Chapter 4

Working Class Man: Masculinity in Dance

Critical Theories

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ESSAY

Circling the Square

by Chris Nutter

IN JULY 2003, Bravo premiered Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, a reality series in which five urbane gay men give lifestyle makeovers to straight men, and it became an overnight cultural phenomenon. That same summer, The New York Times made the coinage "metrosexual"—a straight guy who grooms himself like a stereotypical gay guy—a household word. Both of these pop culture phenomena reveal that a gay makeover of the straight American male has literally reached prime time.

While the media's reporting on the subject revealed the obvious—that indeed straight men are looking more gay these days—the real and radical change in straight American men has gone virtually unnoticed. Much more than a matter of heterosexual men simply working out, waxing, and wearing Prada, straight men are liberating themselves from homophobia, leaving themselves open to gay influence, and thus to a more expansive idea of what it means to be a man. No longer averse to "gay traits" in the way that straight men of Ronald Reagan's and John Wayne's generation were, the new American man has made his way out of this narrow, homophobic ideal of manhood and embraced a larger world. Those in the vanguard include actor Eric McCormack of Will & Grace, who has said that Will is close to his own (non-gay) personality; San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom, who has become a leading gay activist; and the Carlson twins modeling in unabashedly homoerotic poses for Abercrombie & Fitch. Right behind them is every straight guy who auditioned to go on prime time TV to be made over by a team of gay men. Call him the "post-straight" American male.

The rise of the post-straight male constitutes a drastic shift in the Zeitgeist, because in traditional American culture homophobia in men has not only been indulged, it has been respected. And the impact of this phobia was by no means limited to maintaining the great divide between straight men and gay men. Anything associated with male homosexuality—from dancing and creativity to male beauty and friendships with women—has been stigmatized, too, estranging the straight American male from human traits erroneously labeled as "gay." Exerting what is surely the greatest impact on American manhood since the rise of feminism in the 1970's, gay liberation is not only helping to heal relationships between straight men and gay men, it is also allowing "gay" qualities back into the construction of masculinity, and many straight men are realizing that they've been on the losing end of homophobia, too.

This tectonic shift in the expectations of straight American men did not happen overnight but instead belongs to a movement that's been underway for decades. As gay liberation spread in the 1970's and 80's and gay men quietly and bravely came out to their straight friends and relatives and broke new ground for what was acceptable and even desirable in men, there emerged a more open, expressive, gay-friendly male character. Even when it was illegal for gay men to congregate in bars or clubs, and homosexuals were regularly thrown in jail, fired, kicked out of their homes, and given shock treatments as "cures," there were straight men who defied homophobia. Actually, gay men in big cities have known of the cool straight man's existence for decades. He was the heterosexual hair stylist at the salon in the Village, the straight DJ at the disco in the Castro, and the fag-hag's boyfriend in West Hollywood who embraced her gay friends.

Also appearing in gay-oriented books and films, this guy was the straight character who lived or worked in gay environs, or the straight actor who played gay roles with no loss of empathy for the character. For example, in the 1968 play and 1970 film The Boys in the Band, actor Cliff Gorman brought to life the character of Emory, the quintessential “nelly queen,” and did so with a realism and complexity that made it hard to believe it was a heterosexual man in the role. In Tales of the City, which the San Francisco Chronicle began to serialize in 1976, Armistead Maupin created the character of Brian Hawkins, a straight man who lived, worked, and socialized in the gay universe of 1970’s San Francisco.

In the 1970’s and early 80’s Broadway choreographer and director Bob Fosse was defying practically every limit on the straight male identity, first by succeeding in a world dominated by gay men, then by daring to be “flamboyant” in the choreography of his Broadway shows, notably Cabaret. World-famous party promoter Ian Schrager, the straight half of Studio 54, helped usher in the era of “gay cachet” by turning disco, hitherto a gay cultural phenom, into a national craze. Republican Senator Barry Goldwater, considered the father of modern conservatism, became an open advocate for gay rights when his grandson came out of the closet, years later taking a stand against the ban on gays serving in the military by writing in The Washington Post that “you don’t have to be straight to shoot straight.” Phil Donahue spoke publicly about his own journey out of the homophobia of his working-class Irish upbringing and became the first TV host to present gay men in a fair and open light.

Still, with the homo-averse image of Ronald Reagan still representing the American male ideal, this alternate straight man remained ignored in the 1980’s, or under suspicion for being gay himself. (Even Bob Fosse in his 1979 autobiographical film All That Jazz included the death-bed epiphany that his compulsion to sleep with slews of women probably came from his own fear that deep-down he must be homosexual.) It was in the 90’s that the post-straight male started to gain prominence. In 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton became the first candidate for national office to court the gay vote and to speak out against homophobia. Also in that year, Calvin Klein hired Herb Ritts to photograph a shaved, plucked, and pumped Mark Wahlberg in classically objectifying homoerotic poses for Calvin Klein underwear, and did the same with Antonio Sabato, Jr., four years later. In 1993, Tom Hanks portrayed a gay man in the movie Philadelphia and later thanked his gay mentor in his Oscar acceptance speech.

By the late 90’s, the examples in the media of this transformation became innumerable. Will & Grace debuted in 1998 and became one of the hottest shows in the country. Not only was the leading gay character played by a heterosexual man who classified himself in an interview with Diane Sawyer as “sexually straight, but socially gay”—a social creature theretofore known only to gay urbanites—the ratings for the show were so high that it was clear that many straight men were tuning in each week and getting a pretty massive infusion of gay culture (or at least a TV version thereof). This included prominent depictions of a reversed world of straight men in the gay mix—as with Woody Harrelson’s role as Grace’s boyfriend learning what it’s like to be in the minority, seeing life through a gay cultural prism, learning the art of playing gay, and ultimately understanding Grace better through her relationship with Will.

A number of movies reinforced Will & Grace’s depiction of the famous attraction between gay men and straight women, notably My Best Friend’s Wedding, The Object of My Affection, and The Next Best Thing, which was further reinforced by such famous real-life friendships as the one between Madonna and Rupert Everett. In addition, many of the most popular shows in the country—from Six Feet Under and Sex and the City to South Park and Spin City—had leading straight male characters who were very open to their gay counterparts and to their own “gay” qualities. And in the Oscar-winning movie Gods and Monsters, Sir Ian McKellen’s older sophisticated gay character brought Brendan Fraser’s young brute out of his homophobic cloister and into a new world of expression and connectedness, encapsulating in fiction a process clearly underway in the larger culture.

Straight men also became inundated with gay-inflected images of themselves. Abercrombie & Fitch turned homoerotic into hetero-erotic with their Carlson twins campaign, objectifying two all-American straight boys in the same way that straight men have traditionally objectified women. (Of course, they were also pitching to the gay male audience through these images, further shifting the power dynamic between gay men and straight men by placing straight men in the role of conforming to gay men's ideals.) Even national "man's man" magazines like Men's Journal, once content with cover stories on fly fishing, began to put sexy, half-naked guys on the cover, creating a look that could easily be confused with soft-core gay porn, complete with teasers promising the reader gorgeous abs. Puff Daddy's signature fashion line "Sean John" turned what was once quintessentially "gay" into something "gangsta" by debuting a line of Liberace-inspired, full-length fox furs for men.

Since the turn of the millennium, there have been other revolutionary moments, such as the arrival of the Bravo reality dating show Boy Meets Boy. Heralded as the first dating show to feature gay men—and then trashed for being as vapid as its heterosexual counterparts—there was one spectacular element. In the mix of men vying to be chosen by the lead were a few straight men pretending to be gay. Many gay groups were up in arms about this, observing that straight dating shows don't sneak gay people in to trick the lead. (That would soon change.) But when the straight men gave post-show interviews, each revealed that he had experienced an epiphany about the illusory nature of the difference between straight and gay men, while gaining insight into what life is like for gay men in the closet.

But it was Bravo's Queer Eye for the Straight Guy that turned hundreds of years of deep-seated conventional wisdom about American men on its head. While only a make-over show, it resonated with the viewing public because it mirrored something that was happening in the larger culture: gay men were rewriting many of the rules the defined the ideal straight man. Perhaps it was inevitable that labels would soon pop up to describe this new type of male who, while not homosexual, seemed in some ways to be "gay." Terms like "stag-hag" (a play on "fag-hag") and "stray" (for "straight-gay") were applied to straight men who hung around gay ones. "Straight but not narrow" described straight men who weren't hung up about homosexuality. The coinage "hetero-gay" was soon replaced by "metrosexual" to describe straight men who cared about their looks as much as gay men reportedly do.

