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Embodied Desire: Establishing the Transmasculine Viewer

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Embodied Desire:
Establishing the Transmasculine Viewer

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Film and Electronic Arts
of Bard College

By
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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*For Pops,
I hope I've made you proud*

Introduction

In his introduction to a recent interview with the writer Andrea Long Chu, Eric Newman writes that Chu has “a nuanced a sticky understanding of how and what we desire, of how a desire never really our own shapes us into the conflicted subjects we are.”¹ Chu is a part of a new generation of transgender academics and writers, following in the footsteps of the likes of Stryker, Halberstam, and Butler, in an attempt to stay abreast of our culture’s rapidly shifting ideas about gender and identity. Chu’s writing is focalized around linking transness with desire; the desire *to be*, *to be like*, to be desired, and to desire others. Her essay “On Liking Women” and her new book, *Females: A Concern*, attempt to recontextualize common ideas of transness, ones that focus on trauma, and the narrative trans people having been born in the wrong body, to instead highlight the transformative role that desire plays in everyone’s life, desire that shapes and impacts how we present and see ourselves.

Writing about gender today is a complicated subject. Everything about how gender is understood, even *what* gender is considered to be, is in flux. At the start of this project it was necessary to reckon with the knowledge that, in as little as a few years, the terminology I have used herein may no longer be in wide-use, and the field of queer and trans studies will have probably surpassed all of what has been examined here. The identifying term of the project, transmasculine, is already new, and so tenuously defined that by the time it has settled, or perhaps even been shuffled out of popular use, the work done around it in this paper might be irrelevant. Even so, I believe it is important to engage with a theory that takes into account viewers that do not situate themselves within the binary, even if that attempt might only be relevant for a brief period of time.

This project is, more specifically an attempt to break open filmic theories of viewership, utilizing Laura Mulvey and the theories of viewership extrapolated from her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Where Mulvey considers the male and female viewer, I intend to include a third

¹ Andrea Long Chu, “Andrea Long Chu on Desire, Weak Love, and Modern Trans Identity” (Lit Hub, 2019).

viewer, the transmasculine viewer, whose operative gaze exists at an intersection between the masculine and feminine gazes. The transmasculine gaze is predicated on desire, emphasizing how Mulvey's male gaze, broken into two types of looking and reoriented to include an "othered" viewer, enacts two modes of desire that the viewer engages with when watching a film.

The first chapter of the project serves as an introduction to Mulvey's original work. I will establish Mulvey's general theory, and explicate the two unique facets of the cinematic look: the scopophilic and the identificatory. Extrapolating on these two ideas, I will engage in the space that Mulvey does not engage in, and take into account a viewer that does not fit into the role of the female viewer or the male viewer. Mulvey's theory indicates that there is space for a viewer who does not fit into the binary that she describes, and the transmasculine viewer can be identified in examining this third space. Following this examination, I will engage with the theory of gaze cinema, an expansion of Mulvey's work in "Visual Pleasure," and gesture towards a of what identificatory and scopophilic looking *is*, and how they manifest for the transmasculine viewer.

The second chapter will take Raymond Williams' analytic framework of dominant, residual, and emergent threads of culture, and move use it in order to understand narrative trends in film. Williams' theory, originally used as a marxist historical critique and a format for analyzing literature, can be used to identify what I will call the emergent impulse in cinema—an impulse in which the films examined herein, ones that were produced as part of the dominant film culture, are influenced by or exemplify emergent cultural threads, and can be recontextualized to include viewers with perspectives other than the expected. Rather than take accepted film history as fact, this chapter will consider how the often invisible presence of queer viewers in the dominant film culture is more present in the dominant audience than it is assumed to be. Using this assumption of the emergent culture's presence reveals unexamined connections between disparate genres of film that can be put in conversation with one another to elucidate a more dialogical relationship between dominant, straight film culture and the

often queer nature of emergent, transgressive, and/or underground film. This connection offers up space in which to understand and validate queer readings of films that are otherwise presumed to be straight. These readings are intrinsic to opening up space in which the transmasculine viewer's gaze can be understood, which will be further elucidated in the third chapter.

The third chapter offers two case studies in which the film and its contents provide space in which the transmasculine viewer's perspective can be described. Additionally, these films demonstrate specific features that make them more accessible for the transmasculine viewer, despite a lack of actualized transgender representation. The two films, Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, demonstrate an idolization of masculinity that is interrelated to homosocial/homoerotic dynamics. These two aspects, combined with an emphasis on "realistic" depictions of masculinity, exemplified by Method acting, and emphasis on male homosocial environments, display and implicitly teach the viewer about different examples of masculinity in their respective settings. I argue that the hyper-focus on masculinity, rather than alienating the transmasculine viewer, in fact works towards Mulvey's argument for the cinematic experience of mirroring, which allows the transmasculine viewer to insert themselves into the film. Utilizing four criteria, I will analyze the films, attempting a queer reading that simultaneously engages with the emergent narrative of the film as well as functions as an avenue through which the transmasculine viewer can be understood.

Ultimately, this project is a rumination on desire and identity. In engaging a theory of the transmasculine viewer one must take into account the way that desire informs how we watch films. In engaging with a viewer who is summarily underrepresented in cinema necessitates engaging with films that on a surface level appear to not appear to the "other" viewer. But if we believe that part of the viewing process is alleviating the sense of self when entering a theater, in order to allow the fantasy of a film to include us as a viewer, the transmasculine person can find themselves in films whether they

are visible within them or not. The screen serves as mirror in which the viewer can find themselves reflected in the images, even if the reflection is imperfect.

Chapter One: Viewer's Pleasure

In 1975, Laura Mulvey published her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in the film journal *Screen*. In the essay, Mulvey describes an analysis of the film viewer's gaze, centered on Freudian psychoanalysis, and examines questions of subjectivity and desire that emerge when considering the viewing of films. Mulvey is interested in “how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him.”² For Mulvey, a fascination with film is a question of the gaze, of what the spectator is looking at on-screen that is appealing, and of *who* that spectator is. Mulvey's analysis describes the assumed spectator of films as male and argues both that films are made solely for the male spectator and that the look of the spectator is one of desire. “Visual Pleasures” marks the first use of the term “male gaze,” a term that is now commonplace in feminist film criticism. To summarize the commonplace usage of the term, the “male gaze” represents and puts language to the act of looking that is performed by men on the screen and in the audience. In recent film writing, the term male gaze has often been used to criticize the sexualization of women's bodies on screen or the particularly voyeuristic and chauvinistic slant to filmmakers' oeuvres.³ Though Mulvey *is* interested in the social connotations that the male gaze implies, her essay focuses on conceptualizing a dynamic between the viewer and the viewed and describes how a forced perspective of maleness that she believes film facilitates changes our conception of spectatorship as a whole.

Cinema “reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle.”⁴ This control and reflection is intimately linked to the male gaze. According to Mulvey, the viewer of a film is always presumed to be male, and films are made aesthetically and narratively for the pleasure of the male

2 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1998), 14.

3 “Male gaze” in Oxford Reference.

4 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 14.

viewer. The pleasurable look of the male viewer watching films is thus broken down by Mulvey into two distinct aspects: scopophilic and identificatory looking. Scopophilic looking is defined by the erotic pleasure taken from looking at someone on screen who is desirable. This look is explicitly identified in the male gaze, in which the looking performed by the male viewer of a film addresses the female characters solely as objects of desire. Scopophilic looking is intimately related to the “three different looks associated with cinema”: the look of the camera, the look of the audience, and the looking that the characters do on screen.⁵ These acts of looking are predicated on and facilitate desire and most often represent the look of the male. The second aspect of looking is the identificatory look. According to Mulvey, this look is “developed through narcissism and a constitution of the ego,” and is based in “identification with the image scene.”⁶ The subjects of both aspects of the gaze are ones of desire and possession; the scopophilic look is desire for another that becomes desire to possess that other; the identificatory is desire for another that is a desire for embodiment, rather than possession.

To help elucidate what I mean in linking the identificatory look with the desire for embodiment it is necessary to pivot back to Mulvey. She defines the identificatory look using the work of Lacan, while the scopophilic look remains solely under the purview of Freudian psychoanalysis. In Lacanian terms, the identificatory look is an extrapolation of mirror theory or the mirror phase: the moment in which a child first recognizes their reflection in a mirror. Mulvey describes the mirror phase as thus:

The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child’s physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with mis-recognition: the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside of itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others.⁷

⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure...,” 25.

⁶ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 18.

⁷ Ibid, 17.

In applying this definition to an examination of film viewership, the viewer represents the child, the mirror the screen; the object of mis-recognition for the viewer is the character that the identificatory look settles on. The viewer of a film sees the character upon whom the identificatory look settles and sees themselves reflected, identifying with an image that is representative of someone “more complete, more perfect” than themselves. That the reflection is an “other”—that is, a representation of the viewer that is not themselves—opens up the space for identification outside of one’s self which, according to Lacan, is reflected in socialization. For our purposes, this identification with the “other” is imperative in understanding the viewer’s relationship to the on-screen “other” who is identified *with*. The “other” in movie-going is any character that is identified with, because they are never a perfect reflection of the viewer who is looking for identification when watching a film.

In her follow-up essay to “Visual Pleasure,” “Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure,” Mulvey solidifies the assertion of the forced perspective of masculinity imposed on all viewers of film. Mulvey writes that the built in “patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as a ‘point of view’; a point of view which is also manifest in the general use of the masculine third person.”⁸ The suggestion here, and in “Visual Pleasure,” is that because of the dominant slant towards the male perspective, any viewer who watches films assumes a male perspective in order to engage wholly with the content of the film. If the viewer is not male, the identification is complicated by the necessity to understand an alternative viewing that occurs when the viewer does not automatically identify with the male character. Within this framework the non-male viewer must find a way to identify with the male character whose perspective is forced onto them. This process is not mimicked by the male viewer who, even if the obvious object for identification is a woman will not, according to Mulvey, identify with that character. The male viewer is unable to identify with a female character because that identificatory process is representative of a symbolic castration of the viewer.⁹ To identify with a

⁸ Mulvey, “Afterthoughts,” 29.

⁹ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 21.

female character makes the male viewer, for the length of the film, no longer male. According to Mulvey this castration is rarely a concern. The films she considers position the male characters as the obvious choice for the identificatory look, and the female characters are subjected to the scopophilic look. Mulvey asserts that for the female viewer to comfortably view a film, she must assume the position of the male viewer.

Mulvey, writing during the 1970s, is interested specifically in the female viewer. The essays examined here engage explicitly with the discourse of feminism at the time. “Visual Pleasures” and “Afterthoughts” do address the problem of a viewer other than a straight male or female. In her terms, the “othered” viewer is the woman. Films are not made for the female viewer, and so the female viewer uncomfortably adopts the male perspective and is forced to both bear witness to, and participate in, the acts of voyeuristic and erotic looking performed on the familiar bodies of woman on-screen by male viewers. The films that Mulvey predicates her analysis on are not designed to allow for the female spectator to identify with the female character on-screen, because that character is only present in order to facilitate the scopophilic look of the male viewer. The identificatory look performed by the female viewer is in accordance with the design of the film; she assumes the identificatory process of the man, and this allows her to more wholly experience the film process. She *must* adopt the male perspective and participate in the male-oriented viewing processes to be present in watching the film. If she refuses to do so, she cannot participate in the viewing process of the film and loses the access point in which to participate in the narrative. However, it is possible to transgress the forced masculinization of the film's form, but Mulvey does not address this space explicitly. Female viewers of films can identify with the female characters, moving against the dominant intent of the film and transforming those female characters from objects of desire into subjects for identification. However, though this transgression of the gaze by female viewers is important, it is not the focus of this investigation. Where Mulvey positions the woman as the “othered” viewer in her analysis, there is space to include a third viewer

who is also unacknowledged in the dominant film process. This third viewer is the transgender viewer.

In today's cinema, Mulvey's binary of looking is complicated both by the existence of women-led films for and about women and by the presence of other spectators who do not fit comfortably into the binary of male and female. In order to bring Mulvey's theory into the current time, it is imperative to open up a space in which to interpret the role and viewing process of that third viewer; that is, to contemplate the existence of an "other" viewer that encapsulates the marginalized identity of viewers who do not fit into the binary of male and female. These viewers of cinema are placed in the same position as the female viewer; they are expected to identify with the dominant figure, the man. In doing so, they adopt the male-oriented mode of looking to watch films. The transgender viewer is forced to assume the perspective of the cisgender male—the operative mode that can be positioned furthest from their own—in order to comfortably view films.

For Mulvey, the scopophilic and identificatory looks are motivated by desire and pleasure. This motivation, facilitated by the way films are made, is part of what alienates the "other" viewer and forces them to assume the male point of view. The pleasure that watching a film provides is catered explicitly towards the male viewer. The scopophilic pleasure of the male gaze is oriented towards what Mulvey calls the "exhibitionist role" of women on screen; they are "simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*."¹⁰ The identificatory look is related to the male viewer's ability to actively watch a film. This look, in which his "ego libido"¹¹ is stimulated, gives the male viewer power over the narrative. The identificatory look is an active one and "supports the man's role as the active

¹⁰ Ibid, 19.

¹¹ Ibid, 18. – In order to move forward more quickly I will just note Mulvey's definition of the ego libido here rather than go into depth about it in the body of this investigation. Mulvey defines the ego libido as "identification with the image seen." To messily paraphrase Mulvey's rigorous psychoanalytic work: this is the male viewer's desire for power that is constituted by identifying with the active, male character, who doubles the erotic, objectifying gaze on the female characters. As a viewer this erotic look is passive, but in the film the erotic look is active, or able to be acted on; thus identifying as a man with the man on-screen gives the male viewer an imaginary power over the narrative.

one of advancing the story, making things happen.”¹² In combining the erotic and active looks, the scopophilic and the identificatory, the male viewer assumes power over the film while he watches it. Though the narrative will play out the same way every time, he is able to orient himself into a role that facilitates imaginary control over what happens on screen, because the film is designed to service his desire because it positions the man as the ideal viewer.

Pivoting Mulvey's analysis towards a consideration of the transgender viewer is not intended to downplay the necessity of her prioritization of the female viewer, nor is it meant to criticize the relevance of her essay in feminist film theory. There is more work to be done intellectually, and in the industry, in order to elevate the position of women. However, in this moment it is important to consider intersectionality in the field of feminist film writing and to address the lack of academic work that considers the complicated perspective of a transgender viewer. The language surrounding “identity” and “identification” opens up questions regarding sexuality and gender, and considering Mulvey’s assertion of the forced point of view of maleness when viewing films, it is negligent to avoid expanding her theory to consider the transgender viewer. I use the term transgender as a catch-call that encompasses the binary trans person, as well as the myriad of gender non-conforming and androgynous viewers of cinema. I am generally interested in how Mulvey's theory can be expanded to consider the trans viewer, but my specific analysis is focalized around the heretofore unaddressed transmasculine viewer. By transmasculine I mean the recently coined identity that encompasses individuals, identified as female at birth, who choose to present masculinely and engage with their identity and perception as one that is aligned with, or moving in, a space that is traditionally defined by masculinity.¹³ Alongside

¹² Ibid, 20.

¹³ Transmasculine is a relatively new term that is being used with greater frequency by members of the LGBT/queer community. Some of the earliest appearances of the term can be found in science journals including a chapter from the book *Gender and Sexual Difference* titled “The Western Lesbian Agenda and the Appropriation of Transmasculine People”, by Sel J. Hwahng, that details the politics of lesbians in relation to transmasculine people. Hwahng's definition of transmasculine people is not entirely clear but her chapter contests lesbian's attempts to claim assigned-female trans people or nonbinary people who identify or choose to partially transition towards a more masculine presentation. In 2016 a *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* article details the experience of “transmasculine” people who choose to have children. This article defines transmasculine people as “people who were assigned as female at birth, but identify on the

this specific concern, I am interested in considering the relationship between transgender identity and, using Mulvey's work, the temporary identificatory position imposed on all film viewers

In fact, extrapolating from Mulvey's work, I would claim that in the forced identification with "masculinity as a 'point of view,'" "the other" viewer who identifies with the predominant point-of-view on screen (in the case of Mulvey's work, the straight male,) enters, temporarily, into a transitive position. For the run-time of a film, any viewer that identifies with a character other than themselves is placed on a spectrum of transitory identity. In order to view a film and embrace the perspective—which is to say, to identify with the character who the viewer follows visually and narratively--the viewer's own identity is left at the door to make room for a mirroring that allows them to take on that point-of-view. The viewer places themselves, metaphorically, into the shoes of the character in order to more fully engage in the viewing experience. If we believe Mulvey's assertion, and understand that films now engage with more points of view than the male perspective, every viewer who enters a theater assumes, temporarily, a transitive identity in order to pass through the threshold of identification and engage with watching a film.

In considering the transmasculine viewer, it is necessary to demarcate their perspective from the perspective of Mulvey's cis male viewer. Mulvey orients the male viewer's identificatory and scopophilic looks as the source of his power and, if we are to believe Mulvey's claim that cinema, especially Classical Hollywood Cinema, is made to cater towards the male viewer's presumed power, where does the new, transmasculine viewer fit in on the identificatory spectrum?¹⁴ Transmasculine identity transgresses a clear identification with the male point of view because, though transmasculinity

male side of the gender spectrum." Google searching the term "transmasculine" yields 604,000 results, the top result being a wikia "gender" forum, which defines transmasculine as "a term used to describe transgender people who were assigned female at birth, but identify with masculinity to a greater extent than with femininity."

