

The Full Monty: Reaction to and Against Feminism

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Abstract: The development of feminism marks its influence on women's and likewise men's life, which is captured and presented by filmic works. The Hollywood film *The Full Monty* directed by Peter Cattaneo some 20-odd years ago, still reminds the world audience that we've already stepped out of the era when female body was the sole object to be gazed and now male body can also be on show. Superficially, the film seems to suggest that man is obliged to turn in their dignity, gazing power and above all, their authority to women partially because of the development of feminism. As the director Cattaneo says, this film is "a reaction to feminism". However, below the surface the film is not only reaction "to" but "against" feminism by reason that the glorification of masculinity can be detected in many parts of the film with the help of film languages like montage, camera movements and angles. Therefore, this paper starts to explore for what purpose the public has changed its understanding and definition of masculinity, then questions whether the man-stripping phenomenon is a progress or setback for either the society or the development of feminism. Seeking recourse to Judith Butler's "performative" statements and Michael Foucault's theory on power, it intends to answer the question whether this film is a reaction against feminism, and to prove the hypothesis that this film demonstrates masculinity in an alternative "language" and thus glorifies it while man was disguised as victim of the feminism development.

Keywords: Man-stripping, Masculinity, Feminism, Performative, *The Full Monty*

1. Introduction

As bell hooks has said, "sexual liberation was on the feminist agenda" [1]. When the Oscar-winning film *The Full Monty*, directed by the British director Peter Cattaneo was released in 1997, the world audience was reminded that the era has gone with the wind that female bodies were the sole object to be gazed, since male bodies were also available on screen nowadays. Robyn Wiegman claims, in fields like cultural commentary, Hollywood film, and the academic marketplace, "masculinity has become 'new'—newly marked and newly in crisis" [2]. In *The Full Monty*, masculinity is made a site of spectacle, for both the audience in and outside the frame. In this film, the relationships between men, women, work, class and money are exaggerated and to some extent, perplexed. As Wendy Holden says, this is a story of "modern times" and "ordinary men who have been unemployed for a long time and feel that society does not need them any more" [3]. The plot of

the film is simple: six British steel workers have been unemployed for a various span of time (months to years), so they struggle to give a male striptease show to get rid of their economic disadvantage and regain their manpower. To gain more spectators and upon the women audience's cheers, these six men in the once and final show go for "*the full monty*", that is, total nudity.

When the film *The Full Monty* first came out, it was interpreted as the product of the several waves of the feminist movement in the past decades, which have left undeniable marks on Britain and her people. The director Cattaneo has also made similar remarks by saying that this film is "a reaction to feminism" [4]. However, if the underwater part of the film is explored, it can be noted that the glorification of masculinity and shallow representation of women are obvious here and there within the film. Therefore, seeking recourse to Judith Butler's "performative" statement and Stephen Frosh's theory on masculinity, this paper endeavors to prove the

hypothesis that the film is more than a reaction to feminism and includes a close analysis of the complicated sources of social oppression as presented within the film.

2. People's Gradually-changing Understanding/Definition of Masculinity

The world that all are dwelling in has its strict guidelines, definition and even criteria for what is masculinity and femininity, which have permeated the society for centuries. Quoted from R. W. Connell, a male and a female are two sex roles that always exist in "any cultural context", and "masculinity and femininity are quite easily interpreted as internalized sex roles, the products of social learning or 'socialization'" [5]. Like the two oppositions of one dichotomy, there is a clear line of demarcation for people to obey. Whoever attempts to transgress the boundaries will be tragically punished, being labeled as abnormal or perverse. As Connell goes on to describe, "an unmasculine person would behave differently: being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth" [5]. Therefore, no matter how weak a man feels inside, it is essential for him to maintain the straight and towering façade.

However, it's quite another story nowadays. With the development of feminism, women are calling for more deserved rights and opportunities, thus taking away some privileges that men used to possess enjoyably. When the traditional distinction between roles of man and woman is obscured, or when the boundary of man's privileged spectrum is transgressed, many feminine characteristics are encapsulated on some men, such as gentleness, cooperativeness, obedience, carefulness, cowardice, and even fragility. Men shedding tears are presented within the filmic and television frame with increasing frequency. Apparently, men are driven to the situation that they have to face the cruel reality that they didn't dare to expect about a hundred years ago. However, as Stephen Frosh has observed, what has been emphasized "is the way in which sex faces men with the distance between the fantasy of possession of the phallus and the experience of insufficiency and inability to 'stand as the cause of desire' for the sexual partner". It calls into question the basis upon which the autonomy of masculine identity is built: as self-sufficient and powerful, able to control and dominate the other" [6].

No matter how the understanding of masculinity is being changed, the essence remains unchanged, that is, be powerful and dominating. The changed requirement for men from either woman or feminism becomes an urge for the controlling sex to gain back their partially lost privilege.

To address this issue, we need to refer to the beginning of the film, whose scenes provide a big contrast between the prosperous Sheffield as a steel city 25 years ago and the slack scene of the contemporary factories. The next scene has often been commented on. Two main actors, Gaz and Dave, are

shown stuck on a sinking car in a canal because they fail to steal girder from the factory. As Estella Tincknell and Deborah Chambers state, this scene has foregrounded the link between the loss of employment, redundant bodies, and the bleak and decaying space of postindustrial Britain, which symbolically predicts their current dilemma and anxiety of being a modern man. According to them, "the link between the loss of employment, redundant bodies, and the bleak and decaying space of postindustrial Britain is foregrounded from the first scene in the film as Gaz and Dave's comic ineptitude as thieves leaves them stranded in the middle of a Sheffield canal, wobbling on a sinking car in a symbolic re-enactment of their predicament" [7]. Their predicament can be read as the anxiety of being a modern man. On the one hand, they are facing the ever-increasing challenge from women in nearly all terrains; on the other, they are desperate to guarantee their once privilege, maybe at the expense of losing more. What makes things worse is that they sometimes have to face and accept the reality that their manhood or masculinity is in moments of crisis. Being surrounded by a canal and the sinking of the stolen girder—the last straw at that moment, these two men are shown as going nowhere. Thus the prologue invokes thinking from the audience: what has made men so helpless? Who has moved/removed their masculinity? In the book by Mao Sihui, he offers a detailed analysis of the relationship between power and the male body. With recourse mainly to Foucault's theory of "the political technology of the body", he rewrites Foucault by proclaiming that the male body has become an invention. In his words, this modern society witnesses the dramatic changes in women's position, which have inevitably challenged, problematized, and even "subverted" many conventional notions of masculinity, such as physical strength, intelligence, rationality, emotionality, sexual competence and property ownership. That is to say, masculinity "has always been in crisis" [8].

3. Male Bodies: Key Token in *The Full Monty*

Unlike many, if not most mainstream films either in American or British theatres, *The Full Monty* utilizes man's nudity to attract the audience's eyeballs. It is undoubted that this presentation of male bodies might be due to the desire to achieve some freshness on the screen to guarantee box office. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that it reflects in reality the increasing anxiety of men of losing their once privileged positions.

Mary Ann Doane has once claimed, "historically there has always been a certain imbrication (regular overlapping) of the cinematic image and the representation of the woman. The woman's relation to the camera ... is quite different to that of the male" [9]. The difference lies in that women are more often than not, the object to be appreciated, commented on, desired, and played with. The privilege of men in terms of the looking relations both within and outside the cinema outlines the difficulty, if not impossibility, of gaining viewing pleasure

from the films by women. Doane has said elsewhere in the article that, “the female ... must find it extremely difficult... to assume the position of fetishist” [9]. If it is viewed from this perspective, the film *The Full Monty* can be termed as progressive, although not exactly experimental. As Judith Butler has argued, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished [10]. The courage of these six men are obvious, whose action of demonstrating their male bodies to the public endangers their “survival” under this compulsory society. It’s quoted from Stephen Frosh, “masculine and feminine are constructed categories, they never hold firm, but are always collapsing into one another” [6]. However, there is also always a force to draw a relatively clear boundary between the two. These six men’s actions can be read as trespassing the boundary. In this sense, the film celebrates male courage in a way that has never been employed so fully before.