Actually, the term "metrosexual" was coined some ten years ago, in England, and appeared in Salon.com about a year before The New York Times used it in 2003. However, it languished in obscurity until Queer Eye made the idea of gay influence on straight men undeniable, and thus the concept of the metrosexual acceptable. The fact that the metrosexual has become widely accepted is significant because it normalizes the idea of a "gay influence" on straight men, traditionally a taboo subject. But the metrosexual is in and of himself a very narrow character defined almost exclusively by his gay-inflected appearance—specifically his worked-out, moisturized, hip urban look, which relatively few gay men even possess. As such, it is limited to the realm of style. But this notion is also quite subversive because it represents a straight adoption of the classically gay experience of being sexually aroused by one's own body. It also indicates that straight men have morphed into objects of beauty and not just of power, or have at least merged the two qualities. Way ahead of the curve in this regard was Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was quite the willing "girlie man" when he posed in the early 70's for gay magazines like After Dark.

If it was the common cause of women's liberation that brought straight women and lesbians together in the 1960's and 70's (though the relationship was at times contentious), it is gay liberation that has begun to close the divide between straight and gay men. Think of it as straight men's own gay liberation, just without the gay part. After all, it is much more than one's sexual orientation that's liberated when one comes out; it's also the fear of exhibiting supposedly "gay" traits, as one begins to un-learn the internalized constraints on self-expression. Many heterosexual men are having a similar experience freeing themselves from homophobia and allowing themselves to be exposed to a definition of manhood perpetuated by gay culture that includes traits not associated with traditional masculinity.

WHILE THE RISE of the post-straight male clearly indicates a monumental change in the culture of heterosexual American men, there are of course nuances and countertrends that make the observation of this new identity somewhat more complicated.

First, the post-straight consciousness as defined here is mostly a white cultural phenomenon. Black and Latin cultures are on separate paths with respect to gay liberation, so the dynamics of homosexuality and gay influence are playing themselves out differently in each group. For instance, in black culture, the word "gay" is often associated with "white," and most black and Latin men who have sex with men do not identify as gay. Also, many of the straight male constraints that are liberated by the post-straight consciousness—such as the idea that "real men don't dance"—exist predominately in white culture. Although these racial and ethnic differences make the picture more complex, they do help to illuminate the illusions we hold so dear about what constitutes a gay trait or a straight one; to wit, you'll have a hard time convincing a straight black Brazilian man that swaying his hips when doing the samba makes one "gay."

The second complication relates to the widespread tendency to conflate gayness with femininity. Homophobia has many of its roots in a hatred of the feminine. As the late Quentin Crisp observed about his trials and tribulations as an out gay man in World War II London, he wasn't despised because he was gay but because he was effeminate. Many straight men in the 1970's and 80's made the genuine attempt to relate to and identify with their feminine side (Dustin Hoffman in Tootsie and Alan Alda in general), while straight men in the 90's and 00's have explored their "gay" side (à la Patrick Swayze in To Wong Foo and Eric McCormack in Will & Grace). Is there a difference between the "feminine" and the "gay"? Perhaps not—at least in the minds of straight men. Either way, such manifestations in mainstream media reflect a sincere attempt to explore the other side of the sex-and-gender divide rather than simply to mock any transgression of it, as in, say, the gag drag of Some Like It Hot or the Blaine and Antoine sketches on In Living Color.

The third complexity is the entrenched presence of homophobia in American society, which is still espoused by everyone from the President to the Pope. The embodiment of the stiff, homophobic, right-wing male can still be found in plenty in nascar race audiences and evangelical churches everywhere. But it would be wrong to conclude that because homophobia persists in some quarters that the trend I've identified is confined to large urban centers in the so-called "blue states." Over the past six years I have interviewed dozens of straight men all over the country, most of them under forty, and this research has revealed a whole framework of subtle but deep gay influence at work in the "red states" and in the suburbs. Straight men from South Carolina, Michigan, and Mississippi frequently cited the impact of an older gay uncle or other relative who demonstrated an alternate way of being a man to counter their father's model. Surprisingly enough, almost every straight man I talked to reported that he'd been called "faggot" at one time or another, giving him some experience-based empathy with gay men and demonstrating that homophobia is as much a force for male conformity as against homosexuality.

My own experiences growing up in Alabama and Mississippi match this assessment. My fraternity brothers in college helped open me up to the world, teaching me how to be affectionate with other men, encouraging me to be myself, and in their own ways nudging me out of the closet. Along with my actual brother, they were the first people to run to my side when I came out. A wonderful example of this release of homophobic tension in the heartland could be seen in a recent episode of the Da Ali G Show when the flamboyantly gay host Bruno revealed to a bunch of straight teenage boys on spring break in northern Florida that they'd been performing tricks for a (phony) gay TV show, and the boys simply laughed.

For all its complexities, the overall trajectory of mainstream male culture is clear. Modern gay-inflected, post-straight icons like pop star Lenny Kravitz with his pink boas and perfect abs, Gavin

Newsom with his perception that gay people feel for each other what he feels for his wife, and the straight guys on Queer Eye letting themselves be made over by a group of gay style mavens are demonstrating to an emergent generation of boys and men that flamboyance, compassion and openness are not contradictory to manhood or masculinity, nor are they “gay” qualities after all.

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'Oi. Dancing Boy!'

Masculinity, Sexuality, and Youth in *Billy Elliot*

by CYNTHIA WEBER

[1] A striking thing seems to be happening in contemporary male dance films. In the 1990s and into the new millennium, men suffering from masculinity crises often engage with dance in order to once again make a credible claim to their masculinity. So pervasive is this trend in films like Strictly Ballroom (1992), The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994),The Full Monty (1997), and now Billy Elliot (2000) that there even seems to be something of a formula guiding it -- disturbing or disturbed femininity triggers a masculinity crisis which results in dance being set up as the recuperative cinematic space of mainly white male masculinity (Somerville). While variations abound in the implementation of this formula, the basic pattern in each film is the same. Somehow, somewhere, men engage with dance to at least temporarily emerge as forthrightly masculine.

[2] What intrigues me about these films is their engagements with dance. For they all beg the question, 'Why dance?' In addressing this question, I want to resist the impulse to say what dance is. Approached genealogically (as Susan Leigh Foster does) or philosophically (as Graham McFee does), conclusions of dance theorists about dance are similar -- 'what we understand as dance is dance' (65).

[3] At least initially, dance seems like an odd genre choice for films suturing male masculinity crises to make. Yet this choice of dance might make more sense if we consider how we popularly think about dance and how dance contributes to the construction of a cultural identity, understood as 'how one's body renders meaning [and is rendered meaningful] in society' (Albright, xxiii). Popularly, many meanings of dance circulate in contemporary Western cultures. Dance is commonly thought of as liberating, transformative, empowering, transgressive, and even as dangerous. We popularly think of dance in these ways because dance marks a space in which corporeality is offered to us as a rhythmic, mobile spectacle. Dance is a space that is brimming with what Laura Mulvey has called 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (also see Cohan). By making us look at it, dance also asks us to read it. In this respect, dance is no different from any other spectacle or even performance. What makes spectacles so gripping is their demand to be read.

[4] But here, dance (and particularly dance in films about male masculinity crises) gets complicated. For what is so interesting about the 'look here' space of dance in dance films featuring male masculinity crises is that when we look at dance, we are both comforted and surprised. The dance is comforting because it is readable. Contrary to popular understandings of dance (as liberating, etc.), dance is among the most strictly coded performances we have. Dance is coded in terms of steps, scores, styles, genres. And it is these codes that make dance easy to read. We do not usually have problems distinguishing between a ballet and a striptease show, for example. Yet in these dance films it is the dancers who surprise us, for they are not who we expect to see. They are all boys or men. These boys and men do not fit into the codes of dance in ways we expect. Indeed, even in Mulvey's discussion of cinematic spectatorship, to-be-looked-at-ness is embodied by women, not by men.

