

*Review Essay*

## **Minimal Males: Men in the Movies**

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*ACTING IN THE CINEMA.* By James Naremore. Berkeley. University of California Press. 1988.

*ACTING MALE: Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Clint Eastwood.* By Dennis Bingham. New Brunswick. Rutgers University Press. 1994.

*REBELMALES: Clift, Brando, and Dean.* By Graham McCann. New Brunswick. Rutgers University Press. 1993.

Most people go to the movies to see the stars.

However, the stars are often the last things many academic critics and scholars of film see. Instead, the flowering of academic film studies during recent years has tended to turn screens into semiotic systems of signification, audiences into gendered spectatorial subjects with confused currents of sexual identity, and film figures into representations of crippled psyches reenacting interior scenarios of either aggressive masculine brutality or passive female victimization. With important notable exceptions, most of our academic and scholarly work on film in recent years has reflected the dominance in all university criticism of psycho-

analysis, semiotics, and feminism to the detriment of any close critical attention to performances by individual actors and actresses.

Thus, even structuralists David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, who generally discount psychoanalysis and semiotics in their influential and pervasive works of film history and criticism, also de-emphasize acting by making it merely one of four basic elements of *mise-en-scene* or the “putting into the scene,” the customary term derived from theatrical staging for what appears in front of the camera. Explaining actors and actresses as “figures” of expression and behavior, Bordwell and Thompson see such performance as part of the overall filmic environment to be incorporated within settings and props, lighting, costumes and make-up. Some of the notable exceptions to this scholarly neglect of acting and performance include Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1987), Richard de Cordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), Robert Sklar, *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women’s Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), John O. Thompson, “Screen Acting and the Commutation Test,” *Screen* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 55-69, Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Penguin, 1974), Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), and James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

Of this partial list of works, probably Naremore’s *Acting in the Cinema* comes closest to proffering a general theory and history of cinematic performance from which to generate studies of particular individuals and themes. Naremore provides the student of film with an accessible theoretical foundation and historical framework for a general overall view of the transformation of performance from the stage to film. Organized around controlling concepts about the nature and structure of performance, Naremore’s book achieves considerable historical depth and context by invariably placing his ideas within the broad range of the development of acting and performance dating from the late Renaissance and the late seventeenth century up to our own time. The book deserves special attention because it establishes a vocabulary, terminology, history, and methodology of performance that can provide the basis for organizing and structuring in-depth studies of acting and performance as a force—maybe even the compelling force—of cinema. *Acting in the Cinema* seems quite indispensable to me to initiating any serious strategy for seeing the actor/actress and performance in their true complexity as aspects of cinema that are intrinsically related to but also distinctly different from the other elements of *mise-en-scene*. Moreover, such an appreciation for the significance of acting and performance should help film to realize its full potential as both an aesthetic and cultural form.

The names Konstantin Stanislavsky and Bertolt Brecht pervade *Acting in the Cinema*, delineating the classic opposition between two dominant attitudes toward acting that reflect deeper oppositions about the modern self and culture. “Stanislavsky and his followers are essentially romantics, contested at every point by the radical modernism of Brecht” (3). Concerning Stanislavsky, he writes that

all varieties of teaching derived from his work try to inculcate spontaneity, improvisation, and low-key psychological introspection; they devalue anything that looks stogy, and in their extreme form—namely in the work of Lee Strasberg—they lead to quasi-psychoanalytic rehearsal techniques, inviting the actor to delve into the unconscious, searching out ‘truthful’ behavior. (2)

Stanislavsky emphasizes the screen as the “fourth wall” or traditional proscenium boundary for performance as a representation of reality separate from the world of the audience and the external social environment.

