gendered, raced, and classed subject position.


“Although the gaze might be said to be ‘the presence of others as such,’ it is by no means coterminous with any individual viewer, or group of viewers. It issues ‘from all sides,’ whereas the eye ‘[sees] only from one point,’” writes Kaja Silverman.24 In the course of her unpacking of Lacan’s theory of the gaze, Silverman differentiates the eye or the “look” from the gaze, making the analogy that the eye and the gaze are, in psychoanalytic theory, as distinct as penis and phallus. Drawing from Lacan, Silverman elaborates that, far from lending an air of mastery to the subject, voyeurism renders the looking subject “subordinated to the gaze,” disturbed and overwhelmed, and overcome by shame. In Lacanian gaze theory, “the possibility of separating vision from the image” is called “radically into question,” and along with it the presumed “position of detached mastery” of the voyeuristic subject.25 This clarification of Lacanian gaze-theory has bold implications for feminist film theory, whose proper interrogation of the male look has not, at times, “always been pushed far enough. We have at times assumed that dominant cinema’s scopic regime could be overturned by ‘giving’ women the gaze, rather than by exposing the impossibility of anyone ever owning that visual agency, or of him or herself escaping specularity.”26 This view of the voyeuristic subject not as victim but as vulnerable and fragile insofar as he can never achieve the sense of mastery that fantastically impels his voyeuristic project informs my reading of the double-protagonist film.

As Lacan himself writes,

What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain. There he will phantasize any magic of presence, the most graceful of girls, for example, even if on the other side there is only a hairy athlete. What he is looking for is not, as one says, the phallus—but precisely its absence, hence the pre-eminence of certain forms as the objects of his search.27

What these films stage is the confrontation between the masculine voyeur and that “hairy athlete,” the homoerotic male fantasy that obtrudes between presence and absence, who is the shadow on the wall, closer to Otto Rank’s figure of the shadowy double than to Lacan’s discovered “absence.” In the double-protagonist film, the question raised is not whether or not the male looker phantasizes about a graceful girl when in reality only a hairy athlete lurks behind the curtain, but, rather, if that male looker wants to find not the girl but the hairy athlete behind that curtain (Figure 5).

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25 Ibid., 146.
26 Ibid., 152.
Tormenting Compulsions: Auto Focus. Considering a film such as Auto Focus in depth allows us to narrativize several different developments at once: the double-protagonist film; the increasingly explicit nature of homoerotic desire; and the increasingly fraught nature of looking relations between men. An unjustly overlooked film, not a great film but an impressive one, Paul Schrader’s Auto Focus extends the themes of fraught male-male looking relations in Point Break to a new degree of freighted anxiety; as such, it registers shifts in the developments of both the double-protagonist film and the construction of American masculinity. As a film by the screenwriter of Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976), it also provides a poignant and worrisome critique of 1970s cinema.

Writing of the scene in which Travis Bickle watches, alone, the screen in a Times Square porno theater, Amy Taubin remarks, “In the porn theater, Travis cocks his finger like a gun at the screen. We don’t see the image he sees, but we hear the sounds of faked sexual passion. Again, the connection is made between gun violence and orgasm. But Travis doesn’t come in his seat in the porn theater. Nor does he come when he’s sitting in the front of his cab, where the windows frame a porn movie as epic as the city itself. I think it’s safe to say that Travis never comes to orgasm, that, for him, the only possible release is death; the film will deprive him even of that,” and us of closure, Taubin concludes.28

The male protagonists of Auto Focus apparently come to (offscreen) orgasm frequently, obsessively, yet the same essentially barren and plangent quality of fervent effort never coming to fruition, or of gathering tensions never finding release, characterizes Schrader’s film. Like Scorsese in Taxi Driver and Brian De Palma, in whose

28 Amy Taubin, Taxi Driver (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 55.
films from the early *Hi, Mom!* (1970) to the recent *The Black Dahlia* runs a consistent and consistently despairing theme of pornography as the failure of eros, the failure of connection, and the failure of normative masculinity. Schrader presents pornography in *Auto Focus* as the site of the absence of eros, the triumph of the death-drive, and the end of narcissism. Desire and sexuality are fully tethered to masochism, fetishism, and the death-drive here, libidinal energies devoted to the cessation of life.