[5] The film In and Out (1997) explicitly spells out popular Western prejudices about dance and their connections to gender and sexuality. When small town high school teacher Howard Brackett, who initially thinks of himself as straight, is outed on national television, he turns to a home-improvement cassette program entitled 'Exploring Your Masculinity' to teach himself how to appear to be straight. In one of the cassette's segments, Howard must resist the temptation to dance while the tape plays 'I Will Survive' and the stern macho instructor implores Howard to think about real men like John Wayne and Arnold Swartznegger. Of Arnold, the instructor says, 'Arnold doesn't dance. He can barely walk'. But, alas, Howard loses his battle against the beat and dances, at which point the instructor assaults him with a barrage of homophobic insults. The lessons Howard and the film's viewers learn are clear -- dance is a feminine space, if men dance, dance is a queer space, and therefore 'real men' (i.e., normal, straight men) do not dance.

[6] This lack of fit between popular ways of reading dance and male dancers is precisely what drives these contemporary male dance films. This is what makes not only the dance scenes in the films but the films themselves compelling spectacles. We want to watch them. We want to read them. We want to understand how paradoxical positions can be made sense of. And so we not only look at the space of dance (as it seems to demand). But in looking there, we find that dance provides us with several options for re-reading common sense ideas about the space of dance itself, male dancers in this space, and how male dance films construct cultural identities in relation to dance.

[7] All this suggests that an answer to the question 'Why dance?' in films that feature male masculinity crises might be that dance presents us with opportunities to re-read not only the space of dance but the bodies and cultural meanings attached to these bodies found in this space. As an active space in which 'objectivity and subjectivity -- between seeing and being seen, experiencing and being experienced, moving and being moved' are constantly negotiated (Albright, 3), dance can function as a space in which one's cultural/corporeal identity is rethought by society and by the 'self' at the same time (also see Aalten). And that seems like a pretty good reason why male masculinity crisis films might turn to dance.

[8] In these films, dance functions as the space men experiencing masculinity crises pass through in order to become something they think they no longer are, they think they used to be, and they wish to be again -- unquestionably masculine. Gender is not only performed in and through the space of dance (as Judith Butler claims); it seems to be choreographed (as Susan Leigh Foster claims, "Choreographies of Gender"). And, importantly, the men in the dance films often imagine themselves to be their own choreographers.

[9] This last point about choreography moves us from thinking about dance as a space there to be read and re-read to dance as a space to be written. I would suggest that by presenting us with opportunities to read and re-read the space of dance and male dancers in this space, contemporary male dance films also begin to re-write the cultural codes that govern dance, dancers, and dance films. Dance functions in these films not only as what Roland Barthes calls a readerly space (a space in which we can take comfort from reading what we have already read before -- strictly coded dance) but also as what Barthes (S/Z) calls a writerly space (a space in which meanings cross, cancel, and construct more meanings -- men and boys dance to resolve masculinity crises).

[10] What I find is most interestingly written in this space is heteronormative masculinity. How contemporary male masculinity films re-write heteronormativity in relation to the space of dance bears investigation because of how these films code dance. While I have suggested that dance can be coded in any number of ways, I find one consistent coding in these films is of dance as a queer space. What do I mean by queer?

[11] The term 'queer' lacks definite character. It has been described as 'contra-, non-, or anti-straight' (Doty, xv) and as 'an in-your-face-rejection of the proper response to heteronormativity, a version of acting up' (Hennessy, 967). I am not completely satisfied with these ways of thinking about the term queer, for they tend to reinforce the opposition between the queer and the heteronormative, whereas I am not convinced that these terms are oppositional (Weber). For this reason, I tend to think of queer in much the same way that Barthes thinks of the plural, as 'that which confuses meaning, the norm, normativity' (Sade, 109), which is different to standing against the norm or normativity. This is an important difference, because what I think these contemporary male dance films demonstrate is that, paradoxically, heteronormative masculinity is secured in and through queer dance performances.

[12] In very different ways, each of these films challenges the common sense notion that what is 'normal' and what is 'queer' are opposites -- however those terms are inscribed in specific contexts. Homosexuality does not only make heterosexuality possible as an opposite to it. Heterosexuality happens in homosexual, non-straight, and queer spaces. Indeed, contemporary heterosexuality (and, more broadly, heteronormativity) seems to require a passing in, if not a passing through, queer spaces

in order to establish itself as 'normal' and 'dominant'. The result is a variety of heteronormative masculinities (as well as queer masculinities). Yet however varied these masculinities are, they all share debts to queerness in their construction -- not merely by opposing it (or, for queer masculinities, by embracing it), but by passing through it.

[13] In this essay, I will investigate how the film Billy Elliot re-writes heteronormative masculinity in relation to the space of dance. I will do this by exploring how the film sets up its relationships among masculinity, sexuality, and dance, arguing that the understandings of and relationships among these terms are dependent upon another concept that structures the underlying meaning system in the film -- youth. Billy Elliot employs youth to defer questions of sexuality, questions which -- when left undeferred -- queer characters, relationships, and spectatorship. I will trace how questions of sexuality are suspended for the youthful Billy, how these questions catch up with the adult Billy, and how they ultimately reinscribe the meanings of masculinity, sexuality, and dance, thereby changing what it means to perform heteronormative masculinity.

[14] One note of caution. I am not arguing that the film Billy Elliot or the body of Billy cannot be queered from start to finish. As I will point out, queer readings are possible at various moments in the cinematic narrative. What interests me is how the film itself tames these moments by providing an alternative (and I will argue, dominant) code through which to read the film -- the sexual innocence of youth, a code the film works extremely hard to construct. My reading of Billy Elliot, then, is not concerned with whether or not Billy and the film might be or are 'definitively' queer from scene to scene, but rather with how and when the film itself queers Billy and the narrative by suspending -- and thereby subverting -- its own dominant code.

[15] I will offer this reading in four parts, organized around reflections on three central questions and a conclusion. My questions broadly follow the formula identified above -- disturbing or disturbed femininity leads to a masculinity crisis which leads to dance becoming the recuperative space of male masculinity -- by asking: (1) How does the film code the feminine?; (2) How does the film set up its masculinity crisis?; and (3) How is dance coded as both queer and as recuperative of heteronormative masculinity? In my conclusion, I will speculate on the impossibility of securing heteronormative masculinity.

Billy Elliot

[16] Billy Elliot is set in a coal mining village in country Durham, England during the mid-1980s miners' strike. It is the story of the Elliot family -- eleven-year-old Billy (Jamie Bell), his older brother Tony (Jamie Draven), their father (Gary Lewis), and their maternal grandmother/mother-in-law (Jean Heywood). Dad and Tony are striking miners, struggling to support this motherless family and give Billy a proper childhood. Part of that proper childhood involves Billy taking boxing lessons. But across the gym at one of these lessons, Billy discovers -- and joins -- an all-girl ballet class. The plot focuses on the tension created between Billy's preparation for an audition at the Royal Ballet School under the tutelage of Mrs. Wilkinson (Julie Walters) and his family's expectation that Billy will follow more manly pursuits.

[17] The film wastes no time coding the feminine. It does so in the title sequence. The film opens showing young Billy in the bedroom he shares with Tony. The camera focuses on an old record player. With only his arms and hands in frame, Billy removes an LP from its well-worn sleeve and fumblingly places it on the turntable. After two attempts, Billy successfully maneuvers the needle at the start of 'Cosmic Dancer' by T. Rex. As Marc Bolan sings 'I was dancing when I was twelve', Billy hurriedly steps onto the bed in the background and begins to bounce up and down. Without the camera shifting its focus, we see Billy in the background from the waist down, clad in t-shirt, shorts, socks, and trainers. The camera cuts to the empty wallpapered wall. In a shot reminiscent of the opening sequence of The World According to Garp (1982), Billy's head enters the frame from below in slow motion. Bolan sings, 'I was dancing when I was out./ I was dancing when I was out./ I danced myself

right out the womb. / Danced myself right out the womb. / Is it strange to dance so soon?' Still focused on the wallpapered background, now surrealistically too large for the small room it is meant to occupy, the camera cuts to parts of Billy's dancing body -- shoulder, chest, hand, foot, gleeful face -- then pulls back to show Billy's full-bodied energetic movements.