In contrast, Brecht epitomizes an aleatory code of critical antirealism and self-conscious didacticism that collapses the boundary between audience and spectator, undermines the protection of the proscenium by encouraging the immediacy of presentation rather than representation, disrupts continuity and coherence to use anxiety and uncertainty for developing audience involvement and participation, and strives for a “democratic exchange” between the audience and the art form (33). For Naremore, the contrast between the great seminal figures of Stanislavsky and Brecht parallels the movement in film from psychoanalysis to semiotics, inner world to social praxis. Throughout the book, Naremore demonstrates how the dialectic between surface and center, between the semiotics of codified gesture and the center of inner psychological being defines the discourse on performance going back to Diderot’s model of controlled acting; to William Archer in the late nineteenth century replacing pantomime with naturalism; to the importation to America from France of Francois Delsarte’s semiotics of physical gesture by Steele MacKaye, who preceded David Belasco at New York’s Madison Square Garden; to a kind of gymnastics of acting in Moscow that reflected the influence of both Marxists and Frederick Winslow Taylor, the American efficiency expert; to Robert Bresson’s theory of acting as simple expressionism; to the impact of Lee Strasberg’s controversial therapy theory of performance upon the Method school of acting, Group Theater, and the Actor’s Studio. Concerning the latter development of Method acting, Naremore emphasizes the work of Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Jane Fonda, James Dean, and Robert De Niro in promulgating a new doctrine of the actor as autonomous non-conformist engaged in a competition of creativity and authority with the previously privileged director. Such a complex view tends to contrast with Lawrence

Olivier's unpretentious notion of acting as a form of persuasion (51) and Spencer Tracy's famous advice for aspiring actors to assume an attitude of insouciance: "Just know your lines and don't bump into the furniture" (34).

Although Naremore deals brilliantly and persuasively in individual chapters with major female stars—Marlene Dietrich, Lillian Gish, and Katharine Hepburn—the thrust of the book really tends toward a recognition of the originality and non-conformity of male stars in articulating and asserting the special importance of acting and performance in cinema. He also suggests that such figures as Charlie Chaplin, Brando, Cary Grant, James Stewart, James Cagney, and De Niro by virtue of their innovative use of performance participated in a reconsideration of masculinity in American culture.

However, to appreciate the relationship between acting and changing notions of masculinity, we need to turn to Dennis Bingham's *Acting Male: Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Clint Eastwood* and Graham McCann's *Rebel Males: Clift, Brando, and Dean*. Both Bingham and McCann build upon an assumption of the complexity of cinematic acting and performance to propose film's participation in the construction and reconstruction of masculinity in modern culture. Citing Naremore's work, Bingham argues that the gestures and physical movements of acting and performance invariably achieve meaning by articulating an ideological identity and position, including an ideology of sex and gender. He maintains that the dominant ideology of masculinity in film and the culture has established a false norm of a stable "unitary" and "monolithic" heterosexual male (8, 19). Bingham "decodes" (62) such conventional unitary notions of masculinity and suggests the presence both in film and the culture of alternative models and ideologies of masculinity. Seeing Jimmy Stewart as typifying the "magnified individual" of Hollywood stardom "who represents a unique, continuous personality that is nonetheless produced by, and reproduces, cultural standards of race" (15), Bingham also believes Stewart typifies the "fragility of patriarchal gender constructions" (4). For Bingham, Stewart simply lacks the "solidity" of the "male icon" and becomes an "utterly ambivalent persona" (39, 40).

To a certain extent, Bingham's figure of the stable, dominant masculine monolith (19) becomes something, so to speak, of a straw straight man; he exists primarily to face deconstruction in the confrontation with the complexity of what Bingham envisions as the potential of the new male hero of difference, diversity, depth. By analyzing the faces and interpreting the acting and performance of Stewart, Nicholson, and Eastwood, Bingham hopes to expose the weakness and ambivalence at the heart of mainstream America's dominant "ideologically constructed masculinity" (24). Although this idea understates the complexity of major male stars since the beginning of modern cinema, including silent era stars like Chaplin and Valentino, Bingham nevertheless beautifully bridges the world of screen images and the world of cultural constructions of gender. He artfully uses a psychoanalytical method to make this connection, synthesizing concepts