A most valuable aspect of Lacan’s work is his decoupling of desire from biological or physical needs. As the Lacanian theorist Tim Dean explains, “Distinguishing desire from biological or physical needs, Lacan conceived desire as the excess resulting from the articulation of need in symbolic form. Thus where bodies may be said to have needs such as biological sustenance and physical protection, subjects have desires—principally, overcoming the loss constitutive of subjectivity as such—hence the requirement to ‘find the subject as lost object.’ It is because desire remains distinct from need that sexuality is cultural rather than biological.”

If desire is the differential between need and demand, desire always exists outside of the corporeal wants and wishes that have a pressing agenda all their own—desire becomes its own project, indeed yanking at the sometimes wayward, resistant body to which it’s tethered in the effort to fulfill its unfulfillable, limitless agenda. Desire, as Freud made sure we understood, has no object, “no real aim.” Desire floats and fluctuates above, below, beyond us, always goading us, never revealing, satisfying, or fulfilling us. *Auto Focus* gives us an opportunity to see desire’s harrowing machinations up close, as it depicts bodies in service to the unceasing campaign of desire’s desire never to desist.

*Auto Focus* is one of the only films ever to depict sexual addiction; most films about addiction focus on substance abuse. Based on the real-life unsolved murder mystery of Bob Crane (Greg Kinnear), an actor cast, at the start of the film, in the sitcom *Hogan’s Heroes* (CBS, 1965–1971)—the most improbable 1960s hit comedy, about a German POW camp—*Auto Focus* centers on the relationship Crane develops with John Carpenter (Willem Dafoe), an electronics technician and swinger, who seduces Bob into his underground world of group sex and video technology. Carpenter, or “Carpie,” as Crane calls him, purveys the latest 1960s technology, the video recorder, which would not make its mass-market appearance until the late 1970s. Orgies, often surreptitiously videotaped, follow rampantly. The two men develop an even closer bond and make even more videotaped orgy productions when Crane, post-*Hogan*, goes on the road with an (execrable) sex farce, *Beginner’s Luck* (it features lines such as “What does your wife look like?” “I can’t remember!”).

An onanistic voyeur who wants to be a tourist of endless erotic possibilities, Crane plays drums in stripclubs with telling names like “Salomé’s.” Many discussions of the “tourist gaze” exist, but I find Katherine Frank’s examination of it in *G-Strings and Sympathy*, a theoretical deconstruction of her own experiences as a stripper, particularly interesting (though far too brief). Drawing on the work of sociologist John Urry,

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Frank discusses the “collective gaze”—in which multiple tourists lend glamour to their surroundings—and the “romantic gaze”—which emphasizes solitude and privacy. *Auto Focus* explores Crane’s attempts to fuse both the collective and the romantic gaze, to make the realm of endless sexual opportunity a private, special realm of personal fantasy. His narcissism becomes a kind of masochistic submission to itself, as his desire not only for unceasing sex but also for the unceasing mechanical reproduction of himself having sex become things to which he must forever submit.

Crane explicitly puts Carpenter into the subordinate, echoic position. “What you’ve done for me?” Crane incredulously counterattacks, when Carpenter confronts Crane for having made a video that casts Carpenter in what he sees as an unflattering light. Crane coldly explains that the Hogan-obsessed girls they pick up want to have sex with him, and that Carpenter benefits from Crane’s fame and largesse, not the other way around. Though Carpenter shares in Crane’s sexual obsession, he is not so much Crane’s double or his reflective surface as he is his failed, rejected, pining lover, who, in a way analogous to Crane’s confusion of the gaze, confuses homosocial intimacy with homoerotic desire, or wants something more utopian, a way for orgiastic sex to be like the potential Blithedale of Coverdale’s description in Hawthorne’s novel *The Blithedale Romance*, a new Golden Age that promotes polyamorous amativeness and authorizes “any individual, of either sex, to fall in love with any other, regardless of what would elsewhere be judged suitable and prudent.”

