

John Wayne and Ideology

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To Jeffrey Charles Leitner

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INTRODUCTION

ENSURING THAT “WE GET TO WIN THIS TIME”

In a complex and dangerous world, the allure of the simple is addictive.
—Ewen and Ewen

The subject hallucinates his world.
—Lacan

Though nominally about John Wayne, this work is more an examination of post-World War II reactionary politics in the United States, a politics still playing a major role in contemporary American life. During Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s presidency, American progressives effected an unprecedented number of social reforms—Social Security, the FHA, the FDA, the FDIC, the WPA, the FCC, the GI Bill, and the repeal of Prohibition, to name but a few. But none of these reforms, it should be noted, materialized without stiff opposition from conservatives. Opposition that persists.

For example, though American industrialists did not want to be seen as “economic royalists and sweaters of labor,” they nevertheless fought tooth and nail against the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which established a minimum wage, mandated overtime pay, and outlawed most child labor. Their beef? That “these everlastingly multiplying governmental mandates,” such as the FLSA, were too onerous for businesses earnestly attempting to find solutions to their labor problems (qtd. in Grossman). More than a century of laissez-faire labor policy apparently not being enough time for industrialists to figure out how to avoid chaining children to their workstations.

It’s important to consider that despite their failed opposition to the FDR-era reforms, those conservative forces ultimately *won*. The United States in the postwar era has been marked by conservatism rather than liberalism, *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Roe v. Wade*, and the 1965 Voters Rights Act notwithstanding. Furthermore, with respect to those reforms, they have been slowly eroding since their enactments: while certainly not as bad as the Separate but Equal era, public schools in America are more segregated now than in the late 1960s¹; *Roe v. Wade* has

been under incessant assault since 1973, its most egregious compromise to date being the 2013 Texas Legislature's abortion ban; and, also in 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the Voter Rights Act's provision to mandate federal approval for states' proposed voter legislation².

My agenda in this work is to examine how a certain type of cinema, the John Wayne movie being its most egregious example, works hand in glove with that postwar conservatization.

Cinema functions, in the words of Kaja Silverman, as a "collective make-believe" (*Male Subjectivity* 15), and perhaps it's also appropriate to call cinema a "collective male-believe," given its recurring obsession with bolstering a putatively weak masculinity. Within the context of mainstream Hollywood cinema, little separates the "make-believe" and the "male-believe," from its beginning the screen privileging male fantasies. Though Hollywood has an ambivalent—if not to say unwarranted—reputation as a haven of American liberalism³, it often serves as an apparatus of conservative ideology. The poster boy for that agenda is John Wayne, who, especially after World War II, proudly, overtly, and unashamedly "figured" conservative politics. He wasn't the only one, of course: public figures such as Ayn Rand, Walt Disney, Gary Cooper, Cecil B. DeMille, Clark Gable, Ward Bond, and Ronald Reagan were among Hollywood's most aggressive critics of American liberalism. Cinema's power as a conservative instrument is borne out by the fact that many of them—especially Reagan, Rand, and Disney—remain household names in America, while the Hollywood Ten, those refusing to "name names" during the McCarthy era, do not. Together with Reagan, John Wayne remains the symbol of American right-wing politics, or, to be more specific, the strain of American right-wing politics that has given us Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Richard Nixon and his Plumbers, and the Tea Party.

In Paula Cole's 1997 song "Where Have all the Cowboys Gone?" a heartbroken woman who finds out too late that the man she finds herself with is not the man she thought she was getting, says sarcastically, "I will wash the dishes while you go have a beer." The key line, though, is when she asks, "Where is my John Wayne?" While the song is critical of men who abandon their families to escape into self-serving male fantasies, the usage of the song is something entirely different: in the twenty-first century, the song has metamorphosed into an anthem for an America pining for the lost masculinity that John Wayne ostensibly embodied⁴. Such is the power of John Wayne, that even the deployment of the name itself manufactures an interpretation counter to the one offered in the lyrics.

I will discuss it in more detail in Chapter 5, but a famous incident reifying this manufacturing process occurs in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) where, upon being given a covert assignment to find POWs still left in Vietnam, John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone), who was an Army Special Forces Ranger in Vietnam, asks his former commanding officer, Colonel Samuel Trautman, (Richard Crenna), “Do we get to win this time?” Rambo’s “we” draws the spectator into film’s male fantasy world, a world plagued by a sense of loss and trauma. Furthermore, the Rambo fantasy world is historically marked by what Richard Slotkin calls a “Crisis of Public Myth”:

In a healthy society the political and cultural leaders are able to repair and renew that myth by articulating new ideas, initiating strong action in response to crisis or merely projecting an image of heroic of heroic leadership. But leaders are recognized and empowered only in an ideological system whose public myth imagines a place and a role for heroic action. (626)

Certainly Rambo’s “cinematic address” alludes to the United States’ Vietnam War embarrassment, but does so from the white-supremacist perspective that marks the Reagan era, that is, that through a reclaimed white masculinity, “we” can triumph over the forces that stripped “us” of our primacy.