14 Classical Hollywood Cinema is a term used in film criticism to denote films from the 1910s until the 1960s, when cinema had the most rapid growth and Hollywood-style, production company based narrative film came to the fore. Mulvey deals with Classical Hollywood and this paper will take Mulvey's theories and pivot them towards The Golden Age of Hollywood, denoting films post WWII to the end of the 1970s and the failure of the studio systems.

aligns itself with masculinity, it does not equate maleness, and the transmasculine viewer continues to exist in a space between the two ends of the binary spectrum. Their ability to operate in the active viewing position, typically ascribed to men, is complicated by the relative lack of actualized representation accessible to them in popular film. Representations of trans people in cinema, at least in popular cinema, and especially in popular cinema from the 20th century, is hard to come across, and when it is encountered it is often derogatory, or deeply censored, as per the moral rulings of the Hays' Code.¹⁵ There is even less room for their identificatory process than for women, who can transgressively identify with the female character as a character, rather than as an object for scopophilic looking. Their ability to identify with the male characters is complicated by the fact that they are not intended as the active viewer. Additionally, if we operate under the assumption that the transmasculine viewer at one point identified as female, they are poised to receive the oppressive gaze of the male viewer on them as familiar scopophilia, rather than engage with the empowering, active identificatory look possessed by the male viewer.

Here we come to the meat of the project as it stands. There is no model for the identificatory process of the transmasculine viewer, but there is a history that might be adapted in order to understand and formulate a theory in which they engage with film. The transmasculine viewer is not removed from Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure; however, their participation in it crosses the gender divide that Mulvey draws, and transgresses the more rigid understanding of the scopophilic and the identificatory. For the transmasculine viewer, the scopophilic look does not come from the assumed "male point of

¹⁵ I am using as reference a recreation of the Hays Code hosted on Arizona State University's website. The Hays Code was instated in 1931 and is described as "a code to maintain social and community values in the production of silent, synchronized and talking motion pictures." The Code instated a moral pedagogy that films were required to adhere to in order to be shown. The guidelines note that "Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden." This is in reference to any and all of what we would now call "queer representation" in cinema. Though transgender identity is, in modern standards, not a sex perversion, the representation of trans people in film is relegated to cross-dressing comedies like *Some Like It Hot* (1959, dir. Billy Wilder) or *Victor and Victoria* (1933, Reinhold Schünzel). Gay and lesbian characters are still found in films, but the Hays Code also dictates characters such as these, or criminal characters, must face retribution for their actions if they are to be featured. Thus many veiled, gay characters find tragic ends in films of the time.

view”, and often actively works against it, embodying a queer desire when looking at both men and women on screen. However, cinema still exists as cinema, and if we believe Mulvey's work is relevant beyond the moment in which she wrote “Visual Pleasure,” cinema is still, to use a colloquialism, a man’s game. Thus the interest here lies in complicating the male perspective, taking into account the “other” man, which is to say, the transmasculine person. This viewer opens a new space in which to conceptualize the process of cinematic identification, and the maleness of cinematic looking, allowing for alternative conceptions of Mulvey’s two gazes; a scopophilic gaze predicated on male desire for men, and/or an identificatory gaze predicated on the desire to *be* masculine.

Bringing Transness to Mulvey –

I do not intend to pose this investigation as a revision of Mulvey, nor do I mean it as a criticism of Mulvey's lack of inclusion, something which she should not be faulted for. Rather, I intend it as a revision and an expansion of Mulvey's theory. “Visual Pleasure” gestures towards the inclusion of the gay male viewer in Mulvey's nod towards the “buddy movie” and Molly Haskell's work, and her follow-up essay “Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure'” deals explicitly with the masculinization of the viewer, vaguely taking into account the blurring of the gender divide.¹⁶ However, Mulvey's concerns are oriented explicitly around the female viewer, and I believe it is necessary to expand her theories to include the transgender viewer, especially in a moment when transgender identities are actively discussed in the mainstream.

Mulvey notes that she is interested in “the relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the 'masculinisation' of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-goer.”¹⁷ In “Afterthoughts” Mulvey considers the pleasure achieved by the female viewer who enjoys the masculine point-of-view imposed by watching movies, rather than engaging with it begrudgingly. Aligning the transmasculine viewer with the female viewer is

¹⁶ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 19.

¹⁷ Mulvey, “Afterthoughts,” 29.

problematic in that it reduces the distancing from femininity their identity prescribes but, there is space in Mulvey's analysis to include the transmasculine viewer, who I would argue goes through a similar process as what Mulvey describes for her female viewer. She identifies the narrative transpositions of identity in watching films as “trans-sex”, and though she does not intend this to refer to actual transgender viewers, it is clear that the rigid divide between male and female is more complicated than Mulvey necessarily addresses, allowing space to take into account the actual transgender person. Instead of addressing them, however, Mulvey borrows dated terms for transgender people in order to explain, utilizing Freud's psychoanalysis again, the female desire for an active role in film as reason for her active identification with the male point-of-view. Mulvey writes:

Although a boy might know quite well that it is most *unlikely* that he will go out into the world, make his fortune through prowess or the assistance of helpers, and marry a princess, the stories describe the male fantasy of ambition, reflecting something of an experience and expectation of dominance (the active). For a girl, on the other hand, the cultural and social overlap is more confusing. Freud's argument that a young girl's day-dreams concentrate on the erotic ignores his own position on her early masculinity and the active day-dreams necessarily associated with this phase. In fact, all too often, the erotic function of the woman is represented by the passive, the waiting (Andromeda again), acting above all as a formal closure to the narrative structure. Three elements can thus be drawn together: Freud's concept of 'masculinity' in women, the identification triggered by the logic of narrative grammar, and the ego's desire to fantasise itself in a certain, active, manner. All three suggest that, as desire is given cultural materiality in a text, for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second nature*. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes.¹⁸

Mulvey continues her investigation by pivoting into the patriarchal roots of narrative structure and the functionality of female characters, but I would like to pause here, on her Freudian analysis, and break open her use of the term “trans-sex” in order to fill in the gaps where a transmasculine viewer can be

¹⁸ Ibid, 32.

considered.

Here, Mulvey's argument branches into folkloric tradition, but ultimately returns to film criticism. To broadly summarize, she says that men are serviced by narrative, while women are part of the service of narrative, but in finding traction in male identification, can make narrative serve them. To Mulvey, this is a kind of gender confusion-- a moment in which the girl returns to a masculine state, as Freud suggests in his theory of femininity.¹⁹ What are we to do with the transmasculine viewer in this dichotomy? They are neither male nor female, and embody different parts of both ends of the spectrum. Masculinity aligns them with the male process of engaging with narrative, seeing themselves in the character and believing the fantasy of male success, and their socialization prior to identification as transmasculine puts them in a position to empathize with the woman as narrative object.²⁰ However, their identity as masculine problematizes the "masculinization" process that Mulvey argues happens to female viewers when watching film. Thus, what is the process that occurs, if the experience of the male viewer and the transmasculine viewer, or the female viewer and the transmasculine viewer, is not one to one?

Here it is necessary to split from Mulvey wholly. Her analysis of film breaks down the viewer's looking into two pairs: the active/passive, which contains the male (active) and female (passive) view, and the scopophilic/indentificatory, which are the two aspects of the gaze that create active viewership. The male viewer does not need undergo any perspective shift in order to engage with the active looking process, nor with the two parts of that looking, and the female viewer can simply assume the male perspective to engage actively with a film. The transmasculine viewer, operating in a median space between the two, does not participate in the dominant viewing process, and instead creates a new space

19 Ibid, 30-31. – My use of Freud in this paper will be relegated specifically in reference to Mulvey use of him. This project is not taking into account Freud's theories on gender outside of Mulvey's use of him in her theory of visual pleasure.

20 Transness is popularly understood as a narrative path from one thing to another, from girl to boy, from boy to girl, etc. While this understanding of transness is contested within the community as a whole, it is the most popular way to discuss trans identity, so I will employ it here to aid in the coherence of my argument.

in which the gaze, operating within the same framework Mulvey established, remains active but engages with an entirely different kind of looking. I will explain this new gaze by describing its parts, beginning with the scopophilic. While not explicit, Mulvey notes that the scopophilic gaze can and does hold space for the homoerotic gaze of the male viewer, which is represented especially in buddy films, wherein the male character's looking is directed at one another as objects of desire and adoration.²¹ The buddy film necessitates male desire for other men. Outside of this brief nod in Mulvey's piece, she frames male looking is overtly predicated on women as objects of desire. Thus, no matter the assumed sexuality of the transmasculine viewer, whether they be attracted to women or to men, their desire is accounted for in Mulvey's original framework, though the emphasis lies on the homoerotic looking exemplified in the buddy film. Where the transmasculine viewer's scopophilic look can, to some degree, be accounted for in Mulvey's theory, their identificatory look is more complicated. Assuming that, because of their transient identity that exists between the male and female, they do not identify exactly with the male character, and do not identify with the female character as a representation of themselves, what must be done for their identificatory process to occur? The female viewer shifts to identify with the male character, or identifies with the female character despite her position as an object of desire. The transmasculine viewer can *sympathize* with the female character and the female viewer, understanding to some degree both the female viewers desire for transgressive identification with the women on screen, and with the woman on screen's identity as an object, but it is solely sympathy. Their identification with the male character on screen comes from a place of empathy. This empathy, oriented around the desire *to be like* the men on screen, is an intrinsic part of the identificatory process for the transmasculine viewer. Empathizing with the male characters allows the transmasculine viewer to more wholly take up space that is designated as male, and engages a process of edification wherein, watching the man on screen, the transmasculine person can learn about

²¹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 19.

masculinity and simultaneously *be* masculine for the run time of a film.

This process of learning and empathizing with the male character on-screen operates in accordance with Mulvey's use of the mirror theory. The transmasculine viewer's gaze enacts desire that is analagous to the male viewer's desirous look, but the transmasculine desire is imperative. The pleasure derived from viewing films when the transmasculine gaze is active emerges from a sense of ownership over the images of men. These images serve to validate the transmasculine viewer's identity, and provide a space in which they can imagine themselves into a position that might otherwise be inaccessible to them.

Gaze Cinema and Interpretation –

In opening up an attempt to alter Mulvey's definition of looking towards the transmasculine viewer, it is clear that the elision of spectator and character in the identificatory act of looking, and the simple act of desire in scopophilic looking, is no longer perfect. In order for the transmasculine viewer's acts of looking to occur, an element of interpretation must be allowed. This is not to say that these acts of looking cannot exist for the queer viewer without interpretation, however, returning to a question of representation, if these acts of looking by the transmasculine viewer occur not just for the desire for pleasure, but also for the desire of feeling seen within the cinematic mirror, interpretation is key. The enactment of the transmasculine gaze occurs more readily if a film allows space for queer interpretation to occur.

Mulvey's use of Lacan and Freud are primary influences on the development of "gaze cinema," a theory of spectatorship coined by Timothy Corrigan that is most fit for an attempt to conceive the theoretical and actual implications of the transmasculine viewer. The importance of this investigation is not solely related to the necessity of representation both on the screen and in academic work. To consider the transmasculine viewer forces a consideration of the way that the confluence of identification and interpretation, as it is performed by the transmasculine viewer, can lead to alternative

readings of film, and opens up a radical space to reinterpret our conception of film history from the 70s, the decade in which Mulvey published her essay.

Perhaps it is apocryphal to suggest that the final decade of the Golden Age needs reinterpretation to accommodate a new viewer, but these looks are not new. Queer viewers and queer filmmakers have existed for as long as cinema has, and though transmasculinity is an identity that is still very new, it is worthwhile to include them into the conversation about viewership, especially because transgender viewers presence has been summarily ignored. Thus, in addressing historically significant films with the previously ignored transmasculine viewer in mind, it is necessary to recontextualize cinematic history with the knowledge of queerness in mind. The trans writer and activist Andrea Long Chu writes:

These stories have perhaps less to do with What Really Happened than they do with what Fredric Jameson once called “the ‘emotion’ of great historiographic form” — that is, the satisfaction of synthesizing the messy empirical data of the past into an elegant historical arc in which everything that happened could not have happened otherwise.²²

Here, Long Chu writes about Jameson's “‘emotion’ of great historiographic form” in order to recontextualize an oral history of lesbian and anti-trans movements towards the inclusion of trans desire. The emphasis Chu places on desire and her assertion that retrospectively considering how history might service those it has ignored succinctly engages with the purpose of this project. This retrospective look is relevant when considering a previously ignored demographic of viewership. Conceptualizing a new historiography of queer interpretation in cinema both acknowledges the presence of queer viewer's in the path and helps to elucidate the framework within which queer and trans viewers watch films today. Is it not time to allow those marginalized watchers to synthesize the messy data of their own looking into an arc that speaks some sense into their history?

To return to gaze cinema: in order to allow for the synthesization of accepted history and a new,

²² Andrea Long Chu, “On Liking Women,” (n+1, 2018).

inclusive perspective on theories of viewership to occur, it is necessary to validate the act of transgressive readings of film. In her book, *Perverse Spectators*, Janet Staiger writes that gaze cinema “creates a fixed subjectivity and unified identity through its narrative continuities, closures, central characters, and flexible realism. For the spectator, the gaze cinema is a cinema of interpretation and reading.”²³ Staiger’s assertion of a “unified identity” as it is produced by gaze cinema harkens back to Mulvey’s assertion of the male point-of-view as it is produced and disseminated by the act of watching a film. This identity fixes the viewer into a singular perspective, but does not discourage the “interpretation and reading” that comes from the viewer's perspective when they are not watching a film. If we are to take into account the presence of the transmasculine viewer, that is, the spectator whose perspective is not taken into account in the dominant sphere of the viewing process, it is necessary to understand that there is a secondary process that emerges from their experience of identification and desire when watching films. That process as it is performed by the transmasculine viewer is informed by and based on their own experiences, which are antithetical to the accepted, dominant or “normative” experience. This is to say that whether the transmasculine viewer identifies with the dominant perspective or not, their own experience as a transmasculine person informs the reading they perform when watching a film, and reveals a space in which they can see themselves, whether they are acknowledged or not. This secondary process, predicated on interpretation, is related to what Staiger calls the alibi of a film. She writes:

The normative description [of a film] does not take into account the alibi. Films are often supposedly about one thing when in fact they are easily read as another. Take, for instance, the classical exploitation films of the 1930s and 1940s. Purportedly presented to educate the viewer, these films were there for spectacles of the taboo, forbidden, and gross. This is where polysemy is to the benefit of both the producers and the viewers.²⁴

This quote is of twofold importance. First, though Staiger is considering the double-entendre of film in

²³ Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, (New York, New York University Press, 2000),15.

²⁴ Ibid, 35.

a historiographical sense, the same concept can be applied to the interpretation of narrative film. Like a novel, the meaning intended by a film—that is, the meaning as it is intended by the author, or in the case of film, the meaning intended by the director—is open to interpretation, and the semiotics of the “text” are present in such a way that facilitates multiple readings. Secondly, this meaning-making is not unrelated to the presence of the “other” viewer. Films are made under the assumption of a particular viewer; sometimes the meaning becomes accessible based on the assumption that the viewer will be knowledgeable enough to understand the symbols (for example, the religious imagery in *Mean Streets*), or the film assumes that the viewer will be a straight male so its intended meaning is predicated on their perspective. That the “other” viewer exists allows for development of alternative readings of any given film, in that the way that those symbols and narratives are synthesized by the viewer is perhaps counter-intuitive, or even just adjacent to, the intended meaning. There are, of course, misreadings of texts, and any viewer may disagree with another on the way that either has interpreted the source, but that is a dialogical question, and not the concern here. Gaze cinema’s usefulness in conceptualizing a queer historiography of looking and viewership is that it allows space for the inclusion of multiple meanings of any given film, and it necessitates the perspective of the spectator and how that perspective impacts the existence of ulterior readings.

Conclusion –

To begin to conceptualize the framework in which the transmasculine viewer operates when watching films it is necessary to understand both Mulvey's work and process of cinematic interpretation as it is related to the viewer's own identity. Breaking open “Visual Pleasure” allows us to expand Mulvey's work and opens up the scopophilic and identificatory, revealing that the two parts of the “male gaze” can function in modes that do not participate in the patriarchal, objectifying look of early 20th century cinema. The empathetic look of the transmasculine viewer searches for identification in films that do not support their representation, and finds room for their viewing processes in films that

are not designed to service them. The success of this look, represented by Staiger's theory of gaze cinema, comes from interpretation of films that is predicated on the transmasculine viewer's actualized identity. These readings transgress the dominant cultural narrative that refuses to acknowledge their presence, and allows for radical reinterpretations of films. This reinterpretation is supported by the constant presence of viewer's who do not fit into the dominant perspective, as well as the implicit movements of Hollywood cinema's development, which reveals an emergent thread that is engages with and signals to the transmasculine viewer that their existence and desire for representation on-screen is valid.

Chapter Two: Emergent Culture and Reinterpretation

In order to establish the context of the transmasculine viewer and the necessity the queer interpretation of films it is necessary to place the transmasculine viewer into a legible context within film history. Using the framework laid out by Raymond Williams in his book *Marxism and Literature*, I will define the terms “residual”, “emergent”, and “dominant” and reorient Williams’ definitions to better suit an analysis of film. The residual social process is placed in relationship with the dominant social process, while emergent tide of culture and process is placed in conflict with the dominant one. These terms are used by Williams to analyze literature, as well as to make sense of the broader historical processes of culture, however one can adapt them in order to apply them to the more niche, but equally cultural, history of cinema. Before establishing how that exchange occurs Williams’ terms must be defined and applied to our context.

Dominant, Residual, and Emergent Threads –

What we will call the “dominant” process is, in Williams’ writing, the “dominant effective” tension which is representative of the broader cultural mindset as it is informed by tradition and the primary class. The primary class is not necessarily the ruling class; rather, it is the people’s majority within which we can base our conceptions of the broader cultural tides that are accepted and enacted by the people. If we were to apply this term to Mulvey’s writing, the “dominant” would be the perspective of the straight, male movie-goer. Films are made for, and catered towards the male audience, and participate reciprocally in narrative structure and storytelling that gels with the assumption of the male viewer as the primary perspective. For the purposes of this analysis, and taking into account the retrospective look that this paper intends to produce, the “dominant” perspective is that of the straight, cisgendered, American movie-goers. Films are thus catered towards their identity, and fail to take into account the presence of an “other” viewer. Returning to Mulvey’s use of Lacan: this disregard for the other viewer skews the mirror’s reflective ability. For the straight audience, the images are a one-to-one

reflection”—their identificatory and scopophilic can be performed without need for interpretation because the film is intended for those acts of looking. For the transmasculine viewer, without the act of interpretation the mirror is warped and the intrinsic film-going act of looking fails. The dominant process does not take into account, nor is it interested in, the presence of the people that move outside of its purview.