What label, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin ask in their study *Queer Images*, “should we put on group sex? If the group comprises only one sex, then one might still describe this arrangement as homosexual. But what about a group-sex scene comprising men and women together? Are the participants still heterosexual, or are they now something else?” Such questions explicitly arise in *Auto Focus*, which allows us to speak of the double-protagonist film—in this regard quite distinct from the buddy film—as one in which queer themes speak their own name. “An amusing scene occurs” in *Auto Focus*, as Benshoff and Griffin describe it. “Reviewing a videotape of a recent orgy in which he participated, Crane is shocked to discover his heterosexual buddy’s hand on his butt. Does this make Crane gay? His buddy? What about the two women in the scene—should they now be considered lesbians? The term heterosexual orgy is something of an oxymoron, as it is part of the design of such an arrangement for sexual desire and pleasure to flow from person to person without regard to gender. Group sex is queer sex.”

For several reasons, works such as *Auto Focus*, like Hawthorne’s novel before it, complicate these matters. Its historical moment places it in a liminal moment for sexuality between traditionalism and post-1960s sexual openness. But both *The Blithedale Romance* and *Auto Focus* refuse the presumably ecstatic pleasures afforded by group sex, locating a plangency rather than an exhilaration within the occasion for rampant sexual activity. The film chiefly does this by reminding viewers that the women are exploited

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34 Ibid.
against their will by being surreptitiously filmed—their free-flowing sexual expressiveness undergoing morbid and dehumanizing reification once transmuted into video images for the men’s endlessly prolonged visual pleasure. Carpenter’s anguish over Crane’s desire for him, or lack thereof, also communicates the hollowness of group sex; Carpenter always locates Crane at the center of the whirling carnival of sex and cinema. What complicates Benshoff and Griffin’s view of that scene in which Carpenter’s hand is on Crane’s ass is that the film refuses to label Carpenter as “heterosexual”; indeed, the film comes awfully close to making him increasingly explicitly homosexual. The jokey video montage that amateur photographer/filmmaker Crane made that led to his fight with Carpenter, whom he offends with the montage, involves footage of Carpenter shown, in a way we have not seen him before, mincing it up for the camera. These images of a louchely effeminate Carpenter are joined by a shot of a drag queen, looking sullen and swollen (not someone we’ve seen before), as a looped voiceover from a famous 1970s commercial imprecates, “It’s not right to fool Mother Nature.” In another scene, we see Carpenter mincingly bring Crane and himself drinks to a poolside table. Carpenter stands in for the closeted homosexual whose sexuality is an open secret but also anticipates the seventies homosexual who publicly reveals his sexuality.

Moreover, the discussion of Carpenter’s hand on Crane’s ass reveals that said offending limb rested not just topically on that prohibited zone but digitally invaded it. The argument they have, in which Crane calls Carpenter a “fagola,” leads to the temporary erosion of their bond and signifies the rupture of homosocial desire by homoerotic desire. Later, in one of the most melancholy scenes in the film, Carpenter visits Crane, who has just had a terrible fight with his second wife (Maria Bello, somewhat miscast in this film but always interesting to watch), sitting in his basement watching one of the men’s videotaped sexual adventures. Between the marital fight and Carpenter’s visit, the videotape scene is introduced; in it, the sweetly giggly young blond woman whom Crane is about to ravish asks him to turn off the tape, which he only pretends to do, saying, “Happy now?” as he takes her into his arms. As Carpenter and Crane talk on adjacent sofas, the videotape still plays, with the same woman as before, but now the man having sex with her, while remarkably similar to Crane, is revealed to be Carpenter—one male body substituting for another. Commiserating darkly about women (“Can’t live with them, can’t live without them . . . can’t live with them, can’t kill ’em”), the men watch the video, occasionally making eye contact with each other. Carpenter tells Carpenter, the lone wolf, that he has the right idea. “Live separately,” Carpenter agrees. As they watch the video of Dafoe’s Carpenter having sex with the girl, Crane says, “Oh damn, this is getting me hot,” and begins masturbating; Carpenter immediately follows suit, the men speaking to each other matter-of-factly all the while.