of masculinism and masochism, male hysteria and memory trauma, and the *unheimlich* or Freudian “uncanny” as “the return of the repressed” (57-67). He proposes that in light of this Freudian analysis, acting becomes a form of psychic reenactment of unconscious and repressed experiences related to childhood trauma of sexual difference. According to Bingham, Stewart’s acting in films throughout his career, whether conscious or not, undermines conventional “masculinism,” using masochism as a means for unmasking conventional male subjectivity (66). In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Bingham sees “the surrendering gaze at the moment of rapture” (37), while in putatively masculine Westerns, masculinity actually masquerades deeper “paralysis” as in *The Naked Spur* (60), *Destry Rides Again*, or *The Man from Laramie*. Bingham brings together Stewart’s various behaviors and performances in his many films by placing them within a broad notion of “bisexuality” as the existence of the feminine within man’s nature. “The secret is bisexuality, and the lack of ambiguity with which Stewart’s quite ambiguous career presents itself shows how far dominant ideology will go to keep that secret from consciousness” (96).

For Bingham, Jack Nicholson more directly confronts and challenges common conventions of masculinity. “Many of his films, especially those of the seventies, scrutinize and problematize male subjectivity” (103). Nicholson typifies what many critics term the emerging “new American cinema” (104) that more immediately questions the relationship of male subjectivity and authority (118). Indeed, for Nicholson in such films as *The Last Detail* and *Chinatown*, Oedipal resolution and “the resultant male identity” become a “cage” indicating that “the power he craves is also the power that oppresses him” (126-127). Nicholson matches such complexity by developing a penchant for “Brechtian performance” known as “‘acting in quotation marks’” (104, 125). With this technique, the actor manages to comment upon and interpret the fictional character as in the ironic comments Nicholson’s character named Buddusky makes about his own masculine exploits throughout *The Last Detail* (124-125). Nicholson makes the theme and question of masculinity a central and self-conscious concern by first highlighting and then negotiating with the “lack” that pertains between the masculine subject and the idealization of masculinity (127). The complexity and depth of Nicholson’s performances suggest for Bingham “that actors’ presence are so strong that they themselves can be *auteurs* whose styles and personas transcend and define the *mise-en-scene*,” while also validating the formalist thesis of Bordwell and Thompson that “the place of the actor in the film apparatus” should be “as an expressive figure in the *mise-en-scene*” (143). To Bingham, “*The Shining* provides brilliant examples of why both should be taken into account” (143).

In comparison to Stewart and Nicholson, Clint Eastwood seems less impressive to Bingham as an actor but equally fascinating as an embodiment of an evolving ideology of masculine representation in America. Eastwood stands for narcissism and ego in the process of reconstructing and reperforming masculine

identity (169, 174). Eastwood the masculine “monolith” (179) projects hysteria onto woman rather than internalizing it upon himself as other critics such as Adam Knee and Paul Smith argue (192), and in such films as *Dirty Harry* exploits women’s “patriarchal role as keeper” of the phallic order (191). However later Eastwood films, *The Beguiled* and *Tightrope* for example, reveal an inner darkness concerning men’s fear of women (195, 197, 205), and portray masculinity as a facade for insecurity about authority and power in a changing world. While I agree that Eastwood probably fears many things, I find it hard to see women in general as one of them; yet I also agree that Eastwood through more of his career than many realize attempts to engage questions of psychology, society, and control that push the masculine envelope well beyond conventional descriptions of his roles.

To Graham McCann, a scholar at Cambridge University with books on Marilyn Monroe and Woody Allen, neither ambivalence nor complexity describe Eastwood in any way. In *Rebel Males* he notes, “Eastwood’s super-male offered the male spectator a vicarious sense of personal potency (with his notorious ‘make my day’ snarl, imitated by innumerable macho fantasists, from plump bar-room habitués to US President Ronald Reagan)” (171). McCann never explains why Eastwood imitators are necessarily fat and in bars rather than underweight and in health spas, but the combination of images perfectly fits the dichotomy he immediately sets up between, on the one hand, the kind of monolithic and pervasive masculinism that concerns Bingham, and on the other, an ideal of masculinity that emerged in the late 1940s and 1950s in the figures of Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando, and James Dean. McCann celebrates actors our entire culture has celebrated for at least a generation, but not quite to the extent and in the same way that McCann does. McCann romanticizes and idealizes Clift, Brando, and Dean not only as great innovators of masculine identity and behavior, but even more as oppositional figures who challenge and overcome extraordinary sexual prejudice and obstacles to achieve new levels of creativity and strength. Here is an example of his overall evaluation of them and their influence on acting, cinema, and American culture:

Clift, Brando and Dean were without doubt the three most influential (and probably the most gifted) male movie stars of the 1950s. . . . All three were products of the American Midwest . . . . All three clashed with their fathers when it became known that they were set on pursuing a career as “effeminate” and “frivolous” as acting. All three were, in very profound ways obsessed with their mothers: Clift’s mother sought to enjoy success and high status vicariously through her son, and she dominated him until his premature death; Brando’s mother encouraged him when he was a boy, but died an alcoholic as he was being acclaimed; Dean’s mother died of

cancer when he was only nine years of age, and the bitterness and regret over her absence never left him. (2-3)

In addition to sharing such similarities in background and psychology, they also share, according to McCann, a quality of cultural and political heroism.

All three began their careers, learned their craft and became stars in the post-war years—the era of McCarthyism and the Cold War . . . . The McCarthyite reign of terror during the first half of the 1950s fostered a social climate which facilitated the enforcement of conformity. Much American cinema, like the culture at large, devoted itself to the glorification and reinforcement of individual success and crass material gain, and to the most strait-laced adherence to puritan [sic] values. . . . Previously, as far as movie-makers had been concerned, the sexual identity of men had been simple, solid and “straight.” In the 1950s this changed. (3, 11)

Most important, what McCann terms the “bisexuality” of all three actors accounts for their unique quality of rebellion and non-conformity and helps to explain their great leadership and creativity in film and culture.

They all felt themselves to be bisexual and therefore well suited to roles which expressed an erotic quality bereft of rigid gender identity. As each man reached adulthood, he was confronted by a daunting array of social, sexual, cultural and political problems. It seemed as though society was unusually anxious (in the age of witch-hunts and “juvenile delinquency”) for its young citizens to conform to traditional values and familiar types. As did many others of their generation, Clift, Brando and Dean rebelled against this climate of conformity; the difference was that *they* rebelled in the most sharply self-conscious manner, in the most powerful medium, with the most memorable of images. (3)

Throughout this book, McCann valiantly links his heroes and his subjects to major figures and themes in American culture from Emerson, Thoreau, and de Crevecoeur to Jonathan Edwards and Edward Taylor to the frontier West and violence as a pervasive force in American character. Ironically, the figure who seems most relevant to McCann’s argument concerning the intrinsic connection of love, sexuality, and democratic ideology remains absent—Walt Whitman. Like Whitman, McCann argues that the key to true freedom and creativity on all individual and social levels can be found in sexual liberation and nonconformity.

Unlocking the inner and outer cages of sexual repression opens all doors and cultivates love and equality. However, the absence of Whitman may convey a significant difference between Whitman's position and ideology and McCann's. McCann seems to associate language itself with social and personal stultification, rigidification of old forms, and the institutionalization of death. Discussing his subjects' difficulty with language, he writes:

Their inarticulacy, whether feigned or real, was a signal that words were inadequate to convey the tangle of inner feelings. Their war with words (the great authority figures) told us, in effect, that they had emotions that went beyond language. (17)

Also in contrast to Whitman, McCann not only celebrates their greatness as men and actors but also their pain. Indeed, in a way, their pain helps define them as a special brand of "rebel males" who live, work, and feel beyond the capability and experience of ordinary people.

The young rebel males never know what they want or where they are going, and even fairly plausible explanations of what they are after seem too rigid—a strait jacket for longings whose very lack of clear contours is an aspect of their power. Anyone who thinks they know what is really the matter with these characters cannot, by definition, know what is the matter with them. In this context, it becomes clear why Clift's silent stare, Brando's mumbling and Dean's giggle were so much a part of what they had to say. (16-17)