The dominant process cannot exist without the presence of the residual process. Williams defines the residual as that which “has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.”²⁵ The residual is that which has already happened; it encompasses the moments and features of culture that, while no longer dominant, are still recalled and influence the creation of the dominant. The residual can be representative of what was formerly dominant and is no longer, or it can be the process that informs what is now dominant, whether it be its source or its justification. For our purposes, the residual, rather than representing a type of viewer as the dominant, represents the relationship of film history to the general practices and trends in the films that will be considered herein. Film, as in any artistic medium, is both informed by the culture at large as well as by itself. Both narratively and technically, it is possible to track the growth and development of film from the silent era, into the talkies of the 20s, into the noirs of the 30s, into the pre and post-war films of the 40s and on. This progression is related to the technical developments of the medium over the last century and change, as well as to the development and presence of tropes and narratives that are common in Hollywood films. The residual refers to film in dialogue with itself and with past cultural tides.

The third aspect of Williams' framework is the emergent which is the term that this project relies most heavily on. Williams first defines the emergent as “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship [that] are continually being created.”²⁶ The

²⁵ Raymond Williams, “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent,” (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 122.

²⁶ Ibid, 123

identification of these new developments are predicated on a holistic understanding of the dominant and residual processes, as the emergent cannot be identified without first identifying that which is primary in the cultural tides. Williams points out that it can be difficult to differentiate between those “elements of some new phase of the dominant culture” and the actual emergent process, that which is “substantially alternative or oppositional” from the dominant culture).²⁷ For Williams, the emergent is represented by an emergent class that exists and acts counter to the dominant process. The new cultural formation that exists around this class and the social behaviors, values, and desires attributed to them challenge the assumed norms and open up new spaces that exist against the dominant. The emergent remains unincorporated in the dominant, but it does not necessarily exist as a feature unacknowledged by the dominant. For our consideration, the emergent is specifically in reference to queer viewer more broadly, and the transmasculine viewer as a specific facet within it, though it can also be applied to the existence of the avant-garde and underground movements in film production.

In order to link the assumption of dominant, residual, and emergent film cultures to this investigation of gaze cinema it serves the purpose of the project to specifically outline what films are being considered in this investigation. This project’s purview lies in the films of the Golden Age of Hollywood, with the primary focus being two films from the the 1970s. These films exist within the dominant film culture; the big-budget studio films that are actively considered a part of the broader film canon, as well as the smaller budget films that were, either soon after their release or more recently, accepted to be part of the broad strokes of Hollywood’s development and the culture surrounding the Hollywood auteurs. In consideration of these two categories the films I have chosen to analyze primarily, as well as to stand as representative of the dominant film culture, are Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1971). *The Deer Hunter* represents the dominant culture tending towards the artistic, auteur-influenced style of major cinema. It is a three hour

²⁷ Ibid, 123

epic, produced by United Artists, standing at the end of the Golden Age of American film, before the now-familiar era of blockbusters and action films that began in the 1980s. *Mean Streets* represents the relationship between major film and the underground cinema. Scorsese is, by now, a household name for technically impressive, symbolically rich cinema that succeeds in this mainstream. His films garner international attention whenever they are released. *Mean Streets* was his major debut, though it was not his first film, and it demonstrates the relationship mainstream films can have to the techniques and subject matter of the avant-garde. Scorsese has noted that he was influenced by Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, a halberd piece of avant-garde, gay cinema from 1963, and his own background in documentary work is evident in the almost ethnographic nature demonstrated by parts of the film.²⁸ Robert Kolker writes in his book *A Cinema of Loneliness*, that Scorsese's work, and the work of his contemporaries, "came as well to stand for the collectivity of film viewers; they created the images in which a culture *consented to see itself*."²⁹ This act of consent as it is performed by the viewer is what is of interest in using these films to try and establish an alternative history of the emergent in this project.

Both of films exist as part of a dominant act of consent that situates them in popular consciousness as representative of the general audience in spite, or perhaps because, of their cultural specificity and the ways in which they represent a certain caliber of what is concerned artistic filmmaking in the mainstream. Cimino's film focalizes its story around a group of steel-workers who come from eastern European backgrounds, tracking their lives in a small industry town, as well as their deployment in Vietnam. Though controversy surrounds the film to this day, Cimino's interest in portraying a specific cultural enclave in rural Pennsylvania strengthens the film's presence, and makes it stand out amongst other films about the Vietnam war. Additionally, the film relies heavily on symbolic meaning, and has a unique five act structure that sets it apart from classical Hollywood narratives and has garnered a great deal of acclaim. Scorsese's film is part of what was intended to the

²⁸ Katrina Onstad, "A Life of Anger," (London, UK, 2006).

²⁹ Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1988), 3, emphasis mine.

second of a trio of semi-autobiographical films that began with Scorsese's first feature, *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* (1967). The film's main character, Charlie (Harvey Keitel), is a proxy for Scorsese, and deals with questions of faith and cultural background that are adapted from Scorsese's own life.³⁰ The film is shot with a semi-documentary, ethnographic style, utilizing handheld camera work, and tells the story in a form that is reminiscent of vignettes. Despite the specificity of the stories portrayed in both of these films, and their unique styles, they are situated within the dominant process of cinema.

In order to make an argument for moving either film into a new conception of the emergent, it is necessary to consider what the emergent represents in reference to film history as I am considering it in this paper. If we are to consider the emergent at a baseline as represented by the movements of underground and avant-garde film, including the advent of an explicitly "queer cinema" around the 1960s, it is important to understand the indistinct technical border between the emergent and the dominant. While the subject matter of the emergent film can be easily situated as counter to the dominant, the techniques employed by these filmmakers are not so easily categorized. The experimental nature of emergent cinema begins to bleed into the mainstream, beginning with the international relationship that the French New Wave has with American cinema. Retrospectively, the French New Wave is what Williams would define as a new trend in the dominant culture. However, at the moment of its inception, the style was alternative and radical, and its influence can be seen across the development of American film during our time period. This, as well as the technical and stylistic experiments that makeup underground cinema in the states, begins to bleed into the stylistic decisions made by directors working in the mainstream. With this adaptation of style certain techniques that are based in or related specifically to a specific content (films that are dealing with subject matter that cannot or will not be shown in the dominant film culture) are taken out of context. By this I mean that

30 Michael Bliss, *Martin Scorsese and Michael Cimino*, (Metuchen, Scorecrow Press, 1985).

the symbols and new techniques that are interrelated with an interest in portraying queerness on-screen are co-opted by major movements of cinema, incidentally or intentionally. This co-opting opens up a space in the dominant cinema wherein the viewer for whom these films are not specifically made for is able to situate themselves as, if not the intended audience, at the very least an audience who the film is addressing covertly. Taking this into account, the presence of implicit or symbolic queerness or transgressive themes in these films becomes a covert signal that the transmasculine viewer can use to find footing in their interpretative look, allowing for their viewing process, as described in the first chapter, can more easily occur.

Incidental Acceptance or the Osmosis of Technique –

Before delving into transgressive readings of *Mean Streets* and *The Deer Hunter* with the transmasculine viewer in mind, I believe it is necessary to broadly justify my claim about the distillation of technique in film. To do this I will first direct our attention to the work of Joan Hawkins' writing about Todd Haynes' work. In her essay from the book *Sleaze Artists*, Hawkins writes that “the fact that so many low culture references occur within the oeuvre of an acknowledged director is telling of Haynes’ relationship to underground film but, more broadly, it is telling of the necessary relationship between high and lowbrow culture. Hawkins is interested in the titular “sleazy pedigree” of Haynes’ films”—that is to say, she is interested in the way that Haynes’ films, acknowledged culturally as representative of, or at least examples of, the culture of art film that arrives in the 90s after the advent of the blockbuster. Haynes’ films intentionally blend the low & highbrow, and this stylistic combination has become a trademark of Haynes’ early style. Hawkins proposes that this blending allows a “cultural reading strategy” that allows us to, quoting Fredric Jameson, “read high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena, as twin and inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under capitalism”.³¹ Hawkins argues that it is not that the

31 Joan Hawkins, “The Sleazy Pedigree of Todd Haynes,” (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007), 191.

high and low must remain separate but, instead, believes that the two combine in order to form some kind of hybrid. This offspring is what she feels is exemplified in Haynes' film style.

It may seem strange to direct our attention to Haynes, whose filmography is exemplary of the New Queer Cinema movement, and deals explicitly with queer subject matter, unlike the films this project is focalized around. However, Haynes' films, and Hawkins' arguments for their "pedigree", opens up a necessary part of the conversation. It points us towards an investigation of thematic and stylistic resonances between the high-brow art and prestige films, and the true low-brow, the sleazy, underground, camp that willingly deals with the messiness of human identification. Haynes represents the director whose intention is to combine aspects of both ends of the cultural spectrum, low and high, but this hybrid phenomenon is not exclusive to his oeuvre. The intentionality behind it is perhaps what is lacking other films where this combination can be detected. The parent films of the hybrid style both engage with a kind of "signaling" to the viewer-- this signaling choreographs what the film and its director is trying to *do*. In the art film the signaling comes from stylistic and narrative that engenders an intellectual viewing process in order to comprehend the full scope of the film. These films are held as exemplary because of their attempts to embody the Lacanian concept of cinema proposed previously; that is, they attempt to serve as reflections of the complex human spirit. It is not just in the characters or the story that this reflection exists; rather the film as a whole, in its style and its substantive execution that allows it, as a whole, to mimic some emotion that feels "real." *The Deer Hunter* and *Mean Streets*, though certainly not exemplary of the same camp style that Haynes' is representative of, also participate in a kind of unintentional signaling. This signaling, represented by an interpretative reading that engages with their potentially queer narratives is what makes them relevant in a consideration of the transmasculine viewer.

Counter to this attempt at realistic feeling, or perhaps a conviction for realism in the fantasy of film, is the other parent, the low-brow film. These are the "sleaze films" that revel in the margins,

creating shock value from their flippant and incendiary handling of politics and style. It is easy to take these films for that alone-- they peddle in the realms of sexploitation, brutality, and the gross-out with the intent of showing that which has been deemed wrong to show. But, to take them solely for that discounts the curious nature of their intent. In approaching that subject matter which is deemed inappropriate by the dominant culture, these films situate themselves comfortably in the emergent. They operate counter to the acceptable, and that radical transgression lends them a weight that is not often considered. It is this focus on showing the culturally un-showable that is of interest here.

Staiger counts these sleaze films as necessary examples of her theory of cinematic alibi. She briefly touches on the original exploitation films of the 30s and 40s. These films were intended to be educational works, and functioned in an almost documentarian style in order to show their taboo subject matter. The explicitly transgressive nature of this example does not take into account the other features that a film's alibi can attempt to conceal. The alibi of a film is predicated on an assumption of the normative viewer, normative as a whole being synonymous with our established definition of the dominant. The alibi as a device is designed to conceal something from the normative viewer, and is used as an overlay on the dominant or normative assumption of what a film should be. This eliminates the assumption of an alternate viewer. To quote Staiger at length:

The normative description does not take into account a variety of viewers. Several ways to approach this point exist, but as an example let me point out that textual characters have multiple attributes: age, race/ethnicity, biological sex, gender, sexual preference, occupation, national identity. A character might do certain acts, but a viewer may associate those acts with any one of the attributes of the character's identity. For instance, a cop in command may turn dirty work over to subordinates who are Chicanos. The Anglo, working-class reader may understand this as the "top" man's avoidance of dirty work rather than as an act implicated in racial discourse.³²

To an extent, the argument to be made here is not even one of unintentional symbolism, rather it is an

32 Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, 39.

argument for acknowledging the nature of film as having multiple potential readings embedded in its form. While the alibi of a film may exist in order to code a film's real intent in a way that is intelligible for the audience who is keyed into the signals it provides there are also films that, sans an alibi, still choreograph unintended meaning through symbols, narrative choices, and characters that have the potential to mean different things when you allow room for a viewer other than the dominant one. Thus, where we might normally consider the analysis above as relevant only for the specific dichotomy of sleaze versus commercial/Hollywood films, it can be broadened to consider aspects of emergent culture, like queerness, that are underrepresented or ignored in the dominant, and are revealed through a process of interpretation.

It is not radical to suggest that there is room for multiple interpretations of a film however, when dealing with films focalized on representations of masculinity with the intent of opening up space for a queer reading the territory becomes fraught. There is a defensiveness around representations of homosexuality and the idea that figures in films that are bastions of cinematic masculinity might, in fact, be easily read as queer is receives pushback from the dominant reception. It is here where the latter investigation comes to its head. While queer filmmakers intentionally cull material and stylistic decisions from both ends of the cultural spectrum, engaging with both high and low, dominant and emergent culture, the dominant film industry purports to exist solely as dominant. The relationship that the emergent has with the dominant is mitigated or disavowed entirely. I would argue that, in part, this disavowal comes from a fear of accepting the queerness implicit in the emergent culture, but fails to recognize that queer people have always been viewers and participants in film culture, making them, and their perspective, impossible to extricate from the nature and experience of filmgoing. Richard Dyer, in his partial history of gays and lesbians in cinema, writes "it is no accident that gays were central to the development of the tradition as a whole."³³ Dyer asserts that queer culture represents a

33 Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, (London, Routledge, 1990), 104.

rejection of “mainstream US life in general,” and that queerness naturally made its way into, especially, the underground cinema whose concerns “with personal identity, with self disclosure, with gender roles, with subversiveness” were particularly relevant to a gay context.³⁴ Thus, the two were artistically married, and queerness found its way into film in a more explicit context.

This link between queerness and the underground brings us back to the primary films of this investigation, *Mean Streets* and *The Deer Hunter*. Scorsese explicitly notes the influence underground film had on his own early work. Before he was a blockbuster filmmaker, Scorsese was making films with his fellow students at NYU Tisch, working in the same place and at the same time as many major underground filmmakers.³⁵ In an examination of Anger, established as one of Scorsese’s influences, and a major influence on *Mean Streets*, Dyer writes that his film *Fireworks* (Anger 1947) was “highly disciplined, with a coherent, decipherable symbolic structure. It plays with space and time, but rigorously and in a manner that is only possible on the basis of *understanding the rules of mainstream film-making*.”³⁶ Underground cinema’s stylistic transgressions are predicated on an understanding of how mainstream film works. To use a colloquialism, one must know the rules before they can break them. *Mean Streets* is clearly operating in the dominant film structure, but Scorsese’s interest in experimentation, coming out of an interest in the underground and experimental, begs the question, does the diffusion of mainstream into the underground in order to break the rules go both ways? Kolker writes that the “brief freedom” that Scorsese and his contemporaries felt was “really a freedom to be alone within a structure that momentarily entertained some experimentation.”³⁷ But this freedom did not really come in isolation, and Scorsese learned tricks from those experimental films that came before him. What I would propose is that, intentional or not, in taking from the emergent film culture, there is a diffusion of queerness that makes its way into the mainstream, sometimes without the intention of the

34 Ibid, 104.

35 Bliss, *Martin Scorsese*.

36 Dyer, *Now You See It*, 103.

37 Kolker, *Cinema of Loneliness*, 9.

directors at all. This diffusion occurs through the mainstream director's interest in replicating or playing in the sandbox of the experimental director, who is frequently a queer director. Without meaning to, mimicking this style is also mimicking a film form that is at its base queer. This opens up space for the transmasculine viewer to begin to find reflections of themselves where they were never intended. This is not to say that these films are explicitly queer without realizing they are. Rather, it is that there is material within them that can easily be read as queer, some of which comes from this diffusion of style, that allows for a grounded interpretation of that material as symbolically and implicitly queer.

Conclusion –

If the the inciting force of this project is to establish a working outline for taking into account a transmasculine viewer when thinking through theories of viewership and film, it may seems strange to pivot the analysis towards establishing the validity of “queer” readings of the two films mentioned previously using the framework of the dominant and emergent. The generality of the term queer includes the transmasculine person in its broad definition however, having a “queer” film does not necessarily mean that a trans viewer is taken into account, nor that transgender characters are represented. Though queer representation in popular cinema has increased markedly, in terms of relative representation, transgender people are rarely acknowledged on screen. GLAAD's 2019 “Studio Responsibility Index”, an annual survey of 7 major Hollywood studios that accounts for LGBT representation, notes that of the 110 major studio films considered in the survey, there was no representation of transgender characters.³⁸ Reading trans characters into a film when they are not already represented is also a complicated process, especially when the reinterpretation of films as queer in sexuality but still normative in gender is still contested even if that reading is substantiated implicitly by the text of the film. Rather than reinterpret these films as “trans”, I would pose that there is a

³⁸ Sarah Kate Ellis, “GLAAD 2019 Studio Responsibility Index,” 11.

correlative relationship between the queering of relationships of men on screen and the transmasculine gaze. The transmasculine viewer is comfortably situated in the emergent, and if we are to read queerness into the dominant, a reading that there is an established, interpretative framework for, we can use that reading to elucidate the viewing process of the transmasculine viewer.

Chapter Three: Reading the Transmasculine Viewer

To preface the interpretive analysis portion of this project in reference to establishing the transmasculine viewer, it is necessary to pivot back to Mulvey's use of Lacan, and the identificatory gaze as a facet of film viewing. The ability to read a male-lead film as queer opens up space in which the transmasculine viewer can better participate in the identificatory view. Instead of identifying as a cis-male viewer in order to participate actively in watching a film, the inclusion of queerness allows for a different dimension of masculinity to emerge, one that is less oriented around the scopophilic look directed towards women. This queering of the eye allows for the scopophilic look to fall directly on the men and, in treating the active characters as objects of desire, the subject of the look is transformed, marrying the two types of looking and radicalizing the viewer. In treating the male characters simultaneously as desirous as well as the subject that the transmasculine viewer identifies with they do not have to take on the perspective of the straight, cis male. A new space emerges that belongs to them. This is analogous to the radical process that occurs when a female viewer chooses to identify with the female character, subject of the male viewer's scopophilic look, and treats the male character as an object of desire. Both of these viewing processes are transgressive looks that work against the asserted male perspective of film.