While it’s difficult to know exactly what Schrader is after here—is he saying that the men desire each other, and come close to fulfilling this desire by this shared masturbation? that the men’s masturbation is so unselfconscious and by this point so rotely mechanized that it loses any erotic intention or threat?—the way he visually concludes the scene speaks volumes. The camera moves behind the backs of the masturbating men on the sofas, both captured in the shot, blankly mesmerized by their own created sexual scene, and Schrader holds the image frozen for a moment. “This was my
Norman Rockwell shot,” Schrader says on the DVD commentary for the film, and, as such, it stands as a *bas-relief* of sexual despair, a statement about the profound disconnections at the heart of normative manhood. If male friendship and homosocial bonding over the sexual exploitation of women are highly traditional themes, here the traditions are bankrupted by the effort to heighten and extend the traditions.

The theme of sexual despair comes through in several other scenes as well. After having had his utopian desire for queer sex rebuffed, Carpenter finds himself in the odd position of being asked to inspect Crane’s now professionally enlarged and enhanced penis. Standing before Carpenter, who is seated, Crane exhibits his organ for Carpenter’s scrutiny. The display emerges within the context of their fantasies (prompted by Carpenter’s announcement that he’s just pirated a major new film, *Deep Throat* [Gerard Damiano, 1972]) of making pornographic films with major film stars, such as Stella Stevens (“We could charge ten bucks,” Carpenter muses). Carpenter balks at the idea of looking at Crane’s penis, finally relenting. (“It looks thicker.”) Given that Carpenter had indicated through word and action a desire for closer sexual intimacy with Crane, it seems likely that Carpenter feigns, at least to a certain extent, his disinterest at glimpsing Crane’s penis. Phallic organs, penises—eyes—are all weaponized, technologically enhanced, tethered to machines that metaphorize the mechanization of sex. Crane puts Carpenter into the masochistic position of being forced to gape in awe at his bravura display of male sexual potency. But Carpenter, for his part, consistently refuses the masochistic position into which he always collapses, wanting co-partner status with Bob, who insists always on his narcissistic superiority.

In two of the saddest scenes in this sad film, Crane tells Carpenter of his decision to return to his career and leave the swinging life—and Carpenter—behind. Carpenter pleads with him but then angrily abuses Crane for having so depended on him without demonstrating any gratitude for it. Later, Carpenter calls Crane, and in this brilliantly filmed scene Carpenter’s desperation rises to a fever pitch. Throughout, the actors are superb at conveying the longing and menace in the men’s relationship, and here Schrader fully exploits the haggard, skeletal quality of Dafoe’s screen presence to suggest a living hell of rejection and emptiness, a death’s head in the place of desire. Fascinatingly, as Carpenter talks to Crane about their mutually unsuccessful and separate attempts to get laid, Carpenter grabs at his crotch, desperately, violently, as if he both wants to masturbate as he speaks to Bob—which would make masturbation a kind of desperate, ritualistic homage to an obviously failed male-male relationship—and castrate himself for his own messy, undeniable longings. After this scene, Schrader depicts Crane’s murder, almost incontrovertibly by Carpenter (years later brought to trial, never convicted). We see Crane sleeping as a looming arm holding a camera tripod bashes the tripod repeatedly against his head. This scene, notably cold and affectless—Crane doesn’t move a muscle as his head is pulverized—reads like the punitive destruction of Narcissus, a just punishment for his indifference to the desire he has instigated and refuses to satisfy.