One of the reflective moments in the film might be the following scene: To get prepared for the Friday night show, the six men went to Gerald’s private gymnasium to build up their physique and get tanned with the sunbed. After Gerald gives his permission for other men to get in, the camera movement from left to right enables the audience to view that Guy is lying in the sunbed, Horse is on the bike, and Dave, leaning against the windowsill, is reading a *Cosmopolitan* magazine. While they are commenting on the model’s breasts, Lomper jumps into the screen from the right and says, “Tits are too big”. Then the audience sees Lomper’s frontal reflection in the mirror, who is apparently unaware of the possible comment on his body would he participate in the striptease show. Then, the center of the frame deposits Lomper and Gerald entangle for the anti-wrinkle cream whereas Dave’s voice acts like off-screen voice, saying, “Well, I just pray they’re a bit more understanding about us. That’s all.” The shot cuts back to Dave and Horse with the latter staring at the former, meditatively. The camera abruptly spots at first Guy who is leaving the sunbed to join the conversation, then Gerald, above the waist, with a focus on his dumbfounded face.

The scene described above, as Judi Addelston has commented, can be analyzed with Foucault’s description of “the constant surveillance needed to produce docile bodies” [11]. Traditionally, it is justified to think that women are the only group to receive the surveillance. Nevertheless, men share the trouble nowadays. As Alicia Potter observes, it is a rare moment in *The Full Monty* that depicts men’s empathetic understanding of women’s plight to measure up to the society’s standard of beauty [4]. Somewhere else in the article, the director Cattaneo is quoted with the following comment, “Now, with more sexual liberation, there are whole racks of magazines on men’s health and men’s bodies. We are starting to think and worry about this as part of our journey toward equality. Perhaps it’s one of the bad signs of it: we’ve got your problems as well now” [4]. From this, it can be seen that the self-scrutinizing of men in reality has been represented in this filmic text. Read from a feminist point-of-view, this is the highlight of the film, which can be categorized as the reaction to feminism. In an article titled “Masculinity in Crisis in the

British Professional Crime Film”, the author Andrew Clay has made the conclusion that men are forced to “dance with crime” and “became fugitives, intruders in a post-war society that wouldn’t accommodate them” [12]. Here it would be acceptable to rewrite his words by claiming that in contemporary society men might have to “dance with their (nude) male bodies” to gain back part of their lost masculinity. The film presents some marginalized men’s economic and social problem and draws attention to men’s crisis in present society, thus serving as a reaction to feminism (development).

4. Glorified Masculinity & Demonized Female

Talking about the phenomenon of man stripping, we certainly need to raise the question: is it powerless or powerful? Is it a progress or setback for either the society or the development of feminism? In this film, these six unemployed steelworkers are not only trying to find back their jobs, but also their social status and their masculinity, which is the process of finding back their men power. As it is mentioned above in this article, throughout the film, male bodies have become a site of “gender trouble”, quoting from Judith Butler, and “[g]ender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” [10]. Here, the masculinity of the six men is especially demonstrated through the masquerade. In terms of this, under the pressure of the development of feminism, masculinity gets its glorification in an alternative language, that is, cinematic representation, for people caring less how many men would be actually willing to do that in reality. Masculinity is being exaggerated here.

A close examination of the film might help to clarify this point. Similar to the first scene, the finale of the film has likewise been commented on many occasions. In it, the six men, standing in a V-shaped line, finally reveal their vital organs to the screaming audiences—women being the majority—within the film, while the spectators outside the screen frame can only view the naked backs of the six men. When talking about the symbolism of male sexuality, Richard Dyer has made the comment that it is “overwhelmingly centred on the genitals, especially the penis” [13]. It is therefore correct to say that the film *The Full Monty* follows this viewpoint without violating the taboo by showing men’s genitals and still depicts the powerfulness of masculinity because of its absent presence. When talking about the masculinity of James Bond in Bond films, Claire Hines says that there is “an obvious connection between Bond’s easy mastery of the car’s controls and his male sexual potency” [14]. Under the same thought, the successful presentation of the performance can also be connected to the sexual potency of the six men.