[18] The bell of an egg timer sounds. The action resumes at normal speed. Billy, fresh from his dance, rushes into the kitchen to assemble a breakfast of eggs, toast, and tablets. 'Cosmic Dancer' continues, 'I danced myself into the tomb'. Billy playfully headbutts the clothespin bag hanging from a washing line in the kitchen, picks up the breakfast tray, and uses his head again, this time to slide open the door to his Grandmother's adjoining room. Bolan sings, 'Is it wrong to understand/ the fear that was inside a man?' Cut to interior of Grandmother's room. The room is empty. Cut to Billy's anxious face. Bolan, 'What's it like to be alone?'. Billy, 'Oh, no!' The camera cuts between shots of Billy full-front, then legs only, running outside in search of his Grandmother. Billy pauses at the edge of a field, looking in the wrong direction. Bolan, 'I danced myself out of the womb'. Behind Billy, we see Grandmother walking in an overgrown field. Billy sees her, approaches her, taps her on the shoulder. Grandmother is startled. A concerned Billy, 'Grandma, your eggs'. Grandma's face registers no recognition. 'It's Billy.' As Billy guides his confused Grandmother out of the field, the camera reveals the ridge above on which police are collecting their riot gear from their vans, readying themselves for their daily encounter with the striking miners.

[19] In addition to situating the film historically and politically, this sequence successfully introduces us to Billy and positions him and the narrative in relation to the feminine. Billy is a wannabe dancer. This is the primary fact established by the film. As the Bolan lyrics and the Garp intertext suggest, dance is a life-force for Billy. For Billy to be Billy, he must dance. And, indeed, Dancer was the title under which the film was originally to be released. This wannabe dancer and his family experience the feminine as either absent or unreliable. The sheer physicality of feminine absence is depicted when we follow Billy's gaze into wandering grandmother's vacant room and, later, into wandering grandmother's vacant eyes. This initial sense of absence is soon multiplied and intensified, for we learn that Billy's mother has recently died. Death and senility in the places where the feminine ought to be in this family film conjoin to leave the space of the feminine empty. The feminine (which the film codes as people performing stereotypically female activities) is partially filled in by eleven-year-old Billy, the only available person who can consistently carry out these roles in the family.

[20] The film codes the feminine, then, along the familiar psychoanalytic axis of lack leads to excess. What is unfamiliar about how this axis of lack/excess is employed in the film is that instead of lack and excess being located within one physical body, it is located in one social body, the Elliot family. (The lack/excess axis also applies to another social body in Billy Elliot, the striking community in which lack of adequately paid work leads to excessive responses by the state.) It is this family's lack of a mother and a functioning grandmother that leads to an excess of feminine activities like cooking and caring in Billy. That young, functionally feminized Billy also wants to be a dancer contributes to the film's central masculinity crisis. But, surprisingly, it is not Billy who is having a masculinity crisis. It is his father.

[21] How does the film set up its masculinity crisis? In Billy Elliot (as in the other films I mentioned earlier), the masculinity crisis is triggered by a disturbance in the feminine and played out through the father/son relationship. To understand how the film sets up its masculinity crisis, it is important to grasp how father and son are positioned in the film generally and in relation to one another.

[22] Almost immediately, the film establishes the fact that Billy's father is widowed. He has no wife to reflect his masculinity back to him. Nor is there a feminine substitute -- a girlfriend or the grandmother -- who could perform this role. For the father, the feminine is experienced not only as absence but also as loss. Dad lost his wife to death, and he is losing his mother-in-law to senility. In addition to experiencing the feminine as loss, Dad has at least temporarily lost his livelihood, for he is a striking miner. This means that Dad is unable to provide adequate financial support for his youngest

son Billy, while his older son Tony who has followed him into the mines seems (like his father) to have no future.

[23] These losses of wife and work combine to position Dad as 'not man enough' for either of his sons. This is made explicit when Dad and Tony clash over their responses to the strike. Tony is fed up with the abuse the miners are taking and is determined to fight back. One night, Dad discovers Tony as he takes a hammer from the toolbox, readying himself for mayhem. When Dad warns him to stop, Tony replies, 'You haven't got it in you, man, you're finished. Since Mam died you're nothing but a useless twat! What the fuck are you gonna do about it?' What Dad does about it is punches Tony in the nose, but Tony leaves anyway, and is eventually arrested.

[24] If Dad's example as a striking miner disappoints Tony, his example as a sportsman is not compelling enough to have Billy follow in his footsteps. Billy stops pursuing boxing, the sport of his father and of his father's father, and takes up ballet, which Dad makes clear he thinks is for 'poofs'. When Dad discovers Billy in a ballet class, he pulls Billy out of class and forbids him from taking future lessons. Billy is disappointed that his father will not allow him to dance. Feeling misunderstood, he continues his ballet lessons in secret. All of these factors combine to give Dad a masculinity crisis.

[25] While this might explain why Billy's father is having a masculinity crisis, it does not explain why Billy, a functionally feminized boy with a passion for dancing, is not having one. What explains this is that Billy's sexuality is not in question. This may seem surprising since the dance that Billy engages with is ballet, and males in ballet still confront stereotypes that they are homosexuals (Buckroyd, and Burt). Yet while this might be how ballet is popularly read, it is not how is it is read by dance theorists (nor by the majority of dance films featuring ballet). Even though popular perceptions about men in ballet lead many to question the sexuality of male ballet dancers, it is argued by some dance theorists (excluding Foster, Choreography and Narrative) that ballet traditionally reserves positions of power for men. Classical ballet plays off of what Ann Daly refers to as 19th century gender stereotypes of 'female difference/male dominance'. Cynthia Novack argues that, choreographically and narratively, classical ballet 'evokes romantic, heterosexual love on both a literal and metaphoric level, emphasising opposing characteristics and distinctions between male and female'(39). Commenting on male ballet dancers' historic move from center stage to 'the status of hydraulic lifts for the lighter-than-air ballerinas', Roger Copeland suggests that this might not signify a demotion of men as much as it might play into a 'sexual politics [that] dictate[s] that the woman be displayed and the man do the displaying' (141). And Alexandra Carter has even gone so far as to characterize classical ballet as patriarchal. What this suggests is that even though it might popularly be read otherwise, ballet is not necessarily a queer space for men.

[26] Working both with and against popular perceptions of ballet, Billy Elliot codes ballet as athletic. The rawness of Billy's talent for dance is displayed physically in his gymnastic approach in his dance lessons and his later audition for the Royal Ballet School and emotionally though a burgeoning, unbounded masculinity, most apparent in Billy's 'dance of rage' when Dad prohibits Billy from dancing ballet. That Billy thinks of dance as a male and masculine space is underscored after his first excursion into ballet when he receives encouragement from Mrs. Wilkinson to join the class properly. Mrs. Wilkinson and her daughter Debbie (Nicola Blackwell) exit the scene, leaving Billy staring into an imagined future framed in part by a cinematic sample of the past. As the music 'Top Hat, White Tie and Tails' plays, Billy taps a large stick he is carrying twice on the ground, kicks it with his foot, and swings it over his shoulder like a cane. The film cuts to a scene from Top Hat (1935) in which Fred Astaire and some twenty other male dancers are dancing with canes. While this scene is suggestive of the homosociality of dance, Top Hat narratively places Astaire's dancing body and (by idealistic identification) Billy's dancing body into a space that masculinizes, heterosexualizes, and utopianizes dance (Dyer).

[27] Lest this subtle inscription of dance as masculine and heterosexual be overlooked, Billy Elliot provides its viewers with two characters they either know or suspect are homosexual, who serve as

points of contrast to Billy himself. The most obvious of these is Billy's best friend Michael (Stuart Wells), first introduced chiding Billy about the futility of boxing, later revealed to us and to Billy to be a cross-dresser, and eventually confirmed to Billy and to a viewing audience primed to conflate male cross-dressing with homosexuality to be a 'poof' (Garber). Michael's strong presence throughout the film ensures that viewers 'know' how a homosexual behaves and what a homosexual looks like, making a male dancer like Billy appear to be straight in comparison. The film also introduces us to Simon (Matthew Thomas), a boy Billy encounters at his ballet school audition. Billy is in the changing room after his audition, upset by his perception that it has all gone badly, when Simon attempts to comfort him. Simon sits very close to Billy on a bench, speaks soothing words in his middle-class accent, and eventually puts his arm around Billy. Billy reacts by bludgeoning Simon, who he refers to as 'a bent bastard'. Compared to either Michael or Simon, then, Billy appears to be 'normal'.

[28] Even so, there are moments in the film when Billy's sexuality is open to question -- when Billy acquiesces to a cross-dressed Michael putting lipstick on him, when Billy kisses Michael good-bye as Billy leaves for ballet school, and when Billy declines Debbie's offer to show him her fanny. I would suggest that none of these incidents <u>necessarily</u> queers Billy, in the sense of removing Billy from the category of 'the normal', because they are all coded through that value that, when questions of sexuality arise, trumps all other values in the film. That value is the sexual innocence of youth. While sociological research (much less psychoanalytic theory) does not support a claim to the sexual innocence of youth either at the dawn of the new millennium or in the mid-1980s, <u>Billy Elliot</u> can credibly make such a claim on Billy's behalf because it is not primarily an historical film. It is a nostalgia film -- nostalgic for a 1980s Britain in which viewers might imagine sexual innocence existed, just as they might imagine that the working class had a fair deal economically prior to their defeat in the mid-decade miners' strikes.

[29] In this context, playing with gender codes in the privacy of Michael's home, being affectionate toward your best friend at a life-changing moment, and not being quite ready for a peek at a fanny for it raises all sorts of embarrassing questions like 'what do we do next?' and 'what does this make us to one another?' are not surprising behaviors for an eleven-year-old boy. They combine to make Billy not queer but sweet, which is part of the reason <u>Billy Elliot</u> is such a mainstream success. And, indeed, young Billy's dance sequences that are not explicitly masculine do not necessarily make Billy a 'poof' either, for they take care to infantalize Billy. Young Billy's dancing body is always presented as either masculine or childlike or both.

[30] Even Michael's and Simon's sexualities are rendered harmless (or at least less harmful) by their youth. Michael's dressing in his sister's clothes and mother's make-up is narratively overcoded with innocence and naivete. When Billy stops by Michael's house and Michael answers the door wearing a dress, a shocked Billy asks Michael what he is doing. Michael nonchalantly replies, 'Nothing. Just dressing up.' When Billy asks if they will get in trouble for this kind of dressing up, Michael laughs off his question, saying, 'Don't be stupid. Me dad does it all the time.' In the case of Simon, it may not be his sexuality at all that is offensive to Billy and to an audience identified with Billy, but Simon's class. Simon's middle-class mannerisms are scripted as out of place in his encounter with Billy, even though we know that it is working-class Billy who is out of place at the firmly middle-class Royal Ballet School.

[31] Youth, then, insures that questions of sexuality are postponed for Billy and the (other) possibly queer boys he encounters. This protects Billy and the cinematic narrative as a whole from being <u>necessarily</u> queered. Surely, queer readings of these scenes and the body of Billy are possible at this point in the film. But by privileging a-sexual youth over queer alternatives, the film insures that Billy can still be read as heterosexual, as normal, as not queer. It is this deferral of questions of sexuality through youth that explains why Billy is not having a masculinity crisis. He is too young to have one. He isn't even a 'man' yet!

[32] Even in the possibly queer space of dance (and I will explain later how I think the film queers dance), a reading of Billy as just sweetly innocent is available to viewers. For example, the film's most

blatantly 'queer' scene is sandwiched between two scenes which trouble any attempt to read it as candidly queer. The 'queer' scene affirms the film's blurring of ballet and boxing, foreshadowed by Billy's balletic boxing before he began ballet lessons and his consistent draping of his ballet slippers around his neck like boxing gloves. The scene blurs ballet and boxing by having a tutu-clad Michael receive a ballet lesson from Billy while both boys stand in the boxing ring. Read as a single moment, it is difficult to resist a queer reading of this scene. Yet just prior to this scene, Billy has refused Michael's pass -- a pass that leads to Michael's confession that he is indeed a homosexual -- to which Billy responds by explaining to Michael and to the audience, 'Just cos I like ballet, doesn't mean I'm a poof, you know'. And the tutu scene is followed by Billy's most exuberant ballet, performed for Dad who discovers the boys in the gym. Rather than worry Dad about Billy's sexuality, this encounter enables Dad to finally see Billy for who he 'really' is -- a dancer -- and sends Dad running off to Mrs. Wilkinson asking her how to make Billy's ballet school audition possible. This sequencing, then, allows for a jettisoning of the queer content of the tutu scene, at least as queerness applies to Billy. While in this sequence Michael relinquishes any claim to youthful, sexual innocence by 'coming out', Billy does nothing of the sort. And his acceptance of his best friend's sexuality works to put a mainstream audience at ease, for it affirms both their liberal tolerance of 'alternative lifestyles' and their belief in the norm of heterosexuality (for tolerance always functions by reasserting norms), even though the film presents no evidence that Billy is heterosexual.

[33] It is important to point out that Billy's youthful sexual innocence is in contrast to all the other sons in the father/son film pairings. In Strictly Ballroom, it is the young adult son's own transgressions that bring to light the past transgressions of his father. In Priscilla, the son knows (and must teach his father) that drag is the most macho form of dance. And in The Full Monty, the son is complicitious in the striptease, making his father's attempts to protect him from the sexual implications of the performance a joke. What all four films suggest is that the sons have something their fathers do not have. In Strictly Ballroom, Priscilla, and The Full Monty, this something else comes across as extra knowledge; these sons are wiser, hipper, or freer than their fathers.

[34] In the case of Billy Elliot, Billy's excess is not of knowledge but an excess of youthful non-knowledge that shields him from transgressions in what the film codes as feminine and queer spaces (household labor and dance, for example). This does not mean that Billy is not wise beyond his years in other ways. He is, after all, the working-class son of a striking miner, exposed to the day-to-day realities of economic deprivation and police brutality that result from his socio-economic position. It does mean, however, that juxtaposed to Billy's keen grasp of his class and its consequences is his willful negotiation of non-knowledge around the axis of sexuality. This is particularly evident in a scene in which Dad tries to discuss 'the facts of life' with Billy -- that male ballet dancers are queers.

[35] In their exchange, Billy resists 'knowing' the 'facts' his father insists Billy already knows -- that male ballet dancers are homosexuals. Even when Billy allows the unsayable to be said -- protesting to his father about ballet that 'It's not just for poofs', this concession to Dad's 'knowledge' of Billy's 'knowledge' is immediately withdrawn when Billy offers Wayne Sleep as his example of an athletic dancer, for it is commonly known in 1980s Britain that Wayne Sleep is a homosexual. Whether Billy does or does not know the 'facts' as Dad tries to impress them upon him, it is his will not to know -- his persistent deflection and deferral of these 'facts' -- that protects him and his family from what this knowledge could do to them. It is akin (albeit in reverse) to a child pretending to believe in Santa Claus when all suspect he no longer does. Youth does indeed have its privileges.

[36] Arguing that Billy's youth protects him and his family from the queer possibilities of dance means the answer to my third question, 'How is dance coded as both queer and as recuperative of heteronormative masculinity?' is not immediately evident. I will discuss this question in two parts, first addressing how the film queerly codes dance and then how the film utilizes the queerly coded space of dance to recuperate heteronormative masculinity.

[37] Billy Elliot not only acknowledges but encourages traditional stereotypes associated with the gender and sexuality of dance. The film engenders the space of ballet as feminine by giving us an all-girl ballet class. And it codes ballet as stereotypically queer in the scenes in which Dad discusses the 'facts of life' about ballet with Billy and in which Michael wears a tutu. And yet it is not quite so simple. There are complicated tensions around gender and sexuality in the film's codings of dance and dancers, something the film marks even for a mainstream audience with 1970s Glam Rock icon Marc Bolan dominating the soundtrack.

[38] While the film gives us traditional stereotypes about dance to read, it also works hard to re-write dance as a not necessarily feminine or queer space because dancers are not necessarily feminine or queer. And, of course, it does this work through the youthful character of Billy. Young Billy is not a 'poof' (as he repeatedly tells us, a disavowal which might as easily mark Billy as gay as unmark him as such). In the scene in which Billy teaches Michael ballet, we notice not only that Michael is wearing a tutu, but that Billy is not wearing one. And we know from the film's opening sequence that while ballet may be the type of dance available to Billy, Billy is not so much a ballet dancer (or, as the film In and Out refers to dancing men, a 'big ballerina') as he is a dancer, full stop. This is why Billy can innocently and without prejudice on the part of a mainstream audience acknowledge Michael's hail, 'Oi. Dancing boy.' And it is this hail that protects Billy from the feminine and queer possibilities of dance. For Michael hails a youthful Billy. This 'dancing boy' is interpellated not so much into but beyond feminine and queer dance spaces.

[39] This is in part why dancing is never a problem for Billy. Billy's problem is not that he is a dancing boy but that his father cannot overcome his fears and prejudices about dance and male dancers in order to allow Billy to just be Billy, dancer. This is where the central tension in the film lies. The turning point in the film is not when Billy is accepted into the Royal Ballet School. It is when Billy's potential as a dancer finally penetrates his father's consciousness, and this dancing boy provides his father with a way through his masculinity crisis.

[40] Dad will succeed in resecuring a legitimate claim to heteronormative masculinity by giving 'wee Billy' a chance to be a ballet dancer. Of course, for cinematic effect, things must go terribly wrong before they go right. Dad's initial plan to pay for Billy's audition in London -- by crossing the picket line to work in the mines -- exacerbates his masculinity crisis. Recognizing his father on the bus carrying the scabs into the mine, Tony follows Dad to the mine. As Tony implores his father not to enter the mine, Dad explains himself, saying things like, 'I'm sorry, son. We're finished, son. What choice have we got, eh? Let's give the boy a fuckin' chance.'

[41] Despite Dad's impassioned defense of his action to Tony, Dad cannot bring himself to be a scab, even for Billy. Tony takes his sobbing father away from the pit, unable to be a miner and still unsure how to be a proper father. And then he figures it out. Dad pawns his dead wife's jewelry, which provides enough money for the trip to London. Billy is awarded a place in the Royal Ballet School. Upon hearing the news, Dad runs to the working men's club to tell his mates, only to learn that the miners have settled the strike. They will return to work, defeated, Dad and Tony's decline marked by their journey into the pit in a descending lift. Even though Dad temporarily recovers his job, this is not what restores him to the proper place of father and man. It is his engagement with the space of dance, through his son Billy, that makes Dad properly masculine once again. This point is statuesquely suggested by Dad and Billy's good-bye hug at the bus station, in which Dad holds Billy like a male ballet dancer lifting a ballerina.

[42] The final sequence of the film tells us that Dad's struggles have all been worthwhile. Set some 10-15 years after the rest of the film, we find Dad and Tony in London attending a ballet in which Billy is starring. With Dad and Tony watching, Billy leaps athletically onto the stage in the final shot, as the soundtrack plays T. Rex's 'Ride the White Swan'. With this, the film's swan metaphor (introduced and enacted primarily through the character of Mrs. Wilkinson, her supporting subplot being a sort of 'Educated Rita educating Billy') seems to have arrived at its logical conclusion. Dad's sacrifices for and

support of his son have enabled Billy the working-class duckling to mature into the middle class and properly masculine swan.

[43] Given all of this, how is it possible to argue that Dad's heteronormative masculinity is resecured through dance as a queer space, when I have suggested that young Billy is protected from the feminine and queer possibilities of dance and when what enables Dad's renewed masculinity is not only Billy's gift as a dancer but his wife's jewelry (i.e., the return to the feminine which in psychoanalytic discourse is traditionally how masculinity is secured, even if, in this instance, the feminine is dead)? I make this argument not so much based on the 'dancing boy' but on Billy as a dancing man. For, if as I have suggested, Billy's youth is the code the film employs to protect Billy from the feminine and queer possibilities of dance, his loss of youth in the final sequence works to queerly position Billy.

[44] The adult Billy is less able to resist the queer possibilities of ballet than is the youthfully innocent Billy. The film makes this point in its selection of the ballet in the final sequence. The ballet is, unsurprisingly, Swan Lake. But it is not just any Swan Lake. It is Matthew Bourne's adaptation of Swan Lake (1996), in which all of the swans are male. The male lead in Bourne's Swan Lake, then, is not the prince but a doppelganger male swan, played by the adult Billy (Adam Cooper). Billy appears in Bourne's ballet as both the barefooted, bare-chested white swan who is the object of the Prince's desires and as the evil, leather-clad swan who seduces the queen and drives the prince mad with jealousy. Sally Banes argues that, when the lead of Swan Lake is danced by one ballerina, 'the monster and the angel...wrapped up in a single woman' suggests 'an underlying female dualism' (61-62). In Bourne's parodic version of Swan Lake, this dualism is not only of good and evil but of homosexuality and heterosexuality combined in one male dancing body, with the heterosexual located in the place the ballet reserves for evil.

[45] What all this suggests is that while up to this point Billy Elliot hints at the queer possibilities of ballet and protects the youthfully innocent Billy from these queer possibilities, the final scene brings both ballet and Billy in ballet into queer spaces. To be clear here, I am not making an argument about whether Billy is or is not a homosexual. This point is undecidable. The point I am arguing is that Bourne's ballet places Billy -- gay or straight, we cannot know -- into the space of queer performance. In Bourne's ballet as in the final sequence of Billy Elliot, questions of sexuality are not deferred. Rather, they seize our attention.

[46] What does this reading of Billy Elliot tell us about masculinity, sexuality, and dance, particularly in relation to the possibilities of securing heteronormative masculinity through queer performativity?

[47] On a first reading, Billy Elliot is a mainstream film in its codings of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. The feminine is troubled or troubling. The masculine needs to be and is recuperated. And a line always exists between what is 'normal' and what is 'queer', even if the film changes the boundary between 'normal' and 'queer' by widening the realm of normal male behaviors (presumably straight boys dance ballet) and exaggerating more and more what queer behaviors are supposed to be (a move that is particularly evident in the film's final portrayal of Michael as a grown-up, out, cross-dresser apparently accompanied to the ballet by his black boyfriend , the only black character in the film). Even so, Billy Elliot, like the other contemporary male dance films I have identified, is a bit twisted, for it secures heteronormative masculinity in queer spaces and through queer performances. It is only though Billy's relationship to ballet that Dad moves from a dying patriarchal masculinity into a new male masculinity based upon patriarchal uncertainty, with loss as its central motif. But because ballet is ultimately queered in Billy Elliot, the film's ending not only fails to suture heteronormative masculinity back into a completely 'normal' space; it rips the idea of the normal vs. the queer wide open. To illustrate this point, imagine if the film rolled a bit longer, and we got to see Dad watch Billy in Bourne's choreographed love scenes with the prince. Imagine Dad squirming in the knowledge that he made all of these queer dance scenes possible for Billy, which we know in turn made Dad's own heteronormative masculinity possible?

[48] The film, of course, does not end with Dad's realization that his and his sons' masculinities are queerly secured. It ends instead with Billy's powerful leap, the ultimately balletic masculine move. And with this, the film is trying to have it both ways -- by openly giving a wink and a nod to the queer crowd while, for the mainstream audience, dulling the radical edges of queer performances and the radical knowledge that heteronormative masculinity is often constructed through queer performances. And, of course, it is because this knowledge is dulled and delayed (if not missed altogether) for a mainstream audience that the film is such a success. The film encourages its viewers to look at adult Billy as the successful embodiment of the sexually innocent dancing boy they identified with throughout the film. And by not giving a mainstream audience enough clues as to just whose Swan Lake is being performed, it denies that audience the opportunity to imagine a slightly longer version of the film that cuts between adult Billy dancing Swan Lake and Dad and Tony watching Billy's performance. All of this is reminiscent of Teresa de Lauretis' observation about lesbian representations, that because 'conventions of seeing, and the relations of desire and meaning in spectatorship [remain] partially anchored or contained by a frame of visibility that is still heterosexual,' it is extremely difficult to alter the 'standard vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of what can be seen' (33, 35; emphasis in original).

[49] Even so, Billy Elliot refuses to let a restabilized heteronormative masculinity remain secured. This is because the film introduces us to the adult, queered (if not queer) Billy, which in turn introduces queer spaces and queer spectatorship into the film in ways that complicate any attempt to separate the heteronormative from the queer.

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The Sign of the Dancing Men: Negotiations of Masculinity in Film Musicals

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ABSTRACT

The past couple of decades have seen an increasing prominence of the male dancer in mainstream film (a very recent instance is the performance by Richard Gere in *Chicago*). This phenomenon coincides with an increasing anxiety—amongst men in particular—regarding the centrality of traditional masculinity in a post-feminist, post-industrialist, post-capitalist and post-queer cultural context, and the role of males in society: the concern expressed about boys' performance in school is merely one instance of this more generalised anxiety.

This suggests that dance in film may be one site in which masculinity is being negotiated and re-negotiated for men in the culture—for instance, via the hypermasculinisation of the dancers. Yet dance is a risky space in which to accomplish such negotiations, since the male dancer has historically been regarded with suspicion.

Taking the figures of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly as constituting paradigms of the male dancer in Hollywood film, this paper examines the ways that more recent performances in film of dance by men both address those earlier models, and re-work them, via the 're-authentication' of the male body.

"I have only the evidence of the dancing men," said Holmes. (Conan Doyle 1930, p. 518)

The genre of the film musical is often thought of as encompassing the song-and-dance movies of the 1930s through to the late 1950s. Later musical films have not been produced in the same way as in the golden age of the Hollywood musical—for instance, the star-centred formulaic product of the RKO, Fox and MGM studios—and song and dance in these later films have sometimes functioned differently in the narratival structure of the movie. Accordingly, these later films are often considered paradigmatically different from the traditional Hollywood musical. The latter are viewed as innocent and naïve, at best, or, at worst, overdone and kitsch while the former are understood—or represent themselves—as innovative and clever.

The popular contemporary assumption that the Hollywood musical was simply an escapist genre that evolved over the course of two World Wars, a Great Depression and the post-World War II recession has in recent years been challenged. Instead, the genre has begun to take on different, contestatory meanings, as, for instance, the view that sees many such movies as always-already camp and/or queer and as therefore negotiating issues of gender and/or sexuality in covert ways. Newer approaches situating the films in their particular historico-cultural contexts have revitalised our understanding of the genre and its exemplars.

In recent decades we have witnessed a resurgence of the musical feature film, though with some important differences. Many of these feature, not stars who both sing and dance, but rather performers who dance to other artists' recorded music often already familiar to the audience. 2

Nonetheless, certain generic traits or motifs provide continuity between the older film musical and its more recent avatar. For example, the movie musical tradition that sought to acknowledge a distinction between stage and screen performance and yet, simultaneously, to *bridge* that difference is to be found in *Funny Girl*, first screened in 1968. Another example of continuity is the I've-found-us-a-barn-let's-put-on-a-show movie, exemplified by the series starring Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, and picked up again in such films as the British *The Full Monty* (1997) and the Australian tap-dance movie *Bootmen* (2000).

Integral to this renaissance of the musical film is the return of the figure of the dancing male, featured in movies ranging from the American *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) to *Chicago* (2002), and including the British film *The Full Monty* and Australia's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *Bootmen*. These films often focus on a male character whose performance both encodes and articulates an anxiety around gender at a time that traditional notions of masculinity have started to come under pressure. That anxiety frequently expresses itself in these films through an accentuated or even exaggerated emphasis on the sexuality and pure physicality of the male character/performer. The representative movie of this genre is the John Travolta vehicle *Saturday Night Fever*. In *Saturday Night Fever* Travolta's body is eroticised both on and off the dance floor—even his ordinary walk is a sexual strut. This particular movie also articulates another common trait of such films, namely, a conflict between the central male character and an authority figure, often a father, over the issue of dance itself, and most commonly over whether it is a proper activity or occupation for a male. That conflict can be understood as a rite of passage that gives the central male character—the dancer—entry into the community of men as autonomous and fully masculine.

Of interest is the fact this re-emergence of the dancing man in the film musical coincides historically with an increasing anxiety around masculinity, especially in English-speaking cultures. We have seen articulated the fear that men are becoming emasculated or feminised, whether through the increasing presence of women in public life, the greater prominence of gay men and women, or changes in employment practices in late capitalism. We have also witnessed, in this country especially, a concern at the highest levels over the performance of boys in school, vis-à-vis that of girls. Recently we have observed also the debate in both the culture in general and in the Australian Parliament in particular over the issue of whether gay people should be allowed to marry one another. Increasingly vociferous invocations of 'the traditional family' and 'the sanctity of marriage' suggest that institutions that have traditionally undergirded men's station and power within a patriarchal structure are perceived to have come under threat, and through that threat masculinity itself is menaced.

Does the reappearance of the dancing man in so many mainstream feature films therefore signify an *acceptance* of a feminisation of males in the culture? Is it a *critique* of that feminisation? Or is it—however improbably—an attempt at *recuperation* of a traditional masculinity within a context—namely, song and dance—that has always proven rather risky in relation to notions of the 'truly' masculine? Given the constraints of such a paper as this, in what follows I propose to sketch answers to these questions; I will leave to the longer project of which this paper is a part the more detailed matters concerning the film musical as a genre.

Ramsay Burt observes about the male ballet dancer that by the nineteenth century this figure became 'an object of distaste in London, Paris and many other European cities' (Burt 1995, p. 24) because he was regarded as feminised, not least because he had become an object of spectacle (see Burt, chapter 3, for a discussion). Steven Cohan makes the same point with direct reference to the

Hollywood musical. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's work, Cohan suggests the singing and dancing male body in the Hollywood musical is an object of spectacle, and in this adopts the '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (cited in Cohan 2002, p. 87; original emphasis) associated with the female body in film generally, but especially with the figure of the showgirl in the musical. Moreover, the male dancer, whether of ballet or modern dance, remains suspect as to his sexuality and therefore his very claim to masculinity, since the two are imbricated in our culture.

To understand the nature of the more recent phenomenon of the dancing man, we need to return to earlier Hollywood musicals and, specifically, to the two figures who created the tradition of the male dancer in film, namely, Fred Astaire (1899-1987) and Gene Kelly (1912-1996). There were, of course, other men who danced in movies; but these two remain pre-eminent, and are who most of us think of immediately when the figure of the male dancer is invoked. Astaire, the older of the two and the first to appear in film (in 1933), came from vaudeville. When he made his first film, Astaire was 34 years old. By contrast, Gene Kelly's background included training in modern dance and ballet (he ran his

own dance school for a while at the beginning of his working life); and he was 30 years old when he made his first movie in 1942, almost a decade after Astaire's first film.

Fairly evident differences as well as similarities between the two men in terms of the ways they were represented, or represented themselves, in film have implications for the articulation and protection of the performers' masculinity in the eyes of the viewing public. The first of these is that Astaire's ascendancy in age over Kelly when the latter first began to appear in film is offset by Astaire's representation in most of his films as more debonair and a man of the world. Whereas we no doubt recall Kelly as often dancing in a shirt and slacks, Astaire typically is remembered for the urbanity of his appearance in tie and tails (at least in the RKO films in which he started off). That is, the appearance of upper-class identity and worldly experience provides a buffer to protect Astaire's masculinity, just as Kelly's is defended through his frequent representation as energetically working-class.

The style of dance is also an important means by which the masculinity of these two performers is maintained and protected. Astaire's strategy in dancing is to bring off what is clearly a difficult feat so that it looks effortless, elegant and—above all—easy enough for any man in the audience to imitate, though at the same time as an audience we are conscious that this is not the case. There is a kind of modesty, therefore, in Astaire's performance—what in the Renaissance was called *sprezzatura*, a disprizing or diminution of a feat or an accomplishment so as not to appear conceited. This modesty constructs Astaire as capable of great physical agility, speed and control, but as concealing these so as not to create excessive spectacle (except in instances of deliberate and obvious exhibitionist performance). This reserve is consonant with a traditional notion of masculinity as unassuming heroism.

What Astaire conceals, Kelly reveals. Kelly foregrounds the athleticism of his performance, and thereby draws our attention to the sheer physical effort, skill and judgment of his dancing. There is a brashness about Kelly's dance routines, an exuberance that suggests a more youthful masculinity, and one that is less inclined to hide its light under a bushel. This is a risky kind of self-representation, since it might easily be interpreted as convinced of its own authority and authenticity; and, within the economy of a patriarchal masculinity that encourages men to compete with one another, this is to invite another male to knock the Kelly persona back down to size. Therefore, lest the audience feel affronted by Kelly's lack of modesty (just as they would be charmed by Astaire's more self-effacing performance), Kelly manages to infuse a certain degree of self-consciousness and even also of self-irony into his 4

dance—brought out most clearly, perhaps, in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), a film that satirises the film industry itself. At the same time, however, as the documentary *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer* (2002) is at pains to point out, there was still a sense that what Kelly did in the way of dance could also be done by any red-blooded, active American man.

However, Astaire's sartorial elegance notwithstanding, both dancers are often represented in their films as of working-class origins, even if the narrative, as in *Easter Parade* (1948), constructs Astaire as a successful Broadway star and, in *Singin' in the Rain*, Kelly as a movie matinee idol. Working-class origins are much clearer in Kelly's films, and are often suggested through costume and set location. Yet the representation of the central character in a number of Astaire's films as having to find work as a dancer suggests at least shabby gentility, if not a working-class background. This imputation or clarification of class origins in the filmic narratives is critical: dance may then be seen, in Astaire's case, as a means to upward social mobility (which would have appealed to audiences after the Great Depression of 1929) or, in Kelly's case, as an exuberant expression of the genuine feelings attributed to the working class, as opposed to the muted 'polite' expressions and emotions of the upper class. Moreover, whereas a dancing member of the upper class would tend to look effete, a working-class man who dances is, by contrast, imbued with the hypermasculinity (and hypersexuality) commonly attributed, in our culture's social and gender mythology, to the working-class male. The audience's

differing response to the two stars is neatly summed up in the disarming remark of one female interviewee in the documentary *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*: 'You gave your heart to Fred Astaire; but you saved your body for Gene Kelly.' However, in the popular mind, at least, Astaire continued to be associated with the upper class, as Kelly himself confirms in a 1975 interview included in the same documentary: 'Fred represents the aristocracy when he dances, and I represent the proletariat.'

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the model that has proven most influential on later male dancers in film musicals is that provided by Gene Kelly. The issues of class and the energy associated with the working class, in particular, are reflected in the working-class origins and the intensity of physical performance of Travolta, in *Saturday Night Fever*, for instance, or Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*. Here Richard Gere's rather subdued performance in *Chicago*—especially in comparison to the high-energy dancing of Renée Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones—provides the exception that proves the rule.

The second similarity in representation between Astaire and Kelly—again reflected in the way the male dancers in the later movies are photographed—lies in the technique of cinematic representation itself. When they dance, both performers are generally filmed in mid- to long-shot, rather than in close-up. Even where there may be close-ups of legs and feet in motion in the dance sequences, these usually follow the more distant shots. The purpose here is to authenticate the male star himself as the performer of the dance numbers, something underscored by the credits for *Chicago*, which include a line specifically stating that the relevant dance numbers were performed by Zellweger, Zeta-Jones and Gere. After all, song can be lip-synched by a performer, even to the sound of her or his own voice; however, dance cannot be 'leg-synched,' except where the director and film editor intervene, to create the illusion, by cutting from the star to a dancing stand-in, that the male lead is able to dance.

The use of the medium and long camera shot of the male star dancing establishes not only the authenticity of the performance of the dance, but also the authenticity and irreducibility of the male body itself. This is implicit in the performances by Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, by Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*, by the boys in *Bootmen*, and most obviously by the out-of-work foundry-men-turned-male-5

strippers in *The Full Monty*, where the finale of both the men's efforts and of the film itself is the revelation of the naked bodies of the men, in all their variety.

The male body is thus often represented in motion, self-absorbed (even, as in the case of Travolta and Swayze, when there is a female partner present), sexualised and eroticised through the very action of putting itself on display. Even though that male body may be an erotic object, and hence in danger of being rendered passive, the desire of the dancer not only for his partner's body but also for his own creates an excess that neutralises any threat of passivity. The male dancer is positioned in a risky space whose danger he surmounts by taking control of it, and occupying it actively.[i]

The bold occupation of that space also contributes to the heterosexualisation of the male dancer in the film narrative. Most film musicals move toward the union of the principal male dancer with his leading lady; and, especially in older musicals, we are alerted to the possibility that the dancer has met the right woman by the trope that she requires little or no teaching or rehearsal to partner him competently—she just *knows* the steps (a number of the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers movies use this device). Here, the complex relation of time and space in the musical becomes relevant. For example, where the film narrative pauses for a show-stopping number, the audience is clearly required to bracket the number as somehow not really interrupting the temporality of the story that the film tells. In the context of the heterosexualisation of the male dancer, we may understand that the initial dance of the male and female partners, especially in the earlier musicals, is both a prelude to and a metaphor for romance.

'If a dancer moves across a film frame and the camera constantly follows him, the eye has not really witnessed an event, for there is no beginning or end to it. However, if the dancer flashes onto the left of the screen and exits the other side or stops within the frame, something happens. Time has gone by; space has been consumed' (Gardner Compton, cited in Delamater 1981, p. 7). Compton's last statement is potentially reversible, for in the film musical, when space has been visually consumed, the audience likely understands that time—however notional or abstract—has gone by. The initial partnered dance number may thus additionally be understood as a metaphor forecasting sexual union in a bracketed *future* moment in the narrative. This is made explicit in *Dirty Dancing*, where Baby first asks Johnny to teach her to dance 'dirty,' and then later gives her virginal body to him. It can be implicit in the earlier form of film musical also, as Cohan's account of Cyd Charisse's performance in *Silk Stockings* suggests:

before he is through dancing to 'All of You' . . . Astaire gets 'somewhere [sic] with Charisse because he does succeed in luring her into dancing with him, however stiffly, as the music swells to a lush string arrangement of the melody. Afterwards, as she reclines contentedly on a rug, he remarks with an irony that transcends this scene—indeed, the whole picture—'so, uh, dancing is a waste of time?' (Cohan 2002, p. 89)

It would seem, then, that the male dancer in the film musical has always occupied an area of risk, and that the generic conventions, as they have developed to the present, are so designed as to protect the masculinity of that dancer by essentialising his gender and assertively locating that masculinity in his body, the very object placed riskily on display as spectacle in the film. Movement, social class and sexuality—all become both inscriptions on and by the male dancer's body, in a sort of reflexive loop. This becomes significant when one considers that that body can also be figured as both (re-)gendering the nation and offering a sense of salvation to its men: Astaire and Kelly salvage American masculinity between the World Wars and after World War II, just as Robert Carlyle and his 6

mates in *The Full Monty* reconstruct British masculinity in a post-Thatcher United Kingdom, or the young dancers in *Bootmen* assert Australian working-class masculinity in an era of economic rationalism in our own country. We may have only the evidence of the dancing men, as Sherlock Holmes states in the epigraph to this paper; but it seems pretty strong evidence to refute the idea that the film musical is merely escapist.

[i] One clear exception here is *Chicago*, whose *dramatis personae*, in terms of principal characters, is dominated by women, and whose structure and technique appear intended to test the traditional generic characteristics of the movie musical. For instance, the sequence titled (in the DVD version) 'Cell Block Tango' is in effect a *danse apache*, a highly formalised dance, often performed to a tango, that appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century and represented a violent argument between an *apache*, that is, a member of a Paris street gang or underworld figure, and his female partner, an argument that the *apache* wins. This was an exhibition dance in which the male often wore a beret or flat cap and a *pull marin*, a blue-and-white striped seaman's pullover, while the woman wore a short tight skirt with a slit running up one side. *Chicago* inverts the power relationships, each woman killing her partner. (I am indebted to my colleague Ann McGuire for pointing out the *apache* connection.)

Gender Binaries

def-
1. social construction of gender in most societies in the world where gender is a dichotomy between male and female. Male and female gender expectations, roles, and functions are generally very rigid and the presence of alternate gender constructions are usually denigrated, ignored, or made oblivious.

2. A system of viewing gender as consisting solely of two categories, termed “male” and “female”, in which no other possibilities for gender or anatomy are believed to exist. This system is oppressive to gender-variant people who do not fit neatly into one of these categories.