Salomé has been long a sign of impending castration, of manhood falsely assuming mastery of the spectacle of lascivious female sexual display and instead having its head handed to it on a platter. But in this film it is a man who cuts off the head of another man, a man put in the feminine position—to follow Cixous—of decapitation.
Carpenter’s murder of Crane forces Crane into the ultimate masochistic, passive position, depicted here as wordless, almost inanimate submission to his own death, the most forcible reversal of their roles imaginable. The masochist murderously exchanges his roles with the narcissist, whose narcissism he co-opts through staggering violence.

*Auto Focus* demonstrates how the homosocial underwent a profound transformation in the late 1960s and the 1970s, the period in which sexuality was newly deployed as a multivalent sign of liberation. The film registers the shifts in American homosociality posed by the emergence not only of a newly visible, newly articulated and articulable post-Stonewall homosexuality but also of a new openness about sexuality generally, the most dramatic and vivid embodiment of which was pornography, which emerged as a massive mass-market phenomenon in the 1970s, as the film’s reference to *Deep Throat* reminds the viewer. In *Auto Focus*, pornography signals a new utopianization of sex that stands markedly in contrast with the repressive atmosphere of constraint and conformity represented in the film by Disney (Crane makes a 1973 Disney movie called *Superdad*, and cameos in another, the 1976 *Gus*, both directed by Vincent McEveety). But, like Schrader’s earlier *Taxi Driver* and *Hardcore* (1979) (like *Taxi Driver* another reworking of *The Searchers* [1956], substituting the pornographic for the Comanche underworld and retaining the plot of a search for a violated femininity lost in this underworld), *Auto Focus* makes pornography no less disarmingly repressive than Disney. The world of desire in this film is pornographic and dehumanized, and dehumanized precisely because it is pornographic.

Herein lies both the radicalism and reactionary sensibility of *Auto Focus*, and why it is, for all of its strengths, not a great film. The film refuses the conventional association of masculine dominance, through the sadistic voyeuristic gaze, with pornography. Indeed, pornography, with all of its trappings of technological impersonality, violation, and exploitation, emerges as shared isolation; as we have noted, the film stages pornography as the masochistic gaze. The film collapses voyeuristic looking into exhibitionistic showing, opting for the arguable reading of exhibitionism as masochistic. Pornography’s incitement of the gaze only intensifies the tormenting compulsion, in Freud’s words, that inheres in the sadistic desire to look. Pornography leaves the men bereft, decimated by desire.

But there’s also no sense conveyed by the film that the men’s desire for sexual liberation could be in any way liberating. When Crane’s weary, concerned agent (Ron Liebman) urges him to break free of the swinging underworld, telling him, “Sex is not the answer,” and Crane responds, with full ghastly smarm, “No, it’s the question, and my answer is ‘Yes!’” the film frames Crane as hopelessly self-deluded, his inability to register the precariousness of his insistent desires a foreboding of his fall. The film has zero interest in considering the possibility that Crane, whom it depicts as the embodiment of American male shallowness, glibness, sexual exploitativeness, and lack of self-knowledge, might be heroic in his desire to break free of the myriad constraints placed on sexual expressiveness. (This is not to make the naïve point that society is built on repression and sexual expressiveness provides an alternative to this repressiveness,

35 Brett Kahr notes that exhibitionism has been read as both a function “of narcissistic display” and as an expression of “masochistic tendencies,” which often attempt to “court capture by the police and other authorities, thus gratifying the desire to be punished.” See Kahr, *Exhibitionism* (London: Icon Books), 54.
but to raise the question of why this would be such a naïve point to make, given that society is indeed repressive and sexual expressiveness is indeed constrained.) Pornography may not be “the answer,” but in its crude form here it nevertheless signals a need for innovations in the sexual organization of culture, innovations we, as a culture, still resist and refuse.