In asserting this transgressive looking as it is performed by the transmasculine viewer there are specific aspects of the films presented here that should take priority in the analysis. They offer space in which the transmasculine viewer can assert their gaze in a way that is supported by the structure of the film. I have chosen four that I believe serve to support a theory of transmasculine viewership most wholly. I will present these aspects as hypotheses initially, establish my argument for each, and then attempt to analyze how they function in the two films. The first is that the eye of the camera is one that is desirous for the male character, supporting the scopophilic look towards men; second, that the representation of various types of masculinity in the male-dominated film open up space in which the

transmasculine viewer can better situate themselves within the identificatory process; third, that the erotic triangulation of two male characters and a female love interest, functioning as a displacement of homoerotic desire, which also engages with the scopophilic look of the transmasculine viewer; and fourth, that the implementation of violence is a proxy for sexuality between men and allows for a combination of the identificatory and the scopophilic for the transmasculine viewer. These four elements can be found in both *Mean Streets* and *The Deer Hunter*, and are arguably integral to the way the films function and are framed.

[1] The desirous eye of the camera is an extrapolation of Mulvey's work in "Visual Pleasure." The realization of the male viewer's identificatory gaze is facilitated by the camera's veneration of the male form. Actors on screen embody idealized masculinity, representing power and active ability. They serve as the proxy for the male viewer. The camera enacts the desire that the male viewer feels in relation to this character so that the male viewer does not have to enact the desire himself. The camera performs the erotic looking, capturing the body of the male character so that the male viewer can actively engage with the identificatory process without affiliating it with desire. Rather, he projects himself into the male character and can ignore the impetus for that projection because it is embodied by the camera. The desire for the men on screen is displaced onto the mechanism of the film itself and is disassociated from the viewer. For the transmasculine viewer the desirous camera gives permission for their scopophilic gaze. The transmasculine look at the man on-screen is a combination of both of Mulvey's forms of looking – it is at once scopophilic, desire for the man, and identificatory, desire to be like the man. That the camera is permissive of this desire negates what would be the transgressive gaze of the transmasculine viewer. The camera explicitly allows for the transmasculine viewer to exist as a viewer independent of the male or female viewer, and participates in the same process that the transmasculine viewer does.

[2] The relevancy of varied representations of masculinity to the transmasculine viewer is

primarily in its relation to the identificatory process. In Mulvey's framework the identificatory process for the male viewer necessitates that the male character he identifies with is the active character in the film. His role as bearer of the film's story, as well as being the primary perspective through which the viewer experiences the film, are the two necessary factors for the male viewer to identify with him. The identificatory process for the male viewer is based on desire for power over narrative and power over the female characters. His unbridled eye is facilitated by the film's structure. As we have established in expanding on the desirous camera's eye and its relation to the transmasculine viewer, the transmasculine viewer desires to *be like* the man on screen. This does not necessarily mean that the transmasculine viewer desires to be in control of the narrative, thus they do not necessarily identify with the main point of view character in a film. This opens up space for what kind of male character this viewer identifies with. Rather than being a look about desire for power, the transmasculine desire for identification can be about more than one thing. It is desire *for* the person on screen and the type of masculinity he represents, rather than for the man on screen to represent the power they desire. Thus, secondary male characters, who do not bear the burden of carrying the story, or unconventional or reluctant male characters who do not demonstrate the expected standard of the male hero, might appeal to the transmasculine viewer. This is not to say that the traditional depictions of masculinity do not also appeal to them. Rather, the identificatory process is predicated on a more personal, empathic desire. The feeling of '*I see myself as or in this character*' is more relevant to the transmasculine viewer in their identificatory process than the feeling of '*this character represents the power I can or do hold in the world.*'

One necessary feature in the varied representations of male characters that allows for transmasculine identification is the presence of what film theorist Sarah Hagelin calls cinematic languages of vulnerability. In her book, *Reel Vulnerability*, Hagelin's analysis of male vulnerability on screen is designed as a response to Mulvey's effect on cinema criticism. Hagelin writes: "since the

moment Laura Mulvey labeled the camera's gaze as an assault, film criticism—like culture—has equated vulnerability with femaleness.”³⁹ Hagelin attempts to reorient cinematic conceptions of vulnerability away from women to negate the victim status that women are attributed. Her analysis of male cinematic vulnerability originates out of the moment “when filmmakers challenging the authority of the Production Code censors begin to work through more explicit representations of male vulnerability.” This moment, beginning after World War II, continues with “a new ideology that emerges around the American soldier as a psychological casualty of war.”⁴⁰ She labels this new cinematic vulnerability as “resistant vulnerability” which represents “not victorious but penetrable men.”⁴¹ These “penetrable men,” these vulnerable, failing, affected men who are represented by actors like Marlon Brando and Robert DeNiro, pioneers of the Stanislavskian Method, represent an embodied, and imperfect masculinity. Hagelin's analysis is relevant, additionally, because of its emphasis on Method acting style. The Method is associated with films of the 1970s and is explicit in *The Deer Hunter*. Hagelin notes that:

Debates about acting style are important to an investigation of vulnerability because they question audience access to the body and emotions of the performer and the extent to which we are invited in to (or denied access to) identification with the image onscreen...I see the Method and the visual and vocal strategies it enshrines as both defensively “realist” and the central technique through which American popular culture will construct vulnerability on screen...⁴²

This framing of vulnerability both as intrinsically related to performance style, as well as to the viewer's ability to identify with the image or character on-screen provides grounds for the claim that vulnerability is a necessary aspect of the new kind look posed herein. If the transmasculine look is informed by a more emotional and empathic identificatory process, the presence of on-screen masculine vulnerability reveals a space in which the emotional identificatory is supported by the

³⁹ Sarah Hagelin, *Reel Vulnerability*, (London, Routledge, 2008), 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁴¹ Ibid, 23.

⁴² Ibid, 28.

visualization of emotion and penetrability.

Part of Hagelin's analysis of the vulnerable male is focalized around an analysis of *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Pierce, 1999). Here she quotes extensively Jack Halberstam's theory of the transgendered gaze, which Halberstam defines as a “gaze constituted as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from two places (at least) at the same time, one clothed and one naked.” Halberstam writes this in response to the scene in *Boys Don't Cry* when the main character, the transgender man Brandon Teena, is assaulted by two men. Teena sees himself as he is looked at, naked, by his assaulters. Halberstam writes that in this moment, when Teena is both himself as he is and is seen as his body, which is exposed as “female”, that “he is the Brandon to whom the audience is now sutured, a figure who combines momentarily the activity of looking with the passivity of the spectacle.”⁴³ This combined gaze is analogous to the definition of the transmasculine gaze posed in the first chapter. Halberstam's transgendered gaze is predicated on a recognition of the vulnerability of the transgender perspective specific to seeing transgender bodies on screen treated as both the active and the passive. In this analysis, the transmasculine viewer, while also interested in vulnerability, is afforded validity through acknowledgement of cis-male vulnerability. The transmasculine viewer contests the idea that “female” bodies are vulnerable bodies and, in presenting vulnerable men on screen, they can access a space wherein the vulnerability they might feel in life is validated within the body of the person on-screen that they identify with. Not only does it permit them to embody feelings as a viewer, it also gives them radical power to participate actively in a desiring gaze for the men on-screen, because the vulnerable male is a male that is framed by the film as desirable.

The desire for the vulnerable male is further elucidated by Hagelin's reference to critic Kristen Hatch's analysis of Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951). Hatch writes that *Streetcar* reverses the camera's gaze and positions Brando as “a feminine object of the gaze.”⁴⁴ This

43 Jack Halberstam, “The Transgender Look,” (New York, New York University Press), 88.

44 Kristen Hatch, “Movies and the New Faces of Masculinity,” (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2005), 57.

feminization renders Brando as “an erotic object” and strips Brando of his masculinity and, according to Hatch, of his heterosexuality. Hatch labels Brando a “disruptive body” in that he breaks the mode of the gaze that Mulvey establishes in “Visual Pleasure.” His body commands the erotic, which is dictated as feminine, while still being recognizably *male* in its presentation. It is this confusion of the feminine and masculine that is especially relevant. The vulnerable man operates in an androgynous space within the epistemology of the film. Though he can, and often is, the active figure as well as the central character, he is also framed by the camera as something beautiful to be looked at and is shown as fallible. The acknowledgement of the sexual fluidity of the man on screen, capable of being erotic and feminized, as well as being the active perspective holder of the film implicitly gives permission for the transmasculine viewer's gaze. They can find footing in the craggy, imperfect representation of fallible masculinity and are allowed and encouraged by the camera to look with desire.

[3] The third aspect relevant to considering the transmasculine viewer is also focalized around filmic enactment of desire. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick originally developed her concept of the erotic triangle in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick's focus on homosociality, which focalizes as male desire for other men and includes the erotic, though not necessarily consummated, sexuality of homosocial relationships is relevant here because it embodies the identificatory aspect of the transmasculine gaze. The identificatory gaze is desirous for what the body represents without negating the presence of the scopophilic gaze which is desirous for the body itself. The erotic triangle “schematizes erotic relations,” and helps to organize the multivalent relationship between men in narrative work.⁴⁵ Sedgwick's argument begins with the work of René Girard and the proposal that “in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent.”⁴⁶ Thus the

45 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles,” (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003), 21.

46 Ibid, 21.

argument made is validates the equivalent strength of the relationship between the men with one another as with the female character they pursue. Here, the erotic triangle demonstrates the desire of two parties for one receptive party, while those same two parties engage in an equally intense relationship with one another predicated on their competition over the third party, but exclusive to them. Sedgwick's analysis of the erotic triangle is also intrinsically related to the establishment and upholding of patriarchal power, but the interest here lies more specifically in the erotic aspects of the schematic, rather than the way that the male relationships pertain to and organize patriarchal power structures. Girard's triangle addresses the intensity of the relationship between the two participating men, but does not address the potential erotics of that relationship. Sedgwick notes that the symmetrical formation of the triangle necessitates “*supressing* the subjective, historically determined account of which feelings are or are not part of the body of 'sexuality.'”⁴⁷ This suppression negates the acknowledgement of the potential sexuality in the homosocial dynamic that makes up one side of the triangle. Formulating a schematic in which the erotics between the male participants in the triangle *is explicitly* acknowledged opens up space for the transmasculine viewer because it engages in the space in which the homosocial, which can be transcribed onto the transmasculine identificatory desire to *be like* or to *be with*, conjoins with the homoerotic, which is a component of the transmasculine scopophilic gaze. In addition, Sedgwick notes that

The place of drawing the boundary between the sexual and the not-sexual, like the place of drawing the boundary between *the realms of the two genders*, is variable, but is *not* arbitrary...the placement of the boundaries in a particular society affects not merely the definitions of those terms themselves—sexual/nonsexual, masculine/feminine—but also the apportionment of forms of power that are not obviously sexual.⁴⁸

The origin of the erotic triangle is equally predicated on normalized sexual dynamics, as well as normative gender positions. In “queering” the triangle in order to account for the non-traditional

⁴⁷ Ibid, 22.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 22.

viewer, in this case the transmasculine viewer, the power structures that the triangle both supports and, in part represents, are broken down. Explicitly addressing the queer sexuality present in the erotic tingle breaks down the oppressive power structures it supports and allows the transmasculine viewer, who operates in an androgynous space and thus cannot and does not participate in the gendered power structures of the filmic gaze that Mulvey proposes, to engage with a space in which the unaddressed queer subject can find footing. This dynamic will become more clear in addressing it within the specific analyses of the films, but the essential point is that the presence of the erotic triangle, and addressing the displacement of sexuality and erotics in that triangle, opens up a space that validates the transgression of the transmasculine viewer and the desire embodied in their gaze.

[4] Before establishing the argument for the fourth and final facet of these films that my analyses will be based on it is important to address the problematic aspects of linking violence and sexual expression. The films addressed here demonstrate a clear link between violence and homoerotic desire, violence often representing a symbolic and terminal realization of that desire. While this representation is obviously a damaging way to present men's sexual desire for each other it also makes up an obvious epistemology of the filmic closet and exists as an identifiable, frequently analyzed aspect of representations of masculine desire. The presence of violence both admits to the presence of the homoeroticism and terminates its existence, enacting a residual effect of the Hays Code's disavowal of representations of homosexuality in film. It openly addresses the erotics of male proximity, allowing men to be in contact with and open to one another. The violence serves to symbolically represent sexual release without explicit representation and frequently results in the destruction of the relationship or of one of the acting parties. Its presence is an attempt to limit the ability of the viewer to imagine the actualized realization of male homoerotics and homosexuality.

While this might discourage the queer viewer from engaging with a film that only addresses the existence of queer desire through violence, I would argue that the marriage of violence with sexuality

offers a coded space in which the queer viewer can witness themselves and their own desires on screen, whether the film intends to allow that acknowledgement or not. In his essay “Tarantino's Incarnational Theology” Kent Brintnall writes:

In the war film, a soldier can hold his buddy—as long as his buddy is dying on the battlefield. In the western, Butch Cassidy can wash the Sundance Kid's naked flesh—as long as it is wounded. In the boxing film, a trainee can rub the well-developed torso and sinewy back of his protégé—as long as it is bruised. In the crime film, a mob lieutenant can embrace his boss like a lover—as long as he is riddled with bullets. Violence makes the homoeroticism of many “male” genres invisible; it is a structural mechanism of plausible deniability.⁴⁹

It is this “structural mechanism of plausible deniability” that I mean to imply when describing the coded space that can exist for the queer viewer. Brintnall writes this in response to Steve Neale's essay “Masculinity as Spectacle”⁵⁰ in which Neale posits, in response to Mulvey's work, that the image of an eroticized male figure in cinema is not only possible but supported by the “mechanisms mainstream Hollywood cinema uses to represent the male body.”⁵¹ What Mulvey's analysis does not take into account is that by putting the male body in a position to be adored and aspired to he is framed in a way that makes him desirable. This desirability is not relegated solely to the world of the identificatory and it gives space for the man to be *wanted* in an erotic sphere. Neale sees this desire as something enacted on the male character through the mode of violence. In enacting violence on the male body on-screen he is able to be touched and considered without admitting to the treatment of him as an object of desire. The residual space left by the displacement of this attraction is the space in which the transmasculine gaze is situated. The unwillingness to admit to attraction doubles as an aspect of the identificatory process. Violence makes the man on screen vulnerable, further opening up the already mechanized space in which identification occurs with the male character and the transmasculine viewer, seeking spaces in which they can realize their desire to empathize with and embody masculinity, find that space

49 Kent L. Brintnall, “Tarantino's Incarnational Theology,” (CrossCurrents, Spring 2004), 72.

50 Neale, Steve, “Prologue: Masculinity as Spectacle,” (London, Routledge, 2008).

51 Brintnall, “Tarantino's,” 72.

in the aftermath of violence. In addition, as Neale and Brintnall both note, the violence and its aftermath give permission for any viewer to address an erotic desire for the male body. For the transmasculine viewer, this moment becomes an admission to their presence as a viewer and allows them to fully engage with their scopophilic mode of looking.

In addition to these acts of violence serving as a mode of sexualization of the male character they also position the man as a victim to violence. Victimhood is most commonly associated with the female character. Aligning the male character with the role of the victim, which occurs when he is subjected to acts of violence, acts as a feminizing force, positioning the man in an archetypically androgynous space. Returning to the analysis of vulnerable masculinity, Hagelin notes that the violent actions of men necessitate the “shuffling of female characters offscreen at moments of conflict or heightened emotion...assumes a sentimental vulnerability in which men perform violence in defense of offscreen women.”⁵² Here, the woman is clearly framed as a potential victim, and she is removed from the scenario so that the man can assert himself as someone who can both perform violence in defense of the woman and can face violence without being victim to it. The erotics of violence performed on the male body on screen, however, complicates the man's ability to face violence without being feminized. The camera's idolization of the male form is a feminizing gaze that negates the masculine position of power. Hatch, again, exemplifies this feminization in her writing about Brando, referencing the awareness of this feminization that actors had in the moment of Brando's rise to star status. Hatch writes:

During the filming of *The African Queen*, in which Humphrey Bogart's chest is also exposed, Bogart is reported to have directed the cameraman, Jack Cardiff, “Listen Jack—you see my face. It's got a lot of lines and wrinkles on it. I've been cultivating them for years, and I like them. They are me—so don't try and light them out and make me look like a goddam fag” (Meyers 244). Bogart's objections clearly indicate the degree to which the techniques

⁵² Hagelin, *Reel Vulnerability*, 27.

established for highlighting a woman's beauty—using lighting and camera angles to erase imperfections—were understood to undermine a man's virility when applied to him, threatening to make him “look like a goddam fag.” In contrast to Bogart's grizzled image in *The African Queen*, Brando's face in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is rendered beautiful. His skin appears smooth, his lips full and sensuous. This representation produced what several viewers perceived as a tension between his muscular build and his beautiful face.⁵³

While Hatch's writing does not orient itself around an analysis of violence in film, her observations about cinematic techniques here are relevant to the framing of this argument. If we believe the assertion that the techniques used to highlight “a woman's beauty” are used in a similar way to highlight the obsession with and valorization of the male star, then there is a tangible technique that dictates how the camera frames bodies on film in order to elevate them to the position of a sexual object. This technique highlights physical beauty, but its association with the feminine reveals a vulnerability to the men on whom it is applied. Ultimately, the vulnerability of men on-screen, whether it is in their appearance or in bearing witness to violence enacted them, reveals a facet of masculinity that is not often considered when thinking about the idealized masculinity of male characters. If we take this new facet of male vulnerability into serious consideration, in addition to the latter facets and their relevancy for a queer reading, the man on-screen becomes a more porous subject for identification, and validates the non-traditional masculinity exemplified in the transmasculine viewer.

⁵³ Hatch, “Faces of Masculinity,” 58.

The Deer Hunter: Triangulation, Delicate Men, and Tragic Adoration

A Brief Introduction

In attempting to begin any analytical work of *The Deer Hunter* it is necessary to touch on, at least briefly, the perplexing and disturbing subject matter that the film presents. The Legacy edition of the film's DVD release describes the film as following “a group of Pennsylvania steelworkers from their blue-collar lives, hunting in the woods of the Alleghenies, to the hells of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam war.” Ostensibly *The Deer Hunter* is just another war movie, albeit one with a notably longer runtime and a unique narrative structure. The film, running at about three hours, ruminates on themes about trauma, home, and homosocial relationships, ultimately presenting an argument against the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. *Cimino's* film revels in the brutality of the landscape of Vietnam, insuring that the viewer is incapable of forgetting the horrors faced by the young men who were sent out of their homes to die. Despite what seems to be an obvious disavowal of the war the film also revels in portraying the Vietnamese as brutal savages who serve not as examples of the humans on the other side of a horrifying conflict, but as plot devices and caricatures that service what is, arguably, the film's most famous element: the russian roulette sequences. This vitriolic portrayal of the Vietnamese has rightfully garnered a great deal of criticism. However, I would argue that the unrealistic portrayal of the Vietnamese is not the only part of the film that is unrealistic or dishonest to the actual history of the war. This is not to say it is not reprehensible because of its lack of historicity, but the fantasy of the war as Cimino presents it is used to exaggerate the mythic quality of the story and heighten the film's symbolic themes. As many other critics have noted, there are no documented instances of the Vietnamese playing, or forcing POW soldiers to play, games of russian roulette. In addition, the timeline of the main characters' enlisting is unclear. Though the script notes that film begins in 1968, there is no reference in the film itself to this timeline. Other than Michael rescuing Nick during the fall of Saigon, the film operates in a space that is disembodied from real time. By 1968, the

war effort was well underway, as were the protests against the war and the widespread cultural disavowal of it. It appears that Clairton, the rural steeltown in Pennsylvania where the three men are from, operates outside of time. Other than Steven's mother's concern at her son's departure, there is no reference to the cultural knowledge that the men being sent to Vietnam were being sent towards known devastation. Even Nick, Michael, and Steven's encounter with the Green Beret during the wedding sequence is framed as a part of the mythic set-up for the film. Like the drop of wine that falls onto Steven's bride's dress, an omen for his inevitable fate, the Green Beret is like a harbinger of death, an unheeded warning to the three men, and hardly representative of the reality of the soldiers' return. That return in the film is riddled with tragedy, trauma, and dysfunction.

Though its commitment to an imaginary landscape of war does not negate the dangerous implications of the racist portrayals of the Vietnamese characters in the film, the obfuscation of its position in the public history of the Vietnam War creates a space in which *The Deer Hunter* is ultimately a movie about the men's relationships to one another as they move back and forth between the spaces of Clairton and Vietnam, rather than functioning as a film *about* the war and embroiling itself in gritty, almost documentary-like realities. The film itself is structured in order to elucidate the heightened differences between those two spaces. The film can be broken into five distinct acts. The first act introduces Clairton and the men who live there, and culminates with a bombastic wedding sequence and the first deer hunt of the film; the second act is Michael, Nick, and Steven's tour in Vietnam, culminating in the first Russian Roulette sequence; the third is Michael's return home, without Nick and with a crippled Steven; fourth is Michael's final return to Vietnam at the end of the war, in an attempt to rescue Nick from what is quickly revealed to be his sealed fate; fifth is Michael's return home, focalized around a memorial for their fallen friend.

These five distinct sections help, primarily, to set up a dichotomy between the two main settings of the film and, within that dichotomy, utilize the landscape to help elucidate the psychological changes

of the characters. In analyzing the film in reference to the hypothesis of transmasculine viewership the changes that are most relevant to track are those of three characters: Michael, Nick, and Linda. Michael is a bastion of repression and masculinity; Nick is his gentler counterpart, doomed to die in Vietnam; and Linda is the caveat to their relationship, embodying a love for the two men that they cannot realize with each other. In his analysis of the film Robin Wood notes, amongst the myriad of problematic and tangled aspects of the film, that:

The most problematic aspect of *The Deer Hunter*, the most difficult to get a secure purchase on, is its treatment of sexuality. Certainly, one has a strong sense that the film is blocked from doing what it wants to do (not necessarily to be equated with what Cimino wanted it to do: its logic derives from the movement of culture as much as from an individual sensibility).⁵⁴

I would argue that the admission of “the most problematic aspect” of the film being its relationship to sexuality definitively opens up space for a queer reading of the film that is, if we are to believe Wood's assertion, supported by the film itself. This queer reading exists in the hyper-masculine, homosocial world that the film constructs and allows space for the viewer who is not one of those men to engage with it. This does not negate the maleness of the film, but allows the gaze to be oriented towards towards the transmasculine viewer who, in the queerness inherent in the text, finds their gaze not only accepted but supported.

In addition to this implicit acceptance, Wood's note about “the movement of culture” as part of the film's desire to do something it is blocked from works in tandem with Wood's own reference to Williams' analysis of dominant and emergent tensions and fits neatly in the argument made in chapter two. In the case of *The Deer Hunter*, the dominant culture is evident in the film's classification as a war drama. Here, the homosocial / homoerotic subtext of the film and the centralization of Michael and Nick's relationship is grouped in with their relationships with other men, negating the primacy of their homophilic bond and its romantic and sexual implications. Instead, it is just '*boys being boys*' and the

⁵⁴ Robin Wood, “Two Films by Michael Cimino,” (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003), 259.

film can operate within the bias of the dominant, disengaging from the clandestine, doomed love story that underlies the main plot. If the emergent is truly associated with a queering of cultural tides, then the film is centralized around that which it “wants to do”: to engage with the reality of Michael and Nick's relationship with one another, a relationship that is doubtlessly charged beyond homosociality. Linda's presence in this dichotomy between the dominant reading of the film and the emergent is to serve either as a reason to disbelieve the emergent or as a confirmation of Michael and Nick's desire for one another. In the dominant reading, Linda's relationship with Nick and her subsequent relationship with Michael disproves the two men's interest in one another. If we accept an emergent reading of the film Michael's interest in Linda is a displacement of his interest in Nick and Nick's interest in Linda is an attempt to normalize into the dominant culture, an attempt that ultimately fails on both ends. I will elucidate this relationship more in the section on erotic triangulation in the film. Ultimately, the film operates in a space that is conducive to the emergent culture, a point that will be made more clear within the specific analysis of the four aspects introduced above. These points continue to prove the underlying, homophilic narrative that the film engages with as well as serve to provide examples for how those features help to reveal the gaze of the transmasculine viewer.

[1] *He Was So Beautiful* –

Ostensibly, it is Meryl Streep's Linda onto whom the camera's desirous frame should land if we are to believe Mulvey's thesis. Linda is first shown to the viewer standing beside a mirror. She prepares for Steven's wedding, dressed in her bridal party gown, carrying a tray of food for her father who is shown reflected in the mirror, gazing out over the town while he mumbles under his breath. Though Linda is not shown reflected in the mirror, she is visually associated with it, the two paired by their interaction with her father. The mirror contains the image of him, framing his slumped figure, and is additionally framed within the window that opens out onto the town. Linda is framed in the doorway to the room, entering into a closed space from a dark void that, to our knowledge, leads nowhere. Already

the dynamic between the two is clear. Linda is depicted within the traditional role of the woman, serving the figure of the fallen man. Her father, dressed in worn plaid and denim, the uniform of the working man, is clearly incapacitated but still represents an idea of masculinity, if a decayed one. He is permitted to gaze out onto the world that used to be his to move through freely, while Linda is confined to the darkness of the house. Through visual cues the dynamic between the passive female, demonstrated through service, and the active (or in this case formerly active) man, shown through his reception of service and his position as looking out over the world, works within the framework Mulvey presents in her argument. This introduction further serves Mulvey's thesis by showing Linda as a victim at the hands of her father. Mumbling nonsensical, violent words under his breath, she tries to move him from the window to the bed, negating his visual ownership over the landscape, and he strikes her. This physical action, paired with the framing of the two characters, works with the two parts of Mulvey's male gaze. While Linda is not explicitly objectified in this scene—her dress does not sexualize her, and the camera does not highlight her form or beauty—she is still a light in the face of the denigrated masculinity of her father's room. Compared to him she is beautiful and gentle, clearly made passive by her role in their relationship, and thus becomes subject to eroticized looking. Combined with the violence committed by her father, the film asserts that she is passive and vulnerable. Linda is not the character for whom the identificatory look can or will fall. Her father, however, shows the disgraced ideal of the identificatory look. The formerly powerful man who, despite his incapacitation, still rules the space.

The assumption of Linda as the object of the eroticized look of the camera, clearly indicated by her introductory status as victim and the first realized example of a young, beautiful female character in an already dominantly-male movie is turned on its head almost immediately. The next time the viewer sees Linda she is coming around the corner of Nick and Mike's trailer while the men prepare for the wedding. She has a black eye and her coat is wrapped tightly around her body like armor. She pulls

Nick away from the group, attempts to explain herself, and breaks into tears. The pair move to the side, away from the other men, to speak. Already, the framing of Linda has changed. There are no close-ups of her face, no attempt to highlight the aftermath of the violence enacted on her at the hands of her father. She carries a cumbersome suitcase in her hand, refusing Nick's help to carry it when they move to the side of the trailer. When the two speak to one another, they are once again framed in a window, paired in conversation. Both of their faces are obscured by the lateral stripes of dirt on the window of the trailer and we view their conversation from inside, listening in. Linda's face, and her injury, are obscured. Nick towers over her and more often we get a clear view of his face, flitting between expressions of frustration, concern, and acceptance. When Linda asks Nick if she can stay in the trailer, she asserts that she will pay him, and doesn't cede to his response. He says "It's me you're talking to. How long have you known me for?" The interaction doesn't assert their romantic relationship and Nick, grasping Linda's face in his hands, touches her in a way that registers as no different from any of the tactile expressions of affection shown between the men. Here, Linda is presented on even footing with Nick despite the established assumption which would tell the viewer that we should see her as an object of desire.

Additionally, the voyeuristic look of the camera in this scene is mimicking Michael's look. He is inside of the trailer while Nick and Linda speak and he watches the whole interaction covertly. Though Nick does not treat Linda in an objectifying manner, the viewer could assume that it is Michael's look that treats Linda as an object. However, at this point in the film Michael and Linda have not interacted with one another and there is no indication that he would have any reason to be looking at her. Instead, the context of Michael's observation is that he is looking at Nick. Prior to Linda's arrival, Michael and Nick speak candidly with one another in the trailer about their departure for Vietnam. The conversation nearly becomes fight, beginning with Michael criticizing Nick for his lack of preparedness and ending, ultimately, in a veiled confession of attachment. Michael tells Nick "I

wouldn't hunt with anyone but you. I like guys with quick moves and speed. I won't hunt with an asshole.” This scene highlights Nick and Michael's relationship, establishing their relationship as, at least on Michael's end, associated with “one shot,” Michael's life philosophy that extends itself out of the deer hunt and across the film. Though Michael assures Nick that he “loves the other guys,” the scene is specifically about them and culminates with Michael's assurance that, were it not for Nick, he would not hunt. The hunt stands in as a metaphor for the social dynamics of the group as a whole. The hunt is the ritual within which the men's friendships are centralized and Michael's admission to the necessity of Nick within that ritual sets their relationship with one another apart from their relationship with the group. The scene operates with a traditional shot-reverse-shot structure, highlighting Michael looking at Nick as the two circle each other in their shared domestic space. Nick is framed in primarily close-ups, lit from the grey, morning light coming in from outside the trailer, and his face and words choreograph vulnerability, an almost unspoken admission of fear. When Michael confesses his inability to hunt without Nick, the camera cuts close on Nick's face, and his voice breaks when he responds. The whole sequence is charged with emotion, setting up what will continue over the course of the film: Michael's commitment to Nick and Nick's adoration of Michael.

This earlier scene, then, recontextualizes the eye of the camera during Nick and Linda's subsequent conversation. Rather than looking at Linda, highlighting her vulnerable and desirable status as a female character, Michael's presence, and the camera mimicking his look, tells the viewer that Michael is looking at Nick, not at Linda. If their previous scene is taken as a confession of feeling, which I believe it should be, Michael's look is desirous of Nick and jealous of Linda's physical and emotional closeness with him. Even if their previous conversation is taken as platonic and non-sexual, there is no reason given yet for Michael to look at Linda, and their platonic closeness can still be grounds for a jealous response on Michael's part. It is Nick who is subject of the desirous eye of the camera and he is the subject of both Michael and Linda's desire throughout the course of the film,

reified continuously by the camera.

Wood notes that “Christopher Walken's persona itself mediates the cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity.”⁵⁵ This androgynous traversal of presentation, intentionally used by the film to assert his role as the emotional mediator, also asserts on a meta-textual level his role as the object of desire. Again, Wood writes:

Crucial to his readiness to project those properly human qualities which our culture (in the interests of preservation of gender roles, the family, and patriarchy) chooses to label feminine: sensitivity, vulnerability, the overt display of emotions, gentleness, grace, a physical beauty divorced from any macho traits. From first to last *The Deer Hunter* realizes this more completely than any other film in which Walken has appeared.⁵⁶

If we heed to the assertion that a major aspect of the female character's relegation to the role of the desired has to do with her vulnerability Walken's position as vulnerable and emotive firmly positions him within the framework of the female character. Thus, the film permits the viewer to desire Nick in the way the camera operates, frequently showing Nick as subject of the camera and characters' looks, as well as in his role in the narrative structure. Nick is also explicitly desired by both Linda and Michael, putting him in a non-traditional love triangle within which he is the one being pursued, rather than participating in what would traditionally be a rivalry between the two male characters. I will investigate this further in the segment on erotic triangles.

Wood also notes that Walken was cast, in part, because of his background as a dancer. This is highlighted in an early sequence in the bar. As “Can't Take My Eyes Off You” by Frankie Valli plays from the jukebox, the other men go about their business of drinking and reveling before Steven's wedding. Nick, standing at the pool table with Michael, gracefully moves with the song, while the other men stumble through the bar, drunk and uncoordinated. Michael is the only other character who moves in the space with any grace, but he stalwartly refuses to participate in the revelry, continuing to play

⁵⁵ Wood, “Two Films,” 260.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 261.

pool while the other men sing along to the song. Nick's ease in the space and with his own body gives the scene a latent sexuality that further supports his attractiveness on screen.

The relationship between Nick and the film's music is continuously asserted beyond this sequence and further serves to establish Nick's portrayal as attractive and desirable. The theme of the film, John Williams' "Cavatina," popularized by Cleo Laine in 1976 on her album "Best Friends," serves as both an emotional centerpiece for the film and a nod to the adoration felt by the characters towards Nick. The lyrics to the Laine version are:

He was beautiful, beautiful to my eyes,
From the moment I saw him sun filled the skies.
He was so, so beautiful, beautiful just to hold,
In my dreams he was springtime, winter was cold.⁵⁷

The theme is played during Nick's dialogue with Michael when they talk about the hunt, and is played during all of Michael and Linda's love scenes later in the film. Additionally, the last sound we hear in the film is "Cavatina," played over a still image of Walken's face from the beginning of the film, before the credits role. Its association with Nick, and Laine's lyrics of the song, which would have been well known at the time of its release, clearly link Nick with the lyrics "He was beautiful" and the romantic content of the song. He is the heart of the film and the character on whom the desire expressed by the primary characters is focalized. Even in a context that is not romantic or erotic, the film is predicated on the desire to bring Nick home, a desire for his presence felt by all of the characters in the film.

The androgynous role that Nick serves in the film and his framing as desired is of twofold importance. On a service level Michael's desire for Nick validates the transmasculine viewer's desire for other men. If we believe that the transmasculine viewer aligns themselves with the male character and are also attracted to the male character, for Michael to be a male character who is acting on his desire for a men allows the transmasculine viewer to be present in both of their looks within the

⁵⁷ Cleo Laine, "He Was Beautiful (Cavatina)," (RCA Victor, 1976).

framework of the film. Additionally, even without the presence of Michael the film permits the viewer to *look* at Nick, frames him as explicitly beautiful, and asks the viewer to recall and engage with that beauty. If the viewer does not feel the loss of Nick acutely the second half of the film loses its emotional resonance. Hence, for the film to have weight it is necessary to want Nick, and to desire his return. Additionally, Nick's androgynous beauty implicitly serves to validate the transmasculine identificatory, servicing their own desire as well as providing a character who, through a combination of feminine and masculine traits, can serve as an example of desire *for* the transmasculine person. In saying this I do not mean to assert that Nick himself should be read as a transgender character—rather, I believe that his masculine androgyny can, if it is extrapolated, be used by the transmasculine viewer to associate a certain kind of desire with their mode of being: a mode that is primarily masculine, but associated with the feminine.

[2] *Fallible Tough Guys*

Intending to consider the different versions of masculinity that *The Deer Hunter* offers up in its rowdy cast of Clairton boys it is useful to consider, momentarily, an alternative example of representations of blue-collar military men. For this I will pivot towards representations of men as they are presented in the homo-military exploitation films of the pre-Stonewall era. While *The Deer Hunter* does not follow in their lineage, contextualizing the emergent sexuality of the film with the intended, implicit sexuality of these homo-military films elucidates a useful counterpoint to the more suppressed characterizations of masculinity present. Harry Benshoff writes that homo-military films explore “the borders between male homosociality and homosexuality...many of them actually indict the *repression* of homosexual desire and not homosexuality, per se.”⁵⁸ Benshoff asserts that these homo-military films actively explore themes of sexuality and do not disavow the existence of homosexual experience and the homoeroticism displayed on screen. The caricatures of masculinity featured in these so-called

⁵⁸ Harry M. Benshoff, “Representing (Repressed) Homosexuality in the Pre-Stonewall Homo-Military Film,” (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007), 72.