What makes this last scene more significant is that it is frozen there, conveying the message that men are gaining back

their lost power because they are standing there, under the spotlight, and all the audience are screaming and appreciating their naked bodies. The vulnerability of stripping has been changed to male agency to relocate power. When the history of women stripping is looked at retrospectively, it is not difficult to note that it is all for the pleasure of man, only performance without female agency. Thus, the power of men's performance here becomes apparent and unquestionable. Nathan, Gaz's little son, is embarrassed and runs away when he for the first time watches his father rehearses stripping. Here, Nathan embodies the compulsory social system that strictly and constantly surveys social acts and behaviors. Ironically, the little boy turns out to be the one who urges and whips his father to step onto the stage to perform "*the full monty*" at the critical moment at the end of the film. It shows, from another angle, that man stripping has atypically attained power and strength. The six men have moved from the margin to the center.

The glorification of masculinity can be spotted in many other moments of the film. In *The Full Monty*, masculinity is made a site of spectacle. As it is stated above, the embodiment of weakness of stripping is turned into a form of power display on the six marginalized men, which seldom happens on women. Quoting Dave's words to the audience, "we may not be young, we may not be pretty, we may not be right good, but we're here. We're live, and for one night only. We are going for *the full monty*". It is worthwhile to remember Judith Butler's words here, who thinks that "the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*" [10]. By claiming that they will only present the stripping show for "one night only", Dave, representing man in all, allots again the stripping attributes to women, who are the ones who repeat the acts. Therefore, the six men's "naked" performance on the stage within the film can be ironically read as their not being on the stage, that is, their presence should remind the audience of their absence. Through the performance, these six men not only acquire economic advantage—they could make 10,000 pounds by dancing naked on stage for one night only, the power and strength to control their life, and the masculine agency, but also repel the danger of being emasculated, both psychologically and culturally.

It will also be worth considering how women are represented in the film or how femininity is shown. Like what Stephen Frosh has proclaimed, "[t]he struggle against emptiness and towards articulation of a positive content for femininity has always been a major element in the project of feminism" [6]. However, along the carrying out of the project in major social domains, shallow representations of women can still be detected within corners of the film, which seems to be indispensable for such a film on the issue of man. To achieve a pro-perfect image of man within the screen, the production teams have for most of the time, employed problematized woman's image to establish the dichotomy. Women are demonized and represented as causing or adding up to men's crisis.

On the way back home, Gaz and Nathan sneak into a man's striptease show bar to look for Dave's wife, Jean. While

Nathan is ordered to look for the woman, the camera shoots Gaz in the Gents, looking at the crowded audience. Then it cuts to a shot depicting the excitedly cheering audience, which is the subjective camera shot from Gaz. Next, some shots offer the close-up of some women shouting "Off! Off! Off!" and of the contour of the muscles of the men on stage. Seeing Jean coming towards the Gent's with two other women, Gaz hides somewhere inside the Gents. Coming into the Gents, Jean claims that she won't wait in that "bloody queue", referring to the long line in the Women. After the camera shoots Gaz behind the keyhole, it cuts to the images of the three women outside the door. To cheer Jean up, one of the women went to the other side of the wall and imitated man's way of urinating. The constant shifts between the women and Gaz behind the keyhole and later his horrified face indicate his feeling of being metaphorically emasculated and castrated.

According to Stephen Frosh, "phallus is an abstract signifier and is decidedly not the penis, yet it effects a split resulting in masculinity and femininity as attributes and subjective states, each with a different relationship to the phallus itself" [6]. By imitating man's way of urinating, the woman gains the signified effect of the desirable and potent phallus. In Lacan's words, "desire is a constant reminder of incompleteness" [6]. By showing the woman's desire to imitate man, or more exactly to "become man", the film covertly leads the audience to think that, on the one hand, woman is inferior because of her lack, which results in her incompleteness; and on the other, woman can be a threat to man. It is in a sense that the film can be interpreted as demonizing woman in a misogynistic way.

Moreover, the film manages to degrade female's economic dependency. Gerald's wife, Lynda, is presented as an obsessive consumer whose husband is so frightened of her that he cannot bring himself to tell her that he has lost his job. When Gerald is furious because his male friends have made him fail the job interview, he shouts, "She (his wife)'s out there now on the High Street with a Barclay card in her hand!" The film conveys the idea that woman is the "arch criminal" of men's degenerated life in this modern era, and just like what the old Chinese saying goes, "woman is the origin of all evils". Michael Awkward mentions that because the male psyche is formed under patriarchy, it "inevitably reproduces, in its social, cultural, and political manifestations, that historically oppressive sociopolitical regime's misogynistic behaviors, attitudes, and structures of female oppression" [15].