The Vietnam War itself, starting as it did in the 1960s, was a reaction to progressive reforms—the civil rights and women’s rights movements specifically—reforms that necessitated, *pace* Susan Jeffords, a “remasculinization” of American culture. In *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives* (2009), Brenda Boyle suggests that the war materialized because “what was assaulted most by the era’s revolutions was an American sense of a coherent, bounded, or ‘monolithic’ masculinity” (3). The American response to this ostensible loss of masculinity was to manufacture a war, because, as everyone knows, war is the one reliable place where masculinity can be located:

The traditional American ethos contends that boys become men through experience in war and that conversion makes them real Americans. American boys are convinced that fighting in a war or participating in its violent counterpart is something they should aspire to do, and men who have not participated in a war are made to think they missed a rite of passage. What it means to be a man, though unspecified in this mythology, is tacitly stated to be white, heterosexual, and able bodied. (Boyle 3)

But we lost, so traditional notions about masculinity, which were tenuous even before Vietnam, were now in a state of panic. But we are loath to

interrogate those notions, so to manage the subsequent crisis in the wake of the Vietnam War loss, American culture has manufactured a litany of scapegoats responsible for that loss: liberals, the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, a Democratic Congress, bureaucracy, feminists, “lack of resolve,” the media, abortion, homosexuals, Jane Fonda—suspects that boil down to one thing, a lack/loss of real masculinity.

The century-old Masculinity Crisis has never abated; it is still in its Woman Suffrage-era state of panic. This book argues that John Wayne is the form of that panic.

Even today, almost 40 years after his death, John Wayne stands for an “ideal” masculinity. A common sentiment goes along the lines of “John Wayne was a great American. A man’s man. He wasn’t perfect, no one is, but he was close enough.”⁵ But it’s important to acknowledge that this sentiment is from an almost exclusively White American perspective, a panicked perspective reacting to the deconstructions/diagnoses of the white supremacy, homophobia, and misogyny underpinning American history, the three strongest fingers in White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy’s grip on late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century American ideology.

In the early twenty-first century, the changes effected by feminism and post-war civil-rights legislation have brought “the chickens home to roost,” so to speak, following the Obama presidency. Right-wing entertainers such as Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, “Dr.” Laura Schlessinger, and Bill O’Reilly—all of whom frequently cite John Wayne as the embodiment of real American values⁶—have, to healthy ratings, ramped up their racism, homophobia, and misogyny following the Obama presidency⁷. The so-called Tea Party, materializing in the same month as the Obama inauguration, has installed outright racists, homophobes, and misogynists in local, state, and national political offices. While those legislators have made little headway in their battles against the “homosexual agenda,” they not only have leaned hard into decades-old women’s and civil rights reforms, but also set their sights on rolling back FDR-era reforms such as Social Security and the FLSA. That these phenomena are occurring in the second decade of the twenty-first century bears witness to how powerful reactionary politics, for which John Wayne functions as a patron saint, remains in America.

CHAPTER ONE

JOHN WAYNE, *MISE EN ABYME*, AND IDEOLOGY

[T]he structure of all ideology, interpellating individuals as subjects in the name of a Unique and Absolute Subject is specular, i.e. a mirror-structure, and doubly specular: this mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology and ensures its functioning. Which means that all ideology is centred, that the Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the Centre.
—Althusser

What a cynic who "believes only his eyes" misses is the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures our experience of reality.
—Žižek

This work is about how John Wayne, the most famous actor in the history of Hollywood, desires to function as a mirror—or *mise en abyme*—of postwar American ideology. In *Mirror in the Text (Le Récit Spéculaire: Essai sur la Mise en Abyme, 1989)*, Lucien Dällenbach examines how a text might, within the narrative, produce a small mirror of itself which “brings out the meaning and form of a work.” The term *mise en abyme*, first used as a literary device by Andre Gide in the late nineteenth century, is from heraldry: it is a small mirror on a shield, which, when held up to another mirror, shows a miniature reflection of itself. As a literary device, a famous example is *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play within a play in *Hamlet*, which, like the mirror on the shield, functions as “a miniature replica of itself” (8, Dällenbach’s italics). Dällenbach suggests that these mirrors reveal a textual anxiety, that a text desires that it be interpreted, as Hamlet wants *The Murder of Gonzago* to be interpreted by Claudius, in a specific way. A text tries to shore up the gaps and slippages—Dällenbach uses the German word *leerstellen* (“empty places, free places, or, more succinctly, as gaps, blanks, or ellipses” [“Reflexivity” 439])—that threaten its interpretive integrity, to ensure that “signs” match up with “signifiers.”