“sleaze films” can be placed in relief to the realistic, hyper-masculine portrayals of the men in the prestige production of *The Deer Hunter*.

Benshoff notes that in the military “‘true’ homosexuality was defined in terms of effeminacy, while ‘shower-room horse-play’ among traditionally masculine men tended to be overlooked.”⁵⁹ Though Benshoff is writing in reference to actual military policy, the dichotomy between effeminate men who are automatically recognized as potentially homosexual and traditionally masculine men who are excused of homoerotic behavior is useful in considering both the portrayal of the archetypal characters in the films he is focalizing his analysis on, as well as in drawing out the different types of masculinity represented in *The Deer Hunter*. For our purposes, the traditionally masculine man is embodied by the brief analysis of Marlon Brando's style of acting. As was noted previously, Brando's body is actively adored by the camera in the way that a woman's might be. His use of method acting and the barely suppressed emotions that roil under the surface of traditional men, has become shorthand for how masculinity on screen is conceived of.

De Niro, also well known for acting in accordance with The Method, follows in the lineage of Brando. Prior to *The Deer Hunter* De Niro had received accolades for his portrayal of the unhinged, violently masculine Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*. Compared to *The Deer Hunter*, in which he portrays a more suppressed but equally masculine character, Bickle's masculinity is aggressive, dangerous, and almost exaggerated. The intensity of this portrayal and De Niro's rapid rise to star status in the 70s orients the viewer of the film to associate him and his roles with cinematic representations of masculinity. We are primed, as viewers, to trust that the character he will portray will be representative of a “real” masculinity, a representation that the viewer can track and identify with, or at least identify as masculine.

The purpose of establishing the lineage of De Niro's public persona, and in referencing a lesser

⁵⁹ Ibid, 74.

known genre of military films is to direct the reader towards a conversation about how *The Deer Hunter* attempts, implicitly, to teach the viewer about correct and incorrect versions of masculinity. The ensemble cast of men from Clairton that we are introduced to at the beginning of the film represent variations on standard, blue-collar masculinity. They are all working-class men moving through their private spaces together. On the surface it would seem that they are all comparable, cut from the same cloth, but if one looks closer it is clear that the film is demonstrating a number of different ways to be masculine and it vilifies and celebrates those different presentations.

Steven, for example, is at first presented as the ideal protagonist character. John Savage is handsome, bright-eyed, and soon to be married. Narratively, it would make sense for the film to follow his story most closely, examining the effects of returning from the war on a young family man who has to face the trauma of war in addition to learning how to act as a patriarch. However, Steven is the first to break when the men are in Vietnam. When he returns, he is symbolically castrated, losing both of his legs due to an infection from the rat bites he received when trapped in the river. This castration is foreshadowed at the beginning of the film when Steven's mother notes that Angela is pregnant before the two have married, and he asserts that he has not yet slept with her. Ultimately, Steven is never intended to be seen as the right man to follow; he is too cowardly, and too committed to the cultural obligations his heritage and family push onto him. He is a follower and that dooms him to failure in the world of the movie.

Michael, then, is the character whom we track through the film. He is the hero, he leads the other men through their tasks, he leads the deer hunt, and he is the one who the other men look to for advice. He is who Stan turns to to validate his desire for a new woman (he asks "Is she beautiful?" as though without Michael's approval it cannot be true.) But, as Wood notes in his analysis, and as was established in the previous section, Michael is also bound up in his love and desire for Nick. Thus, his

hero status is “intimately bound up with the connotation of chastity, the persona of the virgin night.”⁶⁰ To negate his relationship with Nick, Michael is also castrated until he begins his relationship with Linda in the second half of the film and this relationship itself is bound up in his relationship with Nick. It is Michael's sexuality that is openly questioned in the film. During a fight with Stan before the deer hunt that precedes their departure for Vietnam, Stan accuses Michael of being a faggot. He never “goes with women,” and his stoicism is misread as indicative of a repression of sexuality, rather than a suppression of feeling. This repression, ultimately, is why he fails to bring Nick home at the climax of the film. He cannot adequately express his care for Nick, thus he cannot promise safety in their return, and Nick succumbs to his death in the depths of Saigon. The promise of the trees and the mountains is not enough to overcome the pressure of tradition and the knowledge both men have of the impossibility of their desire, so Nick releases himself from Michael through death. Thus, even Michael's masculinity, heroic and powerful, ultimately fails.

Nick, as we have established, also operates in a transgressive presentation of masculinity, one that orients itself with femininity as well as masculinity. Rather than rehash this, I will direct the reader towards Stan, who is representative of what the film indicates as the *wrong* kind of masculinity. Though Steven, Nick, and Michael all fail, in part, because of their masculine characteristics, the film engineers sympathy for all three, especially in highlighting their traumatic experiences. Stan, however, is rarely, if ever, sympathetic. He hits his girlfriend at the wedding for dancing with another man, he preens, calling himself “beautiful” as he stares at his reflection in Michael's car. He is the one who questions Michael's capability as leader, accusing him of homosexuality, and attempting to emasculate him and invalidate his role as leader. Though the other men represent complex versions of masculinity, none of them are framed as explicitly *wrong* in the way they engage with their identities. Rather, their masculinity is complicated by circumstance and their failures teach the viewer lessons by highlighting

60 Wood, “Two Films,” 261.

their mistakes. Stan, however, is passive and incapable. He does not go to war, he does not *do* anything in Clairton while they are gone, other than remain wrapped up in his own affairs. His selfishness and vanity makes him unlikeable, and he is often on the receiving end of Michael's frustration. After Michael returns from Vietnam, it is Stan who Michael threatens with death, in an attempt to teach him that there is more in the world than the movements of their small town. The philosophy of one-shot, taken to its furthest reaches by the game of russian roulette represents, in this moment, both the distinct differences between Clairton and Vietnam, as well as the way that the war has taught Michael that his stoicism must remain and the flippant, posturing masculinity that Stan embodies is untenable in the face of horror.

Thus, the film engages in an implicit curriculum of masculinity, its failings and its benefits. If Nick's characterization gives space for the transmasculine viewer to see their own version of masculinity, one that engages with masculinity and femininity, then the varied, often fallible versions of masculinity that are displayed by the other characters demonstrate an equally important thesis for the transmasculine viewer. *The Deer Hunter* simultaneously attempts to teach the viewer, at the very least, the wrong kind of man to be. In openly displaying the relationships men have with one another and the many ways that men can exist, whether it fits into traditional assumptions or not, it can be read as almost radical. It may seem ridiculous to call a war film about blue-collar white men from an industry town radical, but the film deals, subtly, with different perceptions and relationships to masculinity, tradition, and emotion. In this way, the transmasculine viewer, who uses films such as this to inform their own ability to present and understand masculinity, finds a reading in which they might decide which parts or versions of masculinity most appeal to them.

“Can't We Just Comfort Each Other” - Triangulated Displacement

Though the emotional centerpiece of the film is Michael and Nick's relationship, it does not serve well to forget that Nick has a relationship with Linda before he departs for Vietnam nor that

Linda and Michael strike up a complicated relationship with one another when Michael returns without Nick in the third act of the film. Wood notes in his analysis that the “triangular relationship of *The Deer Hunter*, however, goes beyond the use/misuse of women in the buddy movies of the 70s; the women is not present merely to prove that the men are not gay.”⁶¹ Here, Linda is not present merely to disprove Michael's affection for Nick, nor is her previous relationship to Nick present solely to initiate a conflict between the two men, or to normalize their closeness. Her existence in the film is not designed to defend against accusations of homoeroticism, nor does she exist to function within Girard's rivalry-based triangle. Instead, Linda's presence renegotiates the direction of affection and positions Nick as the desired and pursued, leaving her to operate in an active role.

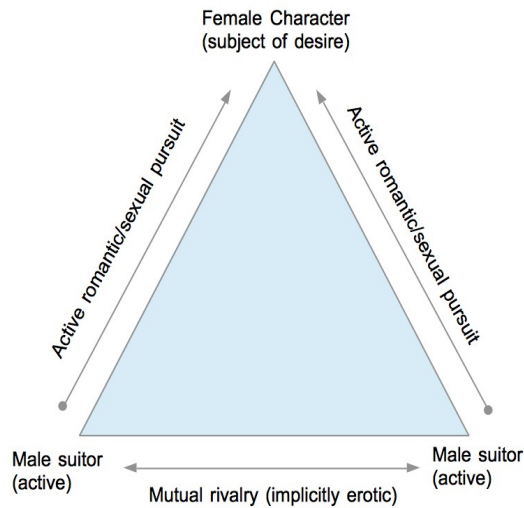
In the traditional erotic triangle, as Sedgwick describes it, the point of interest is the woman, and two men pursue her for similar means: typically romance or sex. The men have a relationship with each other that is predicated on a rivalry but, according to Sedgwick's argument, can be equally erotic (see fig.1). In *The Deer Hunter*, Nick assumes the role that is typically occupied by the female character. He is engaged to Linda, but shares a bond with Michael. When he disappears, the relationship struck up between Linda and Michael is predicated on their desire for the absent Nick. This disrupts the normative erotics of the triangle and proposes a slightly different orientation, one that acknowledges the desirability of the man (see fig.2).

Wood asserts that “the men make love to [Linda] because they are barred from making love to each other; she, at the same time, is ready and able to love them both.”⁶² I would argue that, while Michael's relationship with Linda does exist in place of his relationship with Nick, Linda's relationship with Michael is equally predicated on Nick's absence. At the start of the film their relationship to each other is tenuous at best. Michael pursues Linda at the wedding, but the camera indicates that his eyeline falls consistently on Nick, rather than Linda. In this way, his pursuit of Linda is an act of jealousy of

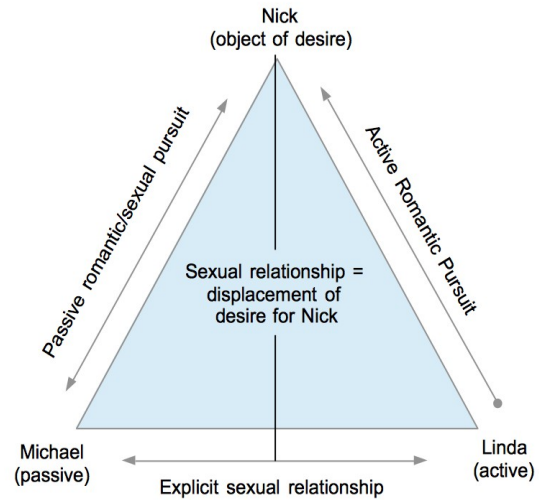
⁶¹ Ibid, 260.

⁶² Ibid, 260.

her relationship to Nick. Rather than pursue Nick, which he is barred from doing due to cultural traditions, he pursues Linda so that she cannot have Nick. Nick willingly exists in his relationship with Linda, but his active participation is halting if it is read in context with his relationship with Michael. He proposes to Linda on the night of their departure, at the wedding, pressured by the overwhelming obligation of cultural sensibilities (he is watching his best friend Steven marry because he has to, so Angela is not shunned for being pregnant out of wedlock) and his proposition to Linda seems nonsensical. She is living in Michael and Nick's trailer while they are gone, and asserts her commitment to Nick through her presentness, and her rebuff of Michael's pursuits. His proposal to Linda in the context of their departure is a fulfillment of obligation that could be negated by the unpredictable, unknown fate that exists for him in Vietnam. Additionally, the camera mimics Nick's eye-line, watching Michael and Linda exit the dancefloor together. In the context, this look gestures towards Nick's fear of losing Michael to Linda, as we are still unaware of Michael's potential relationship with her. Their relationship at this point is only in relation to Nick and we know that by the end of the film Nick chooses not to return to Clairton, a return that would mean a return to Linda and their engagement, and instead kills himself, ending any possibility with her or with Michael, and leaves him with Michael's final declaration, the passive "I love you" that remains in the air in the den in Saigon.



(fig. 1)



(fig. 2)

Linda embodies a more active role than either of the two men by the end of the film. She is the one who suggests to Michael that they should go to bed together “to comfort each other,” pushing over the boundary Michael seems otherwise unwilling to cross beyond walking her home from work. Michael cannot manage more than to tell Nick that he loves him when he returns to Saigon to try and bring him home. Nick, barely the man we are introduced to at the start of the film by the end, chooses death rather than face the decisions that wait for him in Clairton. Positioned against the men's incapacity to express feeling, Linda is the most active participant in the triangle, though she is barely framed as an active character in the dominant narrative of the film. She pursues her desires readily with both men, focalizing her need for both of them. Wood's analysis of this triangular relationship varies from my own but he notes that “when the boundaries of gender construction become so blurred that men can move with ease, and without inhibition, into identification with a female position” the film is able to more fully engage with both its “male love story” and its “heterosexual romance.”⁶³ This breakdown of boundary allows the male characters to operate in traditionally female positions and forces the viewer to cross boundaries of identificatory looking, embodying temporary positions that are

⁶³ Ibid, 260.

typically deemed female. Thus, even the male viewer watching the film, identifying with Nick or with Michael, finds himself pursued by the active female, where typically he would see himself as the pursuer. This breakdown explicitly invites the transmasculine viewer's perspective to the fore, offering a space in which characters of both binary genders move between spaces that are usually clearly demarcated. The nature of the transience goes against Mulvey's assertion of male perspective, and reveals a clear space in which the binary analysis of film cannot be applied, and a new framework for understanding the film must be elucidated to best reveal the underlying narrative. This new framework welcomes the transmasculine viewer, who exists in a space that crosses the gender boundaries traditionally asserted.

[4] "One-Shot" and Terminal Adoration –

In order to frame *The Deer Hunter* in relation to analyses of violence and sexuality as related to film, it is useful to consider it in relation to the archetypal "buddy film," mentioned during the analysis of Mulvey's work. Cynthia J. Fuchs defines the buddy film as based on its denial or fulfillment of "what Eve Sedgwick terms 'male homosocial desire,' the continuum from homosexuality to homophobia and back again."⁶⁴ This continuum exists on the axes of "racial, generational, political, and ethnic difference under a collective performance of extraordinary virility."⁶⁵ This is to say that the bond between the men in a buddy film is both proven and disproven using the same criteria; that which brings the men together is also what fractures their ability to realize the relationship, condemning any of the openness between them through explosive acts of violence. Simultaneously, those acts of violence serve as obvious metaphors and symbolic realizations of the men's desire for one another, a desire that the film disallows. Thus, the realization of desire is impossible, "the final catharsis remains untenable."⁶⁶ The violence that represents their erotic desire for one another becomes the distant

64 Cynthia J. Fuchs, "The Buddy Politic," (London, Routledge, 2008), 194.

65 Ibid, 195.

66 Ibid, 195.

enactment of that desire, as well as supporting the construction of barricades that prevent the characters' capability of actualizing their desire. Fuchs writes that “this conspicuous discharge situates the male couple between the representational poles of homoeroticism and homophobia, in love with their self-displays and at odds with their implications.”⁶⁷ For the characters to acknowledge the meaning of their “self-displays,” to acknowledge the impetus for their violent actions, would be to acknowledge their attraction. Hence, the desire is displaced, and the violence always has a second, plausible reason. In comparison to the previously presented example of the homo-military genre, the buddy film is structured around a condemnation of homosexuality. Though it acknowledges it implicitly, there is no avenue through which the desire can be realized. By nature of its classification as an exploitative genre it should not be considered “good” representation of queerness, but it does not shy away from actively acknowledging its homoeroticism, and hinges on that acknowledgement.

So where does *The Deer Hunter* fit within this description? Fuchs positions the buddy film's formula as related to and spanning the moment from “the cultural trauma of Vietnam through the farce of the Reagan-Bush drug wars” and the buddy films of the 80s and 90s as effacing “the intimacy and vulnerability associated with homosexuality by the 'marriage' of racial others, so that this transgressiveness displaces homosexual anxiety.”⁶⁸ With regards to the timeline Fuchs establishes, *The Deer Hunter* is comfortably situated at the advent of the genre's conception. The film arguably attempts at an ensemble cast and, for the duration of the first act, it is not entirely clear who the main character is meant to be. Steven is the character to whom things are happening in the first act; he is getting married, he is leaving behind his newly pregnant wife with a baby that might not be his, his mother is who we see in the church in the first few minutes of the film, telling the priest her fears for her son's safety. Despite this, Michael is the character whom we follow most closely; he is the character to whom the film sutures its perspective to, which is clarified as soon as the men enter the space of Vietnam.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 195.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 195.

Michael, though, is cold and, without the presence of Nick, it is impossible to find the emotional heart of the film. Without Nick, Michael is an unforgiving point-of-view character, but with Nick as a second set of eyes we are given access to the warmth of home and family that is otherwise absent in the brutality of the rest of the film. Michael's emotions are revealed only in relation to Nick. In this way, the film can be situated as adjacent to the buddy film; without the central relationship of Michael and Nick, the film does not function. Without Nick, there is no impetus for the second half of the film, for Michael's relationship to Linda, for his return to Vietnam, and for the final homecoming that occurs after Nick's violent death in Saigon.

Additionally, in the first act, of the few spaces in Clairton the viewer is given access to, Nick and Michael's shared trailer is highlighted. It is within the trailer that we are first introduced both to Nick's relationship to Michael, and Nick's relationship to Linda. Their relationship to one another in their hometown, while implied with heavy-handed certitude by their dialogue with one another, and by Walken's expressive acting when he speaks and looks at Michael, is also castrated, removed of any sexual or romantic elements and relegated to the space of domestic partnership. Wood argues that the russian roulette sequences in Vietnam and Nick's fixation with them is a fixation with a symbolic expression of sexuality, an escape from the repressed romance between Michael and himself. Wood writes:

We have seen that, in the film's system of symbolic oppositions, the gambling den corresponds to John's bar, as its opposite/complement and its perversion, the shooting of the beer transformed into the spurting of blood. Nick, rebelling from the outset against Mike's obsession with control (one might substitute "repression"), is inevitably drawn to the world of pure chance represented by the roulette game. More important, however, is it is a game Mike forced him to play in the Vietcong camp and thus from Nick's viewpoint a monstrously perverted enactment of the union he has always desired: hence his fixation on it.⁶⁹

If we believe Wood's analysis the final scene in the gambling den is, again, the marriage of violence

69 Wood, "Two Films," 265.

and sexual release. Michael, declaring his love for Nick in an attempt to bring him back to himself and bring him home triggers Nick's recollection. He mimics Nick's thoughts about "the trees" from the start of the film, wherein the landscape of Clairton represented both repression and the freedom he and Michael have together in the mountains. But ultimately the association is always one of repression and the return to Clairton is only a return to unrealized affection. Thus, reminded of the inevitable impossibility of he and Michael consummating their relationship, Nick removes Michael's hand and pulls the trigger, shooting himself in the head. The wound spurts blood and Michael clutches Nick, trying in vain to stop the flow. Even in this the relationship between sex and violence is evidenced; the blood, the physical manifestation of the self-inflicted violence, is doubled with the orgasmic spurting of the beer from the start of the film. As Michael tries to stop it he is also, symbolically, attempting to stop the representation of Nick's final desire for him.

This final act of violence both confirms Nick and Michael's doomed relationship with one another and succinctly links the visuals of violence with the spurting, erotic visuals from the early scenes. This linkage, while destructive, also marries scenes of violence with scenes of masculine domestic space. In Clairton violence is, at first, playful aggression, asserted as affection between the men. By the end of the film, that joking aggression has been corrupted by the reality of repression; its destructive nature ends Michael's relationship with Nick, and also impacts his relationships with Stan and the other men. When Michael mimics the roulette game, the gun pressed to Stan's head in the cabin in the mountains, he is no longer the stoic, heroic leader of their group. He is unhinged and unable to demarcate the different tonalities of violence that exist in Clairton and Vietnam. Subtly, the film condemns the linking of aggression and violence, understanding that it can easily be pushed to the point of destruction. It provides symbols that the transmasculine viewer can read, giving explicit visual cues for the emergent narrative of Michael and Nick's love story and indicating that its presence ultimately is the downfall of that relationship, despite also helping to symbolically realize it. The

presence of violence as linked to sexuality can be more complicated than it is presented here, as we will see in *Mean Streets*, but *The Deer Hunter* ultimately condemns it as a symptom of a greater problem, the inability of Michael to act on his love for Nick and commit to something other than the philosophy of “one shot” and the suppression that Clairton necessitates.

A Brief Conclusion

Ultimately, *The Deer Hunter*'s usefulness in conceptualizing the transmasculine viewer is in its transgression of gender bounds. Presenting Nick as a feminized hero, as well as the emotional heart of the film, asserts that it is not necessary to use a female character as the subject of desire, nor as the character who breaks the bounds of masculine presentation to express feeling and make the emergent thread of a film known. Linda is an active character, operating against Mulvey's assertion of the passive, eroticized female love interest. She creates a space in which the male viewer, even, might find himself identifying outside of his own gender, crossing beyond the rigid bounds of traditional theories of viewership. And Michael, presented as the heroic character who the viewer is expected to identify with, is the most fallible of all, unable to complete the task that is set at his feet. His failure, combined with the complicated characterizations of Linda and Nick, reveals the film's inherent questions about gender and masculinity, and open up a complicated critique of traditional roles. This critique offers ample space for the transmasculine viewer to find identifiably queer content, as well as to consider the bounds of gender in a film that otherwise might be written off as a war epic for men.

Mean Streets: Familial Ties and Lessons in Masculinity

Introduction –

Before beginning a granular analysis of *Mean Streets* it is pertinent to reiterate, once again, where the film is positioned in the broader tides of cinema history. Scorsese, working in New York in the 1970s, was locationally adjacent to the shockwaves of the New York experimental and avant-garde film scene. His interest in the new movement of experimental film (noted earlier in this project in reference to the work of Kenneth Anger) is demonstrated clearly in the non-traditional structure of *Mean Streets*. The film serves, in many ways, as a portrait of Little Italy, barely stitching together a narrative between fragmented sequences that make up a compelling examination of Charlie's life as a low-level debt collector for his mafia-affiliated uncle. The thinness of the narrative, combined with its unconventional telling, ultimately orient the viewer to pay attention less to story and more to Charlie as a character, rooting their viewing experience in the inner turmoil that fuels the movement of the film. Charlie's story is one riddled with questions of identity. The primary tension of the film is Charlie's inability to fulfill the role that is expected by his family; he fails to reconcile his inherited role in the mafia environment and forgoes escalations in power and responsibility in order to maintain his relationships with his friends. This conflict between youth and responsibility is coupled with Charlie's complicated relationship with identity. These conflicts complicate the familial space of Little Italy, where everyone knows everyone else, and demonstrates the breakdown in internal and external spaces.

Charlie's attempt to simultaneously maintain his different lives quickly begins to fall apart in the film as those carefully organized variations begin to cross-over and wreak havoc on his reputation. This breakdown resonates beyond the ethnic and cultural specificity of Italian families, and clearly signals towards broader questions of youth and the challenging transition into adulthood. As Kolker notes, it is in this film, and those that follow in Scorsese and his contemporaries filmographies, in which “culture

consented to see itself.⁷⁰ This alleged act of broader cultural consent does not apply solely to the dominant culture and the universality that comes from the specificity of the film's themes, especially its ruminations on identity, resonant with the emergent culture and the new, transmasculine viewer to whom identity is a primary concern. Constructed spaces of comfort and safety, the performative masculinity associated with gangster characters, and the challenges of Charlie's condemned relationships with Teresa and Johnny Boy, all construct a compelling framework into which queerness resonates easily, and the transmasculine viewer can find footing for their gaze, claiming space in a genre film that typically caters to an exclusively male viewership.

The tensions in the film itself represent, aptly, the conflict of emergent and dominant cultures. Putting the film in that framework reveals Charlie to be covertly working against the dominant, his uncle and the responsibilities of the family, and attempting to construct relationships with Teresa and Johnny, who are both relegated to outcast roles, degenerate and unaccepted by the dominant because of their inherent inability (represented by Teresa being framed as “unfit” for Charlie due to her epilepsy) or their unwillingness (Johnny refusing to pay off his loans) to participate in the dominant socio-political tides of their community. The trio meet their tragic fates at the end of the film because Charlie is unable to fully commit to the dominant cultural expectation and instead finds himself continuously drawn back to the emergent culture, unwilling to relinquish his relationships with Johnny and Teresa for the sake of his uncle and their family's reputation. Amongst all of this, the four points within which I have chosen to analyze in order to validate the transmasculine viewer are also prominent. Charlie is highlighted by the camera as a desirable figure; the film, much like *The Deer Hunter*, uses its conflict of tradition and expectation to highlight “right” and “wrong” versions of masculinity, presenting a myriad of men for the viewer to identify with or against; Johnny, Charlie, and Teresa make up another variation of an erotic triangle, one in which Charlie is centralized as the character who is desired; and

70 Kolker, “Cinema of Loneliness,” 3.

Charlie and Johnny's relationship is charged with violence used in place of expressions of affection for one another. I will elaborate on each in sequence.

[1] *Boyish Charm* –

As the viewer, we are positioned to see the world through Charlie's eyes. The film operates from his perspective from the open. The film opens on a black screen, with an unidentified voiceover. “You don't make up for your sins in the church. You do it in the streets. You do it at home. The rest is bullshit and you know it.” The scene cuts to a shot of Charlie, waking up alone in bed. In the mostly dark room, Charlie is illuminated from the blue light that filters in through the slats of the venetian blinds covering his window. He rises and crosses the room to look at himself in the mirror. The camera follows all of his movements as he stumbles to his feet, peering shakily over his shoulder as he looks at himself. From the get the viewer knows two things: first, that we will follow Charlie through the story, second, that Charlie is beautiful. The voiceover, framed retrospectively as a dream, is clearly attributed to Charlie. He startles awake on the word “bullshit,” seemingly disturbed by his own inner monologue. The camera, resting behind him but watching over his shoulder, approximates what Charlie himself is seeing, without forgoing our ability as a viewer to see him. Though the darkness of the room mostly obscures his face, it is clear that he is attractive. He is wearing a tank top, moving through the empty, intimate space of his bedroom. As he looks at himself in the mirror, touching his lips and jaw, we are permitted to look too, and though we cannot see much we can make out his face, young and handsome, and his well-muscled chest. Without being overt, the film is clear to permit us to look at Charlie while we look through him, and we are made aware instantly of his attractiveness.

Though Charlie is clearly indicated as attractive, the film does not linger on his body in the same way it lingers on the bodies of women in the film. The fragmented bodies of the topless dancers employed at the bar, Tony's Place, that serves as a social focal point in the film, are sexualized to the point of being removed from the people they are attached to. The viewer is served a montage of body

parts: their breasts, their slim waists, and their legs, are highlighted by the camera, while the men in the bar are clearly shown in full. Charlie's inner monologue, playing over the montage of fragmented body parts, is about one of the dancers attractiveness, and her validity as a sexual partner. Even Teresa, explicitly framed as the love interest of the film and intrinsic to the major conflict in Charlie's life, is explicitly sexualized by the camera. During the sequence in which she is introduced, the viewer watches over the shoulder as Charlie looks at Teresa through his bedroom window while she changes. The camera, peering through the slats of the curtain, cuts closer when Teresa strips off her dress, and even closer when she is naked, lingering on her breasts. Layered on top of this image is Charlie's voiceover, in which he talks about having a dream about having sex with her. The scene cuts to the pair in bed, and when Teresa gets up to get dressed she tells Charlie not to look at her. Charlie, mimicking the camera's eye from earlier, covers his eyes and then splits his fingers, looking at Teresa through the slats. This looking mimics and explicitly references the camera's sexualizing eye from the previous shots, nodding to the viewer and acknowledging that Charlie both mimics the camera and that the camera's view of Teresa's body is mimicking his own desire.

Though this explicit sexualization of the female characters is not mimicked in the camera's admiration of Charlie, the difference in the way the camera handles them does not negate the fact that Charlie's attractiveness is clearly indicated in the film. The sexualization of the women operates in line with Mulvey's theory of viewership, clearly establishing them as objects of the male viewers scopophilic look. Though Charlie is not situated in the framework within which we can readily identify the camera's desire for a character, the lack of sexualization attributed to him does not mean that the camera is not desirous of him. We are constantly subjected to *looking* at Charlie, in all stages; we see him when he is dressed in his best suit to meet with his uncle, we see him when he is getting drunk with his friends, we see him in his home, getting dressed, taking care of Johnny, with Teresa. Giving the viewer full access to Charlie, his internal monologue, his private spaces, his friend group, we are

primed to have affection for him, affection that is supplemented by his attractiveness. While it is possible to argue that this makes Charlie's character more accessible for the identificatory look, I would argue that it can do that while simultaneously formulating an environment in which the viewer is, to an extent, attracted to Charlie. He is frequently shown shirtless, like in the scene that precedes Teresa's introduction. The camera, so frequently situated over Charlie's shoulder, shows us the broad expanse of his back, his well muscled arms, as he shuffles through his apartment in the early morning, clad in boxers and a tank top that is tight on his torso. This, combined with Charlie's charm, his attempts to diffuse the rising tensions caused by Johnny's vagrancy, engender a sense of affection for Charlie. The film tries to charm us, almost as though, for the emotional resonance to succeed, we must fall for Charlie in all his fallible, juvenile charm.

This romancing of the viewer easily aligns itself with both the scopophilic and the identificatory gaze of the transmasculine viewer. Encouraged to look at Charlie and to fall for his charms, the transmasculine viewer can be unbridled in their looking, appreciating, as the camera does, Charlie's appearance as he moves through the film. Additionally, the access to Charlie's personal provides ample room for the transmasculine viewer to assert themselves into Charlie's position. The viewer can clearly imagine themselves in Charlie's apartment, going to Tony's Place for a drink, wandering the streets of Little Italy. Scorsese's ethnographic sensibilities, imbued in the camera's loving, detailed portrayal of the landscape of the film gives such a full picture that one can almost close their eyes and place themselves on the streets, walking alongside the characters. This kind of experience, attributed to some extent to a sense of realism provided by the specificity and attention to detail, encourages the identificatory look whole-heartedly. The film appears to want the viewer to feel as though they are there. To consent to see themselves there.

[2] Explosive Masculinity and Cultural Expectation –

Like *The Deer Hunter*, *Mean Streets* relies heavily on an ensemble cast of intimately related

men. After the opening scene with Charlie in his room, the credits roll over a montage of what appears to be home movie footage, showing Charlie and all of the people who form his neighborhood/family/friend group. The use of the “home movie” format demonstrates the cultural relevance of this group and establishes immediately the tensions Charlie faces during the film. Scorsese highlights their Italian-American identities, the role of the church, and the closeness that the men have, a closeness that extends beyond friendship into a tenuous middle place, somewhere between partner and family. This footage also serves to establish a specific kind of masculinity that is embodied throughout the film by Charlie and Michael, the other debt collector working under Charlie's uncle, and one of Charlie's friends. The two men wear impeccably tailored suits, and present themselves as respectable business people. The reality of their positions is that they are no better than their friends, but they posture as if they are. Michael appears to view himself as superior to Charlie and the others, often snubbing his nose at their behavior, but he is also shown stealing money from teenagers, and he takes a hit out on Johnny for not paying him back the money he owes. He is short-tempered and racist, nearly calling off his relationship with a girl because Tony claims he saw her kissing a black man. But Michael is also framed as mimicking what the film presents as the assumed goal of these men: Charlie's uncle. He is in charge of both Charlie and Michael, and has his hands in many of the businesses in their neighborhood. A small scale mafia man, he is polished, calm, and collected, and it is his opinion that Charlie struggles to uphold. Charlie's uncle represents the film's conception of a “good” man, one who does his job well and takes care of his family, whether he likes them or not. But he passes judgement, telling Charlie to let go of Johnny and Teresa because they're too much trouble.

On the other end of this spectrum is Johnny. Johnny is messy, dressed consistently in sloppy clothes that look more similar to what is worn by the residents of Greenwich and the East Village who occasionally find their way to Tony's Place. He owes money to everyone in their neighborhood, and seems entirely disinterested in paying it back. His introduction in the film is a shot of a mailbox, which

Johnny runs towards, out of frame, dropping a firecracker into its mouth, before fleeing, as the mailbox explodes behind him. This introductory shot, Johnny racing towards the camera and invading the space, introducing the chaos that will explode at the conclusion of the film because of him, clearly introduces his role in the film. He does not operate according to the established cultural order. The only character he seems to have any respect for is Charlie, his best friend, but he frequently oversteps those bounds, pushing Charlie around, causing fights even when Charlie asks him not to. Johnny is framed as oppositional to the traditional, culturally rooted masculinity that Charlie's uncle and Michael embody.

Charlie, attempting to fulfill the expectations set by his uncle, ultimately fails to succeed in performing in the role his family has set out for him. He flees Little Italy with Johnny and Teresa in tow, attempting, against his uncle's wishes, to save Johnny from his fate at the hands of Michael and the other men he owes money to. Charlie, in his own way, is attempting to fulfill the expectations set for him. Teresa and Johnny are part of his familial circle, and his commitment to protecting Johnny, and his love for Teresa, in their own way, still align with his uncle's philosophy of protecting family. Charlie's attempt does not align with his uncle's opinions, however, and ultimately he fails. Despite his inability to achieve the idealized, patriarchal role his uncle represents, because we follow Charlie as the point-of-view character, his performance of masculinity is not framed as a failure. Instead, Charlie's masculinity is rooted in a genuine sense of empathy and love for his friends, and from a guilt that arises from his complicated relationship with religion. Charlie's philosophy is predicated on the streets. You pay for your sins on the streets, the opening narration tells him. He believes in the nitty gritty, and demonstrates that that belief is rooted in the feelings of the heart. Though ultimately his philosophy fails him, and puts himself, Teresa, and Johnny in peril, the viewer empathizes with Charlie's attempt, and Michael, who embodies the "right" masculinity, becomes the villain of the film. Even Johnny, the "wrong" kind of man, is framed as empathetic. Johnny notes during the film that he was beaten in the head as a child, and it is implied that that attack had some kind of impact on him well into adulthood.

Johnny and Teresa are both outcasts, and Charlie cares for them more than anyone else in the film. His other closest friend, Tony, who runs the sleazy bar they all congregate in, also clearly does not fall into the polished world of respectable men Charlie is trying to slip into. This outcast group that makes up Charlie's inner circle reveals that Charlie's true world lies with them, somewhere outside of the tradition he is expected to inherit.

This carefully constructed position of right and wrong masculinity, established in a significantly different way than *The Deer Hunter*, ultimately comes to the same conclusion about traditional masculinity: its failure to uphold through the passage of time. Charlie, struggling to reconcile his desire to trust his own impulses and fulfill his own desires with the expectations set by his family faces his doom because he is unable to commit to one or the other. There is no right choice, and the violent conclusion of the film simultaneously allows the traditional man to survive, Michael, while also framing him as an aggressor to a new kind of masculinity that is arising with the changing times. Ultimately, the viewer sympathizes with Charlie's failure, and empathizes with the new masculinity he represents. This new masculinity, predicated on a sense of obligation to found family, and allowing space for outcasts, organizes itself in such a way to allow the transmasculine viewer to empathize with Charlie's position. The emphasis on outcasts and moving against the dominant culture and expectations of a moment in order to fulfill personal desires and to accept those who are not accepted into the dominant reads as explicitly queer, and the reliance this narrative has on presentations of masculinity gives the transmasculine viewer space within which to take the differences as lessons for how to embody masculinity in a way that does not have to succumb to traditional expectations.

[3] Familial Bonds and Unreciprocated Desire –

Like *The Deer Hunter*, the erotic triangle in *Mean Streets* serves to establish desire for a male character. While *The Deer Hunter* uses its triangle to frame the absent Nick as adored by the two active characters, Linda and Michael, in *Mean Streets*, all of the trio that make up the triangle are active

characters, shifting the balance of the dynamic. Charlie is desired by Teresa, but desires Johnny and Teresa equally. Johnny's desire for Charlie is framed in a more juvenile way, frequently acting in order to encourage Charlie's attentions to be directed towards him. His relationship with Teresa is familial, the two are cousins, but Johnny frequently makes sexual comments directed towards Teresa. These comments, however, are used not to express his desire for Teresa, but to get Charlie's attention, and to encourage the explosive nature of their relationship. Ultimately, the rivalry that forms one leg of the triangle is between Johnny and Teresa, competing for Charlie's attentions (see fig. 3). Charlie fulfills the role of the traditional love interest, expressing clear interest romantically in Teresa that he is unwilling to fulfill because of social expectation and because of his unwillingness to forgo his intimate relationship with Johnny. His inability to deconstruct the triangle and resolve the rivalry between the pair is part of what dooms all three of them to their fate.

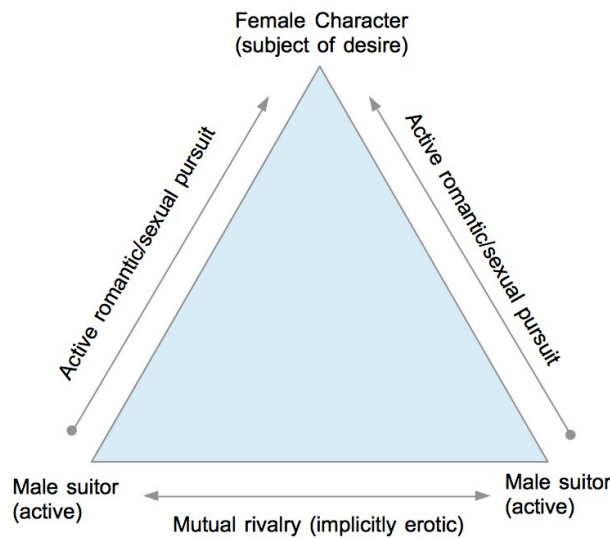


Fig. 1

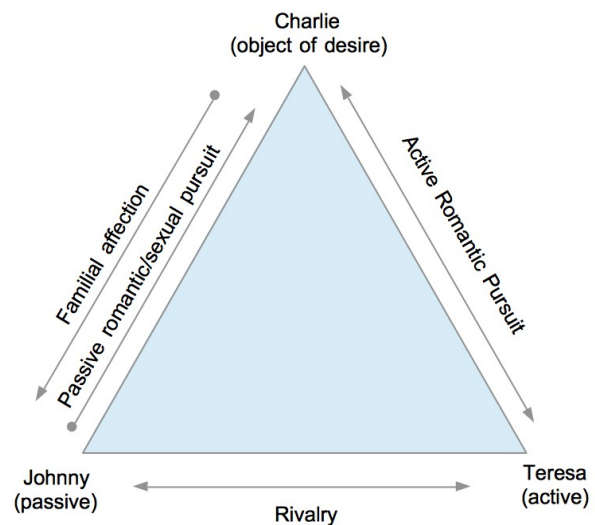


Fig. 3

Charlie's intimacy with Teresa is explicitly romantic. They sneak around their neighborhood, sharing hotel rooms so that they can sleep together, and Teresa expresses her desire to have a *real* relationship with Charlie, asking him to move in with her when she moves out of her parents

apartment. Charlie's affection for Johnny aligns itself more clearly in the familial architecture that the film establishes with its close-knit community dynamics. He assumes an almost big brother role in Johnny's life, most often performing as the responsible mafioso in an attempt to protect Johnny from his mistakes. Despite this, when the pair are alone with one another, the mask falls away and the viewer bears witness to the intimate, jovial relationship the pair have. They are young and foolish, and the film frequently shows them wandering the streets until the small hours of the morning, carrying on conversations that continue between cuts, the locations shifting behind them while their closeness remains. Charlie's fraternal position with Johnny does not reflect Johnny's relationship to Charlie, however. Where Charlie can climb into bed with Johnny and think nothing of it, Johnny's tension in relation to Charlie, and his bristling at the gay characters that are briefly introduced after a gunfight in the bar, establish his nervousness about male intimacy but does nothing to negate the physical closeness he maintains with Charlie. It is clear that his affection for Charlie goes beyond the familial, but in a way that neither Johnny, nor the film, knows how to realize. Instead their interactions and much of their physical intimacy is fueled by aggression.

The primary importance of this triangle in validating a transmasculine viewer is its supplemental representation of Charlie as attractive and desirable as a partner. This framing aligns with the scopophilic look of the transmasculine viewer, who is permitted by the film to view Charlie as both an erotic object of desire as well as a romantic one. Viewing Charlie in his relationship with Teresa, the transmasculine viewer can temporarily alleviate their masculine identity to place themselves in Teresa's perspective in relation to Charlie. Additionally, the camera, revealing both Charlie and Teresa's bodies in their intimate scene, permits the transmasculine to see Charlie's body as desirable, and have that desire mimicked on screen by Teresa. This desire is doubled in Johnny, but enacted in a different manner. Johnny represents the covertly scopophilic gaze of the transmasculine viewer. Often unrealized or unaddressed by the film, Johnny's repression of his desire for Charlie mimics the

necessity of the transmasculine viewer's gaze in order to insert themselves into dominantly operative spaces, and situate themselves counter to that dominant perspective. Johnny's characterization provides a space in which the closeted transmasculine viewer can enact their desire without it being immediately and overtly read as queer. While this argument is not radical in its nature, the representation of the closet on screen can be equally important to overt representations of queerness, and still leaves space in which the transmasculine viewer can situate themselves in their identificatory look, even if that situation engenders a retrospective looking.

[4] *Violent Care-taking* –

Johnny's one-sided interest in Charlie is clearly exemplified by the fights that break out between them over the course of the film. As we have established in the latter section, Johnny's affection and his need for Charlie's attention is often concealed beneath a veil of aggression or violence. Johnny aggravates Charlie to the point of reaction and Charlie, unable to get Johnny to listen to him otherwise, behaves aggressively towards him in order to get him to listen. This dynamic, fueled by Charlie's protective instinct for Johnny, and Johnny's desire for Charlie, fuses to create a sexually charged dynamic that cannot be realized within the framework of the film.

This is most evident in two parallel sequences in the film in which Johnny and Charlie, after moments of explicit violence, walk through Little Italy together. The first occurs after the shooting in Tony's Place. After an altercation with two gay men who were in the bar with them, Charlie and Johnny split from the group and take a meandering path back to Charlie's apartment. Peering at a gun in a shop window, Charlie reprimands Johnny for a past altercation with a cop in which Johnny got beat around. The pair fake a fight with each other, sparring gently with one another. When Johnny sees someone he thinks is a man he owes money to, Charlie smacks him gently on the cheek and they begin to fight with garbage can lids. This fighting, initiated by Charlie, appears brotherly in nature, Charlie expressing his care for Johnny and chastising him for his misdemeanors. He takes Johnny back to his

apartment and the pair strip down and climb into bed together. Johnny, attempting to continue the fraternal camaraderie we bear witness to in the previous scenes is cut short when Johnny, peering out Charlie's window to look at his own apartment, makes a joke about Teresa's epilepsy. Charlie climbs out of the bed, angry at Johnny and the ease of their intimacy disperses, despite Charlie's attempt to reestablish it, making a joke to Johnny as he pulls the covers over his head. This intimate scene, possibly read as something with subtext that implies a relationship other than the fraternal is cut-short by the introduction of Teresa and Charlie's relationship. The film attempts to disallow any reading of Charlie and Johnny's relationship as other than familial with juxtapositions like this one.

The second walking scene begins with Johnny on the roof of a building, attempting to “shoot the light out of the empire state building.” Teresa has requested Charlie go stop him before he gets in trouble, so Charlie exits the bar and goes climbs up to the roof to join Johnny. Johnny, unashamed of the havoc the gunshots are causing, fires again even as Charlie reprimands him, cracking jokes. Charlie, unable to contain himself, smiles, his fondness for Johnny overriding his usual attempts to control Johnny. It is not until Johnny throws a firecracker off the building that Charlie grabs him and the pair flee. The scene cuts and we see the pair running across the roof of buildings, police sirens wailing in the background. The scene cuts again and the pair enter a graveyard. Johnny, attempting to maintain the closeness demonstrated by Charlie's first reaction attempts to recall a childhood memory of the two of them playing hide-and-seek in the same graveyard. Charlie, back to business, and back to his attempts at getting Johnny back on the straight and narrow, ignores him. He threatens Johnny with violence. Here the difference between the two is evident. Johnny is childish in his responses to Charlie, embodying a desire for an earlier time, without responsibility, when the two were close without the weight of expectation heavy between them. In the previous walking scene, their aggression is playful and affectionate. Here, Charlie is down to business, keeping his distance from Johnny. Though the threat is clearly empty, he tells Johnny he'll “break both of his arms” if he doesn't fess up and go to

work the next day.

In these moments, Johnny's unrealized desire for Charlie, and Charlie's aggressive response to Johnny to try and get him to behave properly, demonstrates the impossibility of their relationship. Cultural expectation, which disallows Charlie from behaving like a child and shirking responsibility, is a necessary part of how Johnny conceptualizes his relationship with Charlie. Their intimacy is predicated on a boyish playfulness that Charlie cannot succumb to lest he forget his adult responsibilities. The tension between the responsibility, represented by Teresa, Charlie's uncle, and Johnny's loans, and a desire for childishness, represented by Johnny and Charlie's relationship, and Charlie's repeated forgiveness of Johnny's transgressions, come to a head in the last third of the film. Johnny, expected to show up with the \$2,000 he owes Michael, arrives late. Charlie suddenly displays actual anger at Johnny, an anger that does not dissipate when Johnny makes jokes at him and Teresa, as we have seen in the past. Charlie forces Johnny out of the apartment, grabbing him by the lapels of his jacket and pushing him against the wall. Johnny, stuck with Charlie's weight holding him in place, asks a sexually explicit and offensive question about Teresa. "I always wondered about what happens when she comes. She get a fit?" Charlie breaks, slapping Johnny hard on the face. Johnny breaks and the pair begin to fight. The fight triggers Teresa's seizures and Johnny flees. The explicit nature of Johnny's remarks, triggers Charlie's fury and he leaves Teresa behind in the care of a woman in the apartment. Charlie chases Johnny into the street, pushing him against a garage door. Johnny begins to cry, accusing Charlie of never doing anything for him. Charlie, intermittently slapping Johnny, begins to stroke his face, grabbing his shoulders. The scene oscillates between tenderness and aggression, Charlie unable to return to the state of forgiving care he has previously demonstrated. Johnny's emotions in the scene dictate explicitly his desire to infuriate Charlie in order to be validated in his sense that Charlie cares about him. The scene concludes with Charlie holding Johnny by the back of the neck. He runs his hand down Johnny's face, and squeezes his chin, asking him if he "hurt him." Johnny, the fight gone

out of him, cannot even look Charlie in the eye, and his demeanor is demure and ashamed, but he leans into Charlie's touch, and lets Charlie lead him to the bar.

Charlie ultimately chooses Teresa and Johnny over his responsibility, but his decision ends in violence. Their non-traditional familial unit, existing counter to the expectations set by Charlie's uncle, breaks the desired conclusion for Charlie's life. The trio flee Little Italy, leaving the safe space of their home, and are followed by Michael who, with a hired hitman, fires at them. Johnny is shot in the neck, Charlie crashes the car, and Teresa goes through the windshield. The film ends in explosive violence, disrupting Charlie's commitment to Teresa and Johnny, who he values over the rest of his family, and demonstrates that this break from dominant cultural expectations is seen as untenable. The implicit queerness of Charlie and Johnny's relationship, and the condemned nature of Teresa and Charlie's relationship, are unable to be addressed, and the violence that has riddled the film is used, ultimately, to eradicate the possibility of the emergent dynamic.

Even the explicit representations of gayness in the film are framed as violent in nature and condemned by the film.. When Johnny and Charlie flee Tony's Place after the shooting they get into Michael's car with a pair of gay men who had come to the bar from the Village. One of the men, Sammy, comes onto Charlie in the back seat of the car, and then precedes to pitch his torso through the window of the car, calling out vulgar come-ons to men on the street. Sammy responds to the violent language (Johnny calls him a "faggot" when he comes onto Charlie) and the aggressive responses of the men on the street (they are shown making rude gestures at him through the window of the car) with his own version of violence: unbridled sexuality that is framed as aggressive and inappropriate due to the explicit nature of his remarks. Michael kicks the men out of the car, and Charlie and Johnny attempt to attack Sammy before splitting paths with them. This sequence especially serves to condemn the gay characters, framing them as inappropriate, and highlighting the cultural response that the boys have to the gay men: the immediate reaction to the pair is disgust and frustration with their presence.

This explicit representation of the impossibility of queerness in the film could be read as negating the space in which a transmasculine viewer finds footing. However, I would argue that the film's interest in establishing a framework for a chosen family, something commonly seen in queer literature, and Johnny's relationship to Charlie, still maintain a space in which the transmasculine gaze can exist. The unreciprocated desire that Johnny embodies represents the covert looking that transmasculine viewers necessarily participate in due to their unaddressed identity. The boyish nature of Charlie and Johnny's interactions appeal to an identificatory look that does not relate to the oppressive, traditional standards exemplified by the other men in the film. Thus, though the violence ultimately condemns these sympathetic characters, in a non-lethal way it also makes up a primary element of the affectionate dynamic seen on screen, and exists as an intrinsic part of the masculine relationships shown on screen, thus it appeals to a transmasculine desire to identify with masculinity, including the aggression inherent within those characterizations.

A Brief Conclusion –

Ultimately, though *Mean Streets* presents an equally nihilistic conclusion for the potentially queer relationships displayed on screen, the focus on masculine spaces, masculine relationships, and the emphasis on chosen family, provide subtext and room for the transmasculine viewer to see themselves. The explicit conflict between dominant (traditional) culture and the emergent impulses revealed by Charlie's inability to fulfill his responsibilities speak to the transmasculine viewer's position in the emergent film culture, operating counter to the dominant. The emergent, which allows the space in which readings such as these occur, is the space in which the transmasculine viewer exists and is conceived of, and the film's explicit address of the emergent, places it explicitly within that lineage.

The relevancy in considering both of these films in reference to conceptualizing the transmasculine viewer is twofold. First, examining their emphasis on portrayals of masculinity with the non-traditional masculine viewer in mind opens up new readings of the film, and reveals the multi-

faceted nature of masculine presentation. This allows for the transmasculine viewer to be present not as an insurgent viewer but as someone who is representative of the same implicit process of understanding gender and identity as what is presented on-screen. Secondly, they demonstrate the relevancy of interpretation in film-going and the presence of emergent narratives that reorient films towards viewers that are not typically considered in the narrative. This reorientation explicitly includes the transmasculine viewer, whose gaze necessitates access to queerness, explicit or implicit.

My use of these films can be contested because of their violent natures and their position within a canon of film that summarily disavows the presence of female, trans, and queer spectators. However, I believe that radical reinterpretation of these films is necessary in order to participate in a recalibration of filmic history. Additionally, it is problematic to suggest that the transmasculine viewing process of film's such as these should not be considered simply because the films do not intend for a viewer other than a man to participate actively in the cinematic gaze. Whether a movie is intended for one audience or not, we do not have control over who watches films, and it is limiting to disavow the transmasculine viewer's gaze in reference to film's such as these. This argument could have been focalized around films that represent transness or queerness explicitly on-screen, or could've been focalized on female-led films, or any other myriad combination of genres and ideas. However, I believe that in focusing the argument here on two films that can be placed within a lineage of masculinity on-screen, and deal with masculinity explicitly, there is a great deal of material within which to understand the cinematic process within the transmasculine viewer can see proxies of themselves and, through the identificatory gaze, participate in the broader framework of viewing processes.

Conclusion: Queer Time and Transitive Identity

While this project ultimately concerns itself with the inception of a transmasculine viewer, contesting the binary established in Laura Mulvey's work "Visual Pleasure," I would like to end this project with a broader suggestion. In the first chapter I noted that every viewer who watches movies, if we believe Mulvey's assertion of assumed point of view, identifies in a transitive state in order to watch films. This universal, transitive viewing state is not necessarily about the gender boundaries that are traversed when watching films, as Mulvey suggests. Instead, I would posit that the nature of the identificatory look, which necessitates a desire to *be like* whatever character on-screen the viewer identifies with, becomes a kind of desire within which we embody those characters that we are looking at. This embodiment exists explicitly during the viewing of a film, in which we think like, see through, and live with the character we identify with while they act out the narrative on-screen. For the transmasculine viewer, this identification can extend beyond the film viewing experience, if their identification is, in part, fueled by learning about presentations of masculinity, which can inform their presentation outside of the realm of the movie theater. But this embodied acceptance and manifestation of the identificatory look is not relegated solely to the transmasculine viewer. As Mulvey's use of the mirror theory suggests, every viewer learns, to some degree, about presentation and expression through watching films. Whether you identify with a character that is unlike you, or shares your gender or identity, those characters are never a perfect representation of who we are as a viewer, and we take their perspective on, assuming the role of an "other." That role can follow us out of the viewing experience in the form of expressions, accents, quotes, posture. We learn from movies, whether we want to admit it or not. The gaze I attribute in this project to the transmasculine viewer, while still specific to them, can, I believe, be expanded to better understand the way that the viewing of films impacts the way that all people, regardless of their identities, learn about *how to be* from watching films.

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