

Deliverance: Male Power and Identity in Film and Art

“Manliness is a symbolic script, a cultural construct, endlessly variable and not always necessary”, writes John Lynch of Cultural Studies.

Deliverance was the title of an exhibition at the Leeds Metropolitan University Gallery focussed on the theme of male power. The show took its name from the 1972 film directed by John Boorman and the four male artists in the show each attempted to come to terms with the notion of articulating power in a gendered and changing world. Other than the reference to male power there was no explicit link to the film yet it does provide an interesting entry point for considering the works in the show and the wider cultural issues at stake. It is precisely the difficulties inherent in the process of defining, asserting and sustaining a masculine identity that can be seen in these different orders of representation of film and gallery installation.

Linda Ruth Williams in an article for *Sight and Sound* on the film *Deliverance* points to the ambiguity and contradiction of the word itself: it is a liberation (active) yet also at the same time it is a submission (passive)³. The need for the establishing of gender identity is an articulation of a desire, yet one that uses a pre-existing language and structure of experience that effects limits on that which can be scripted. The actual culturally specific determinate of masculine identity is

a product of the tension between the two elements. As Susan Faludi so effectively shows in her recent book on this subject, when the ability to exercise this illusory power is drastically diminished what is left is only the latter part of the equation: a feeling of submission to an empty category.⁴

In the film, four suburban, white, 40 year old men, with varying degrees of confidence, seek to escape the banality of corporate life by canoeing down an isolated river in the Appalachian mountains. The journey down the river serves as the task to be mastered which is central to any male group outing. Men sharing intimate moments, sleeping in the same tents and supporting each other need to have an organizing imperative to allay anxiety. The forever flowing and turbulent river also serves as a metaphor for masculinity as a process rather than a state of being simply achieved. It is always a tenuous and anxious state of self thinking that needs to be endlessly reinforced. The journey down the river becomes a journey through the darkest and most frightening aspects of masculinity.

By going into the wild, through successfully navigating the river (symbolically gendered, of course, as female), there can be a reinvigorated return to the home, work and city. The publication of the novel in 1970 and the film in

1972 points to a moment when there seemed to be a perceived collapse of what had been a long established sense of secure American masculinity. Vietnam is in the background, a place where the triumphant American male order was being systematically undermined by the pain of uncharacteristic defeat and the emerging loss of confidence and physical power. This coincided with an impending oil crisis which again pointed to the instability of the economic system with far reaching consequences on employment patterns. What makes the film so interesting is what is presented is not a simple reassertion of a singular authentic masculine identity but an anxiety ridden meeting of confused and plural experiences of identity.

If masculinity is not a fixed, essential identity but one always constructed from the socially available images and narratives of any particular moment then *Deliverance* can be read in the light of its contemporary histories. Although the show is called 'Deliverance' perhaps it is actually closer to the more recent film *Fight Club*.⁵ By now masculinity is an identity generated through the consumption of lifestyle products and accessories ("I used to get off on pornography now it is IKEA catalogues") than through any location within a stable system of employment or social role. Work is now largely in the service sector, traditionally a feminine realm, and corporations have been stripped of any outdated nostalgia for loyalty or security. The *Fight Club* becomes a space of authenticity, built on the

¹David Gilmour, *Manhood in the Making*, quoted in Faludi, p.15.

²16 February - 31 March 2001.

³Linda Ruth Williams, 'Blood Brothers' *Sight and Sound*, 4: (9) 1994, pp.16-19.

⁴Susan Faludi, *Stuffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man*, 2000, London: Vintage.

irreducible masculine qualities of the stoic endurance of pain and physical injury. The men do battle, literally, with their perceived grievances, fighting phantoms and symbols of corporate power in an attempt to resist the oppressive pressure to conform to something no longer even definable.

The work in the show, then, can be seen to explore some of these aspects of constructing, at the same as being subject to, male identity. Yuen Fong Ling's installation consists of mediations on three distinct realms of masculine identity: home, work, and sport. In *Home Time* a selection of CDs by male artists are contained by a mass produced CD rack.

This framed by a green mat at the base and a glass apple on top. Yuen reads contemporary masculine gender identity through an older traditional discourse: the bible. By referencing the Garden of Eden and the tree of knowledge he draws attention to the way in which the binary of male/female cannot be simply maintained by recourse to a residual system of thinking. Yeun is using easily available mass produced objects to echo the process of gender identity construction in a modern consumer world.

In *Play Time* a karate suit hangs above crash mats. Martial arts are ritualized combat where men can physically engage with each other in a competitive spirit. The suit is hung by its own belt in a cruciform suggestive of the symbolic image of male transcendence through pain. The ability to fight is considered central to the very definition of masculinity and many boys are from an early age actively encouraged by fathers to engage with its many forms, as any visit to a sports hall or scout hut on a Saturday afternoon will show. This is literally an arena

for the display of male power over other males. *Work Time* consists of two flipcharts standing with pages turned over, a mound of papers underneath on the floor and the two pages left, all blank and devoid of ideas. In the corporate world of MBA speak there are no words to be able to use to articulate the experience of male power in the workplace. If masculinity is a script then there are no new ideas to hand to fill the blank space.

Pat Flynn had two sculptures developed from the theme of computer games, remembering that such games are central to virtual reality spaces and military combat simulations used to train armies. *Tank* is a large scale rendition of a vehicle found in relatively crude computer games from the 1980s. With its green outlines glowing softly in the darkened room there is a shift in scale from the immersive space of the arcade game to the 'Tron' like space of the screened off gallery.

We can appreciate the humour and faintly ridiculous aspect of such references, but the hazy green VDU light is an aesthetic that became far more sinister when it came to be emblematic of the visual spectacle that was the 1991 Gulf War. Even so what can be seen is that such masculine symbols actually point once more to the very process undermining the security of male identity in the domain of combat: technology. Modern warfare is less about physical strength than about computer and technological literacy, and it was the Gulf War that saw significant numbers of women employed for the first time in front-line combat situations on this basis.

Paul Stone displayed three large colour photographs. The two on display upstairs are of a shower head and a urinal. Both are spaces associated with feelings of anxiety for men being sites that involve

some level of public revelation of the body. The work *Pure* shows a close up of a shower head incongruously positioned close to a door. The shower head is one heavily calcified with limescale, dripping slightly, and suggestive of showers found in public facilities such as changing rooms, perhaps at school or a sports centre. Every man is instantly engaged by the reference to such places where group showering after some athletic challenge, awakening memories of humiliation or at best uneasy aversions of potentially dangerous gazes.

Heavenly has a urinal (echoes of Duchamp) with spangly stars placed where piss stains would normally be, including on the floor beneath. There are a whole set of rigid protocols associated with urinals where it is a challenge to be able to urinate successfully in the presence of another man only inches away.

The show was well received and worked well to critically engage with certain aspects of negotiating contemporary masculine identity. It seems to me that we have a choice. We can either continue to endlessly search for temporarily stable categories of gender that will never satisfy, or, rather, we can acknowledge that the categories themselves should be abandoned in favour of thinking something new that can help us begin to change all relationships of power.

⁵Fight club details.