The reactionary agenda of the film, then, oddly depends on the quasi-homosexual masochist’s rejection of straight male narcissism for its complete fulfillment. Carpenter’s murder of Crane emerges as a just retribution, an attack on Crane for the pitilessness of his narcissism and his self-delusion. We recall that, in the Ovidian Narcissus myth, the seer Tiresias tells Liriope, Narcissus’s mother, that he will have a long life unless he knows himself. Narcissus cannot know himself, and if he does come to know himself, he will die. Carpenter’s murder of Crane, then, becomes our murder of Crane—this is why it is key that we never see Carpenter in the scene in which Crane is murdered; his arm becomes our arm, railing down upon narcissistic Crane’s head the full fury of masochistic rage against unyielding Narcissus. The murder is a means of communicating, in the most expressive way, the truth of Narcissus to Narcissus, to end his self-delusion. But this confuses the issue; Crane’s problem is not lack of self-knowledge but the all-too-threatening awareness of the rapaciousness of his own desires. That these desires are only the more vivid, more insistent reflection of customary American male desires—only an intensification of the sexual design and patterns of American manhood—makes the retributive abuse to which Crane is subjected a deeply problematic issue. That this retribution comes from the quasi-homosexual voyeur, now recast as avenging angel, deepens the problem. Carpenter carries on the tradition in double-protagonist films of masochistically suffering over the spectacle of narcissistic self-sufficiency and avenging us for our masochistic suffering.

Rejecting Narcissus. Double-protagonist films from the late 1980s to the present reject Narcissus in favor of embracing masochistic manhood. Take another look at the list of double-protagonist films I opened with, and consider, briefly, the fate of narcissistic manhood in some of these films. In Demme’s Philadelphia, the masochistic black lawyer lives while the narcissistic homosexual dies; in Interview with the Vampire, doleful masochistic vampire Louis helps to destroy narcissistic blond vampire Lestat (who does triumphantly return in the end); in Collateral, the masochistic taxi driver played by Jamie Foxx reneges every obvious chance of escape from the narcissistic sociopathic hit man played by Tom Cruise, not only in order for the taxi driver to destroy the hitman himself but, apparently, also to give the masochistic male ample opportunity to suffer at the hands of the narcissist. The film ends with Cruise’s homicidal, silver-haired Narcissus destroyed and a new, uncertain, but hopeful heterosexuality prevailing, as the taxi driver and the woman lawyer (Jada Pinkett-Smith) that he saved from the hitman, walk out into the first light of dawn. Fight Club enacts the same destruction of the narcissist and valorization of masochism, and Vin Diesel films as a whole can be seen as a transformation of a narcissistic male star into a properly masochistic one.

Double-protagonist films display a new sexual openness, the chief sign of which is a new eroticization of the male body, one not without its deep complications (especially for race). But although this new openness exists, the reactionary quality that inheres in
the films lies in their determination to redress narcissism, to check the overly brazen display of male confidence, beauty, and desire. These qualities draw in the spectator as much as the echoistic alternate protagonist and supporting characters, but the films appear to insist on portraying all narcissism as negative narcissism, a crushing insistence on obeisance to a monstrous male ego run amok, rather than exploring the liberating and potentially radical possibilities of male narcissism. *Point Break* appears to approach its narcissistic males as occasions for liberating and transformative spectatorship, but, glorious though the filmmaking is, it, too, concludes with the destruction of Narcissus. *Brokeback Mountain* comes closest to a celebration of male narcissism, but it, too, provides its chief narcissist with a stern reckoning, albeit one that is poignant in the extreme.

What we have, then, in the double-protagonist film, is an opportunity to compare one powerful style of masculine performance to another. Narcissism and masochism emerge as competing modes of masculinity locked in bitter contest. Given that the victor of this cinematic agon is most often the masochist, we must consider whether or not American masculinity can really be truthfully described as self-loving. As Theodor Reik wrote, “masochism is never a sign of narcissism, but an expression of its being damaged and of an attempt to restore it.”36 In Hollywood films, the situation is somewhat different—the masochist, having realized that narcissism is a state of being he can never enter and the narcissist a figure whom he can never possess, attempts to damage and destroy the narcissist. The privileged form of masculinity to emerge from double-protagonist films is that of the male masochist provided at the climax of *Auto Focus*, wracked with pain and filled with rage, annihilating dreaming Narcissus.