The film, focusing on glorifying masculinity and exaggerating men's crisis as caused by dependent or ruthless women, has meanwhile created Gaz's ex-wife as a wholly one-dimensional character. Legitimately, she pushes Gaz to the edge of losing the fatherhood for the latter's economic plight; metaphorically, she becomes part of the force that "emasculates" Gaz. To add to the issue, Dave's wife is another inconsiderate and innocent woman who knows nothing about her husband. These women have mostly been constructed as the source of men's predicament in various aspects. As Tinncknell and Chambers claim, "*The Full Monty* represent [s] women as a threat or a source of fear, and it is this that

severely limits their possibilities for a feminist-and perhaps also a wholly pleasurable-reading for a female audience" [7].

5. Gender: Not the Sole Source of Oppression

From the above analysis, it might be easy to draw the conclusion that sex/gender is rendered as the prior source of oppression between people (s), even in the modern era. It is true that this factor does work to a certain degree. However, what perplexes the situation is that oppression contains more than one incentive and works under more than one structure. Gardiner summarizes that in one essay of the book, Cheung King-Kok emphasizes that "manhood is inflected by various determinants, such as age, race, sexuality, class, and geographic location", and these determinants are "often interactive rather than additive" [16]. If the issue of gender is emphasized solely whereas other issues are released and at large, it leads only to a blind-alley-like understanding of the problem. Therefore, we need to move beyond the issue of feminism to decipher more profoundly and genuinely the literary texts, here specifically filmic text.

A closer reading of the six male characters in the film would help to notify that their masculinity is marginalized. First, they are all unemployed for a period of time, resulting in Gaz's inability to pay the child support and Lomper's attempted suicide. Economic inferiority categorizes them into the working class. Class is a notion that is regarded as "the essential vehicle" of transitions in society. Although class is, as Mao Sihui argues, "a social construction made for identifying the possible effects of objective properties of categories of people" [17], it still provides measurement system for social hierarchy. Compared to aristocracy and upper middle class, the working class is placed lowest along the hierarchy. Noticeably, this group of men occupies a rather low position due to their unemployment. Physically, not one of the six men appears to be attractive. Horse is an old black man in his 60's, and Dave is suffering from obesity who claims miserably that "anti-fat-bastard cream there is not". The kiss between Lomper and Guy indicates their homosexuality. Within the above analysis, it can be noted that only the marginalized men who are not at the center need to take the risk of losing man's dignity to reclaim the agency and power of masculinity. They are presented as successful finally whereas some women are demonized. However, it hides behind the screen that the majority of privileged men would very unlikely need to take this last measure, whose status of masculinity is steadier more one can imagine. In addition, it would be very wrong to regard sex/gender as the single determining factor of oppression.

Indeed, when we talk about oppression, it is important and inevitable to mention the sources that are deeply implicated in one another. Working on one spectrum, the notions of class, age, sex/gender, sexuality, and the forth intervene each other and add up to the complication of the oppressing practices, resulting in the difficulty and complexity of erasing

oppression. Thus the oppression is sexist, racist, political, and cultural, to name just a few.

6. Conclusion

The film *The Full Monty* reacts both to and against feminism. On the one hand, it reveals the anxiety and worry of men in the present era resulting from the development of feminism; on the other, it spares more space for the depiction and allusion to the physical and psychological crisis brought forward by women.

In conclusion, what message is covertly conveyed should be more significant than what is overtly presented within a film. Superficially, the film seems to suggest that man is turning in his dignity, gazing power and above all, his authority to woman partially because of the development of feminism. However, below the surface the film is not only reaction "to" but "against" feminism because the glorification of masculinity can be detected in many parts of the film. Moreover, sex/gender does not work single-handedly; instead, together with the force of class, age, social and economic status, race, sexuality and the forth, it intervenes with them to achieve the steady and lasting oppression of one group over another. To skip the complexity of the sources of oppression would only lead to the stereotyped scapegoating of the conflicts between the two sexes.

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