According to Dällenbach, “Every literary text tends to restrict, to a greater or lesser extent, its indeterminacy, its ‘empty places,’ and its

successiveness by ‘signals’ which appear as constraints and limitations upon the reader’s freedom of invention” (“Reflexivity” 439). Thus the *mise en abyme* materializes as a signal which functions as an insurance policy against misinterpretation. Were there a deductible on this insurance policy, however, it would be too steep, because the text, as Georg Lukács reminds us, “is a surface riddled with holes” (92), meaning that there are too many indeterminacies, too much *leerstellen*, to fully guarantee any one interpretation.

It’s tempting to use the term *fractal* to describe this mirroring phenomenon, but a fractal as I understand it is an exact replica of the object within itself, whereas a *mise en abyme*, though it may try to replicate the object, nevertheless betrays some slippage, some anamorphosis. As is true for any metaphor, the *mise en abyme* is not an exact replica of the text-as-a-whole. However much the *mise en abyme* attempts to remove the *leerstellen* separating “sign” from “signifier”—or, more specifically, “sign” from “desired signifier”—it instead announces the possibility of misinterpretation rather than a guarantee of its opposite. Dällenbach writes, “a work of fiction is an *intentional object*, always indeterminate because of its very determinacies” (“Reflexivity” 437).

The more determinate *mise en abyme*, then, would one that exploits rather than precludes the *leerstellen*, such as the anamorphic skull in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533), which from a “straight” perspective appears to be a meaningless blob; however, seen from an angle, or, in the words of Slavoj Žižek, “awry,” it is entirely something else. Žižek writes, “if we look at what appears from the frontal view as an extended, ‘erected’ meaningless spot, from the right perspective we notice the contours of a skull” (*Sublime Object* 99).

The anamorphic object is thus the more “accurate” *mise en abyme*. In the case of *The Ambassadors*, the anamorphic skull, a *memento mori*, functions as a more powerful comment on the hyperbolically focused material in the painting. “Look on my Works, ye Mighty and despair,” the focused material asserts; the *memento mori* skull—in its anamorphosis—more forcefully deconstructs the material’s arrogance.

A cinematic example of this anamorphosis appears in Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* (1941), where, like Holbein, Hitchcock contrasts the straightforward with the anamorphic⁸. The “straightforward” image in the film is the portrait of General McLaidlaw, the deceased father of the film’s heroine, Lina (John Fontaine). It is a portrait that, like the French ambassadors in Holbein’s painting, is realistic and representational. According to Stephen Heath, the portrait of General McLaidlaw is a painting “that bears with all its Oedipal weight on the whole action of the film” (21). In the same

house, but in a different room, is a contrasting, anamorphic painting, a “post-cubist, Picasso-like” still life (Heath 23).

Two detectives have arrived at Lina’s home to question her about her husband, Johnnie (Cary Grant), who is under suspicion for murder. As the detectives wait to see Lina, the camera concentrates on one of them, Detective Benson (Vernon Downing), intently examining the painting. Both the painting and Detective Benson are in deep focus, the man craning his neck in a gesture signifying his inability to understand it. This inability is reinforced when Downing, in confusion, looks back at the painting one more time as the detectives are being shown into Lina’s room. A delicious touch from Hitchcock.

When the detectives are shown in to see Lina, all three sit at a coffee table, and the detectives show her a newspaper story. Rather than read it immediately, though, she moves to a different area of the room, to a seat directly adjacent to the portrait of her father, which, unlike the anamorphic painting, is slightly out of focus. Lina puts on her reading glasses and reads the newspaper story: “ENGLISHMAN FOUND DEAD,” which confirms her (and perhaps the spectator’s own) suspicions about Johnnie.

Scooping Lacan by several years, Hitchcock here is showing Lina reading under “the name of the father” (*le nom du père*), the representational painting of her father signifying both her submission to patriarchy⁹ and to her and the detectives’ reasonable or commonsensical interpretation of the evidence against Johnnie. Here we see two examples of *mise en abyme*: the representational object, which appears to be easily discernible, contrasted with the anamorphic object, which the detective—i.e., one whose job it is to correctly discern the signs—cannot fathom. But Lina and the detectives have misinterpreted the signs. Both have seen the signs, the circumstantial evidence mounting against Johnnie, but insofar as they operate *in the shadow of the father*, what appears to be true is false. Within the economy of patriarchal power, the “truth” of the evidence has been *construed*, that is, *made true*. This contrasting of the anamorphic with the representational is as good an articulation as any of Lacan’s concept of the *petit objet a*, the distinction between the subject himself and “what falls from the subject”:

[T]he scopophilic drive, in which the subject encounters the world as a spectacle that he possesses. He is thus victim of a lure, through which what issues forth from him and confronts him is not the true *petit a*, but its complement, the specular image. (“Introduction” 86)