Those who find themselves hating either Newt Gingrich or Rush Limbaugh these days might consider sending them a copy of *Rebel Males* in hopes of inducing terminal gagging. To cultural and political conservatives, McCann's rhetoric and ideas clearly would seem to equate rebellion and non-conformity to self-obsession, narcissism, and immediate gratification. His attack on language and structure and his advocacy of sexual experimentation and diversity suggest the collapse of psychological and social structures in favor of total freedom and openness. Thus, McCann turns his male rebels into embodiments of this ideology. Of Clift, he writes, "Obviously, he was not another Gable or Tracy—a traditional, tough, taciturn leading man; he was rather remote, displaced, a loner, and somewhat androgynous in his appeal" (47). Equally important, he articulates them as models and leaders for a kind of utopian possibility and future that resonates with the idealism of the counter culture of the Vietnam era. Thus, he says of Clift,

He represented the 'new' kind of man for the 1950s; a man who refused to make judgements on sexual preference. He was

perhaps the most Jamesian actor of the era. Inwardness, calculation, coolness, and warmth combined in a single character, a calmness about enduring anguish—these were the qualities Clift embodied. (47)

McCann's analysis of these rebel males on the screen conveys his devotion and personal commitment to them in a way that adds to rather than detracts from his judgement and understanding of them. Again of Clift he writes, "Few audiences at the time were aware of the significance of that androgynous swagger—it was very subtle—but it was as though Clift was telling his female admirers, 'I'm as beautiful as you are—so who needs you?'" (53) About Clift's famous eyes, he says:

In close-ups one is drawn to these eyes. Large, grey, infinitely expressive in his handsome but rather impassive face, they could register yearning, compassion, intelligence and despair in rapid succession. They articulate the ineffable, making Clift something of an *auteur* as he goes far beyond the screenplay. Indeed, the close-up of the eyes became a kind of signature. (56)

As John Huston said after directing Clift in *Freud*: "It was impossible not to marvel at and admire his talent. Monty's eyes would light up, and you could actually 'see' an idea being born in 'Freud's' mind" (56).

Obviously a great supporter of Clift, McCann is no less provocative, compelling, and incisive in his studies of Brando and Dean. One can argue with McCann's judgement and taste, but not really dispute his critical sensibility, depth, passion, and perspicuity. Similarly, one also could argue with his ideological position, rekindling an important, even historic, debate in American culture over forms and definitions of rebellion and individualism as opposed to structures of authority and expression in a democracy. What seems troubling to me and requires some further discussion, however, concerns the way McCann structures his argument. In effect, he makes his case in terms of yet another totalistic ideological bipolarization between absolute notions of good and bad, right and wrong, this particular split being between the sainted bisexual and the constricted straight world of men who somehow cannot have the same intensity of feeling, depth of emotion, need for intimacy, sensitivity, and moral authority as the bisexual. He writes,

The rebel males reminded people that they were all responsible for their sexuality. The assumed definitions of the male sex role were challenged as movies discovered the male capable of sensitivity and an open expression of tenderness—feelings previously ridiculed as effeminate. (30)

This places all sensitive, feeling, and tender men on one side with Brando, Clift, and Dean, and puts on the other side—who?—John Wayne? Ronald Reagan? Rush? any Republican?

In this context in fact, it may be good to return to the figure of Eastwood. In light of the dichotomy and polarization that McCann sets up between absolutely opposed forces, we perhaps could reconsider Eastwood with some potentially interesting results. In the seeming twilight of his career, Eastwood has achieved a new artistic respectability and moral complexity in films like *Unforgiven*, *In the Line of Fire*, and *A Perfect World*. Eastwood, who epitomizes for McCann all of the evil extremes of Hollywood's reflection of obsessive American masculinity, suddenly appears tolerant, open to criticism, pragmatic rather than compulsive in his moral judgements, and critical of moral absolutism. In *A Perfect World* he not only emphasizes the importance of acquiring mature masculinity within a meaningful father and son relationship, he significantly indicates an awareness of human limitations and moral uncertainty. He confesses at the end to not knowing "a damn thing" when he realizes his best intentions have led to destruction. He even proposes the power of love between men and between all people as only a palliative, but a necessary one, rather than an ultimate sentimental solution to life's problems. Such films suggest that what frightens Eastwood more even than the love of women and the woman in himself may be the temptations of mediocrity, conformity, mindlessness, self-surrender, and moral lassitude. Such qualities and such a transformation over so many years certainly should qualify him as a rebel male, especially in these intolerant and vituperative times.