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January 25, 1998, Sunday
Arts and Leisure Desk

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A Few Good Men? Don't Look in the Movies

By RICHARD A. SHWEDER

WHY ARE IMAGES OF MEN IN movies these days so desolate when it comes to real love, real sex, real families, real children and real work? Why has the art form become so detached from what is true and good? Why has our collective imagination concerning the male sex become so perverse and hallucinogenic? In short, why has the film industry declared an open hunting season on men?

If you're like me, eager for a rush of inspiration that comes from seeing a manifestation of something heroic, excellent or at least a little dignified on the silver screen, 1997 was a disappointing year for representations of manhood. "Men first! Leave the women and children behind," an impulse embodied by one of the primary characters in "Titanic," is not an uplifting message. "Under those jeans is something wonderful waiting to get out," a concept at the heart of "Boogie Nights," produces no surge of pride. Certainly there was no character around like the honorable Clark Gable in "It Happened One Night," who doesn't take advantage of the affianced Claudette Colbert ("You better go back to your bed").

Some of the worst offenders in this regard were films declared by critics to be among the year's best. Here, for example, is a short list of acclaimed pictures over the last six months that sucked the soul out of my body, registering zero on my epiphany scale.

* "In the Company of Men," in which the male characters not only don't protect those who are vulnerable, they prey on them. These men are callous, vulgar, egocentric and manipulative. They lie. They cheat. They don't even show respect for their mothers. You want to kill them. The only flush of pleasure you get from this movie is in leaving the theater and reciting the incantation "God forbid that life should imitate art."

* "Boogie Nights," that foxy exhibitionist of a film in which the human body, the English language and a prurient audience are reduced to their bare minimum -- and Burt Reynolds, a fatherly neo-Aristotelian philosopher of sleaze, lectures on one of the great, elevating aims of life: to hold an audience after the climax.

* "The Ice Storm," a story of suburban families living in a 1970's Sodom and Gomorrah, where the need-driven adults are turned on by the idea of being adolescents again and having whatever they want. The only heroic or even mature men in the movie are historical figures alluded to in conversation. The high point is an attempt at cross-generational dialogue: "Hi son, I'm back from my trip." "Oh, were you gone?"

Only slightly more uplifting were the epiphanic fakes, mock-heroic movies about manhood that offered some cheap thrills but little genuine rapture. From the cultural right there was "The Edge" (let's call it "The C.E.O. Fights the Bear"), about the moral and intellectual superiority of wealthy men and their manifest destiny to lead. Lost in the Alaskan wilderness with two clueless pros from the fashion world, Anthony Hopkins (the C.E.O.) is courageous, self-sacrificing, farsighted. He knows how to fish, trap, find the true direction, flavor meat with gunpowder, start a fire with ice, polish shoes with banana peels. And best of all, he knows how to kill the bear.

Perhaps the most startling scene is the moment when one of the other two men, an African-American wearing dreadlocks (Harold Perrineau), is instructed by Hopkins to do something useful: make a spear. A basic message of "The Edge," it seems, is that dominance hierarchies are natural, with you-know-who at the top. Not much cause for celebration. The movie blows up this particular image of manhood until you wish it would just explode.

From the cultural center came the safe "Air Force One," a public-spirited pipe dream starring an impeccably valiant Harrison Ford as Commander in Chief and family man. With baseball glove and Medal of Honor in hand, he flies the Presidential plane and defends the world against Hollywood's latest (and rather vaguely defined) Communist-Islamic-male monsters.

AND FROM THE CULTURAL left there was "A Life Less Ordinary." A spoiled rich girl played by Cameron Diaz is kidnapped by a white working-class man (Ewan McGregor) who has lost his job to a robot. She is the one who shows us what masculinity used to be all about. As the kidnapper cooks, faints, cries, wants to get married and finds it difficult to cope, she is unsentimental, calculating and in control. She chops wood and drinks him under the table. "Go in hard and fast," she tells him. "You're going to be a success." When he finally takes a bullet for her, they fall madly in love.

This film is witty ("Men only want one thing. They may want it more than once, but it is still only one thing") and manages to offer the viewer some perverse pleasure, even a kind of romance, in the idea that a blatant reversal of traditional gender images is better than no gender images at all. But with all the juggling of stereotypes, virtue tends to get lost.

Such movies certainly don't induce a sense of masculine pride in the male viewer. They induce anxiety, as one begins to wonder whether the only way to be a male hero these days is to be a billionaire, the President of the United States or a woman. That's fine if you're rich, Presidential or a woman, but it offers little hope of salvation for most men.

Another way to produce a disastrous image of manhood is to be silly, conspicuously politically correct or, worse, both. "In and Out," a movie in which Hollywood gives an Oscar to its idea of homosexuality, was both. A beloved high school English teacher (played by Kevin Kline) thinks he has been wrongly portrayed as gay on national television. Before the plot thickens, a student in his class explains to him that people are sometimes stereotyped as homosexuals because they are well dressed and love Shakespeare, and the point is made that stereotyping is bad. Later, everyone, including the well-dressed English teacher, discovers that he really is gay. Oops! Did this cartoon of a movie just reinforce the stereotype? And what exactly is it saying about manhood and homosexuality?

The viewer is supposed to laugh at -- and with -- all the small-minded un-American middle Americans who don't believe that between consenting adults anything goes. It is P.C. Lite, the gay experience with a happy face. The "sex" (male with male, male with female) is goofy and devoid of real desire. Movies like "In and Out" are slick and well intended, and they get their laughs, but they leave you feeling spiritually flattened, or at least brain-dead.