The *mise en abyme* could also be a reverse image. For example, James Joyce’s “Eveline,” the fourth story in *Dubliners*, is about a 19-year-old

woman who must choose between running off with a sailor, Frank, and staying with her father, an incestuous, alcoholic pedophile. Unlike the examples of Holbein and Hitchcock, though, the representational and anamorphic objects in “Eveline” are the same object, a *trompe l’oeil*. The *mise en abyme* is an allusion to the opera *The Bohemian Girl*. Eveline and her lover, Frank, whom Eveline’s father hates, sneak off one night to see *The Bohemian Girl*, which is about two lovers, Arline (mirroring Eveline) and Thaddeus (mirroring Frank), bucking the odds—most significantly Arline’s disapproving father—to finally live happily ever at story’s end. *The Bohemian Girl* is a wonderful comic allusion; as I like to tell my students, it’s the only opera with a happy ending. But like the portrait of General McLaidlaw in *Suspicion*, *The Bohemian Girl* is a trick. No happily ever after awaits Eveline and Frank: Joyce’s Bohemian Girl leaves Frank in the lurch and goes back to her monstrous father. This story bears the full weight of Lacan’s *le nom du père*: it denotes “the name of the father,” but when spoken sounds exactly like *le non du père*, “the ‘no’ of the father.”¹⁰ In the Lacanian schema the father is the one who proscribes, the one who “says no.” Though there are lots to choose from, there are few more terrifying fathers in literature than Eveline’s, and such is the power of *le nom du père* that Eveline can’t escape him. Literally can’t escape, as she is trapped forever in *Dubliners*, always leaving her lover and returning to the terrifying *père*.

As is also true for most things, in the world of *The Ambassadors*, Hitchcock, and Joyce, nothing is at it seems. The representational promises the “thing,” Lacan’s *petit objet a*, to be *as it seems*. The representational seeks to be, in the words of Žižek, “a pure signifier which designates, and at the same time constitutes, the identity of a given object beyond the variable cluster of its descriptive properties” (*Sublime Object* 98). A dysfunction of male subjectivity is that there is a gap between who the subject is and what he imagines himself to be. Lacan uses the term *agalma*—a small statue of a God—to describe the image that the male subject desires his own image to be, “that object which the subject believes that his desire tends toward” (“Introduction” 87). It’s tempting to call the anamorphic the more truthful *agalma*, but inscribed in *agalma* is the desperation that it represent the subject, whereas no such fantasy exists with the anamorphic—it seems more accurate to define the anamorphic as a self-conscious announcement of the complication between material reality and truth.

Insofar as cinema is primarily visual, it deploys the hero as a type of *mise en abyme* of male subjectivity. One of the reasons a “regular-looking” actor like James Stewart or Tom Hanks can be a big star is that

the films he is in imagine themselves as articulating “regular guy” fantasies¹¹. It’s also why so few “regular-looking” women are big stars: Hollywood films are decidedly *not* about articulating women’s fantasies. An attraction of a film like *Transformers* or *Spider-man* or *Twister* is that it suggests that the “regular guy” can save the day *and* get the hot girl.

The John Wayne film is radically different than the “regular guy” fantasy film. It props up John Wayne as the ideal male subject, not the subject as he is—or, to be more specific, how Hollywood imagines the “regular guy.” The John Wayne film asserts the John-Wayne-in-the-John-Wayne-movie functions as a *fractal*¹² of the film’s diegetic and ideological purposes. As Bonnie Tyler sings in “I Need a Hero,” “He’s gotta be larger than life.” The film desperately desires for the John Wayne to be *that which it seems to be*, to be, like Hamlet, the subject that “knows not seems.”

But there is no *to be*: the John Wayne, in its overarching earnestness, is *only* “seems.” John Wayne was neither a cowboy nor a soldier—the roles he mostly played—and, most tellingly, *he’s not even John Wayne*. He is Marion Morrison, ex-bench-warming football player from Iowa who hated horses and chickened out of military service during World War II. Routine showings of “The Sands of Iwo Jima” at the National Museum of the Marine Corps; a statue of John Wayne at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage museum; his receiving the National Football Foundation’s highest honor, The Gold Medal Award; and, most astonishingly, his receiving the nation’s highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, not only bear witness to the haphazard connection between sign and signifier, but also may even suggest that whatever connection exists between them might be *strategically* counterfactual. As far as representational *mise en abymes* go, you’d be hard pressed to deliberately construct anything more distorting than John Wayne.

The strategy of the *mise en abyme* is helpful in an analysis of cinema because a movie often deploys images to manage the spectator’s interpretation. Most movies are exacting in that management. It strikes me that most Hollywood movies are desperate that they be interpreted in a limited way, both in terms of ensuring it gets its points across, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, in ensuring that other interpretations are precluded (more on that later). