

Whose masculinity? Anxieties and questions about being called to an account

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A version of these comments was presented after a screening of Harry Dodge and Silas Howard's digital-video *By Hook or By Crook* (Steakhaus Productions, 2002) at Duke University's Richard White Auditorium on the 3rd of February 2003. Panel participants were the film makers Dodge and Howard, and academic respondents, Robyn Wiegman (Margaret Taylor Smith Director of Women's Studies, Duke University), Kara Keeling (Assistant Professor of Media Studies, Dept. of Communication, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), and me, Tyler Curtain (English and Cultural Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

[Introductory comments and introduce yourself.]

Perhaps not surprisingly I have a deeply conflicted, and to some extent an anxious relationship to *By Hook or By Crook*¹ Those conflicts and anxieties are in part engendered by the video's narrative, but importantly they are triggered by how I feel that the narrative demands that I give an account of the past and present terms of *my* engenderment, my becoming a "boy," and its concomitant problems and entitlements. *By Hook or By Crook* calls to account the conflicted relationship that I have to the masculinities that were demanded of me as a child, the masculinities that *are* demanded of me as a middle-class white adult male, and the masculinities, some less, though some more, butch than others, that I have chosen to inhabit and deploy in different spaces, with different people, as a queer adult. I believe that *By Hook or By Crook* challenges its viewers to articulate their own allegiances to, and comfort-levels with, the video's social, class, racial, and sexual politics, and in doing so demands that its viewers more-or-less stage confrontations with others whose levels of comfort and terms of conviction are at odds with either the video's representational strategies or with the beliefs of their interlocutors.

I had originally planned not to offer any formal, written comments about the video. Rather, I had intended to present myself as a barometer to an audience who I assume has myriad agendas and allegiances as they take in and re-present this narrative. For those who read this video-text as a valedictory announcement of a male-only masculinity, a work that allows for a certain female agency in the world, I had intended to remind them of the real violence that flows from the masculine vernacular, both to those humans who are conscripted into its dramas, expectations,

¹ *By Hook or By Crook* (Steakhaus Productions, 2002). More information can be found on the web at <http://www.steakhaus.com/bhobc/index.htm>.

and demands as “boys” and as “men” (and I use scare quotes around those terms), but also to those who are forced constantly to act and re-act to the, at times, limited scripts of masculine convention. Certain types of masculinity, female or otherwise, make heavy demands on those in their vicinity.

Making demands of others. Certainly, this is one definition of agency. I saw my own position on this panel as someone who might speak up at those times that any given character or situation might be called upon to be paradigmatic or an object of emulation and to question how that then magnetizes a social space and calls upon others, both male and female, to fall into particular roles, defensive, reactive, accommodating, or otherwise.

But I find that the film does this itself. As you know from just watching the film, the extraordinary moment where the convenience store clerk slaps one protagonist, Shy, strikes me as a moment of (admittedly problematic) sanity and clarity. It is a moment where a working-class female – lesbian or not, butch-identified or not – rejects the violent confluence of penury and masculinity – the ‘oh, I’m destitute, so I’ll rob a 7-11’ narrative (as a grad student, it was a fantasy that floated through my mind more than once). She is a character who recognizes what is at stake enough to refuse to let the scene end as it is often written, in valorized thievery or her own harm or death.

Instead let me say that what I find to be extraordinary about *By Hook or By Crook* is not that it points to a crisis of the visual to deal with what are problematically called “transgendered bodies” (this is the nascent queer film criticism reading²) – say, the inability of all filmic/iconographic space to articulate bodies that do not signify outside of the “monstrous” in what Brian Massumi might call an affective space³, but what I will call a dominant though not hegemonic imaginary; nor do I think that the video signals a crisis of language – which is to say, like not only all queer work, but all cultural work, we need to resist origin narratives and recognize that the construction of this complex cultural object partakes of disparate, conflicted, though at times harmonizing genres/images/forms/stories/institutions/queer female and queer male craft and critical

² I am in this remark I am referring to the important work that Professor Judith Halberstam has done on *By Hook or By Crook* – as well as her engagement with other cinematic milestones such as *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) and *Boys Don’t Cry* (Kimberley Pierce, 2000) – in an as yet unpublished chapter of a larger, book-length study of transexuality and the cinema. The title of her chapter is “The Transgender Gaze.” I would like to thank Professor Halberstam for sharing her work with me and the other panelists as we prepared our own response to the film’s complex gender and class problematics.

³ See Brian Massumi’s recent text *Parables of the Virtual* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

abilities/ what-have-you, to tell a tale about the excoriating difficulties of working-class female masculinities and sexualities.

I will end my remarks by saying that I think that what is extraordinary for me about *By Hook or By Crook* is what I will call its ability to stage a crisis of engagement among those who view it. As I have talked about this film with my friends, from New York to New Orleans, from Chapel Hill to San Francisco, I find that it consistently throws into contrast any given person's acceptance of, anger towards, shame about, boredom with, rebellion against, distaste for, or delight in the terms of one's own gendered embodiment and how that dictates the terms of one's social life and the lives of others. No conversation has been unproblematic. No conversation has been unheated. And no one has a unproblematic relationship to a female masculinity that seems to take some of its terms from late-teen masculine adolescence and the aggression, anger, and agency attendant on that persona.

At this point, so as not to sound too confrontational, I want to shift gears a bit and say a bit about one filmic device that I found pleasurable and exciting, however. The filmic use of the home movie is of course familiar, and a delightful trope for memory; indeed in some instances (for many of us) it *is* memory, and comes to represent for its subjects a lost real, and somehow if only read correctly, an explanatory mechanism. One of my favorite such uses of the home movie is from Jodie Foster's *Home for the Holidays* (Egg Pictures Productions, 1995). The end of that film bleeds into a home movie of a younger version of Holly Hunter's character fearlessly confronting—and this is by her father's account – the moment of a jumbo jet's escaping the earth and ascent to blue skies, nothing but blue skies. Her mother and sister cower behind the father, but for Hunter it is a filmic space, free from fear. *By Hook or by Crook* studs its narrative with a home movie of a child in a Superman outfit, being lifted and sent skyward in an older male's arms. It feels too simple to read this as an iconographic inhabitation of an iconographic, and in fact, cartoonish masculinity, and thus the space of a pure fearlessness because imaginary, thus the place where anxiety and loss begin. But if so, then it is a loss and anxiety engendered in all our bodies by necessity, which is to say, what it means to be born into the constant and unrelenting machinery of being gendered; and it is worth noting that “home movies” are often the site for heated conflicts of how we got to be who we are, and how who we are forces others into roles they may or may not like. That is an engaged and heated conversation worth having.