Why are so many recent film representations of manhood devoid of exaltation? Why do they aim to eviscerate masculinity and cut men down to size? There are other cultures in which men are still occasionally pictured as dignified and on speaking terms with their women, their children and their gods. But not in our cinema. Why should this be so?

One obvious answer is that art simply reflects life and men have it coming. Thumbs down to men has been a sign of our times for nearly three decades now, since the women's liberation movement began to give power to that defamatory gesture. These 30 years have not been without their inspirational cinematic moments, especially with regard to female characters. Consider, for example, "Thelma and Louise," in which even a sisterly suicide was dignifying. Maybe men really are devoid of civility, honor, fidelity, courage and a sense of duty and justice; maybe men really are cut off from the divine.

An alternative explanation is that after years of watching women so often wave hands at them in a downward direction, men have finally lost their voice. There is probably some merit in this view. I remember being at an academic conference some years ago when an articulate female scholar refused to talk to the men in the room on the grounds that her only interest in them was as sexual objects. Nary a man dared to say a word.

THESE DAYS MEN, weak and strong, usually keep their mouths shut when they are being castigated (as exploiters) or defiled (as self-promoters), for fear

of being defensive, offensive (they might be accused of harassment) or simply out of control. Slandering men has not only become popular; it has quickly become protected speech. So why not market more of it in movies while the demand is great and the risks are few?

Moving from marketing to mythology, there is a legend to be examined about the symbolic meaning of disempowering men. Men no longer barbecue in our movies; instead they are the ones being skewered. But why did they barbecue in the first place? Because we once lived in a gendered world built out of piled-on oppositions: outdoors versus indoors, work versus family, production versus reproduction, salaried versus unsalaried, competitive versus cooperative, hard versus soft. When the hearth moved outdoors it moved into male space and thus fell under male control. So men barbecued.

But now those distinctions have been blurred. Women are in the workplace, where they are more productive, less reproductive and toiling harder than ever before. Men are being downsized and losing their jobs, and their part in reproduction was fleeting in the first place.

What happens to the minds of men and women in this brave new confusing world? Men fall out of love with themselves and into doubt. They look into the void and ponder ultimate questions: Are women more evolved than men because they can be productive and reproductive at the same time? If you take away a man's economic function as breadwinner, does anything of value remain?

Women begin to wonder: Do men envy me or hate me because I can displace them from their jobs and generate children at the same time? Should I empathize with such dark emotions? Should I feel guilty that I'm having more fun at work than at home? Did I make the right choice in sacrificing so much of my family life? Did I have a choice?

These are the dangerous under thoughts out of which horrific cinema-graphic images grow: the incubus or demonic man of "In the Company of Men," who is sociopathic, opportunistic, immoral and perilous to women; the disposable, pathetic man of "Sunday," a 1997 Sundance Festival winner, who has gone from winning to whining, and whose only potential function in life is about to be replaced by a sperm bank; the ornamental male of "Boogie Nights," neither productive nor reproductive, whose only claim to fame is between his legs.

From the point of view of the excellent, the dignified and even the divine, none of that symbolic material is very appealing. The images either trivialize the male voice or turn men into objects of contempt or disgust rather than of admiration or sympathy. That is why "The Full Monty," a small British film that has been in theaters for months now, deserves an epiphany prize. The film is about downsized men but succeeds at depicting a triumph of character as a group of out-of-work steelworkers -- really a pack of bonded warriors -- overcome pathos and fear by becoming the best strippers in town.

So you're only interested in me as a sexual object? I guess I can live with that. And maybe pretty soon you'll find me lovable too? "The Full Monty" gives new,

elevating meaning to both the idea of the disposable man and that of the ornamental man, although the thrill at the end of the movie is tinged with embarrassment, and thus a bit less dignified than one would want.

The best recent reflection on the idea that contemporary men can be on speaking terms with the gods and other timeless ideals came in the documentary "Fast, Cheap and Out of Control." Four men talk about their work as a calling rather than a job. It turns out you don't have to be a billionaire to be a hero. Ordinary boys don't have to grow up to become crude, demonic or diminished figures. They can grow up to become, with honor, mole-rat specialists or topiary gardeners.

When it comes to images of manhood, who knows what the next year will bring? "The Boxer," which stars Daniel Day-Lewis as a man capable of love, courage, loyalty and heroic perseverance who understands the redemptive powers of pain, surely got 1998 off to a good start.

"GOOD WILL HUNTING," on the other hand, is a mixed blessing. It is a charming but well-worn upward-mobility story about a mathematical whiz kid from South Boston who makes it in and around Harvard Square. In America, this movie says, talent always prevails. But there is not much inspiration in thinking that you have to be a genius to be a hero or that high-status women will be attracted only to high-I.Q. men who can reason them under the table. Yes, it is good that the young hero (Matt Damon) doesn't sell out to the National Security Agency or the Cambridge establishment. But as he rides off into the sunset, Silicon Valley may well be in his future. How do you think he turns out?

Perhaps the best way to recover an inspiring image of manhood right now is, in fact, to go see that film about the North Atlantic on April 15, 1912. Gaze upon the small heroes in the band on the deck of the sinking Titanic: "Gentlemen, it's been a privilege playing with you tonight."

The sort of man who voluntarily stayed on board and drank his brandy as the old ship went down still deserves to be noticed. After 30 years of downsizing, perhaps he can be the basis for an affirmative-image program for men.

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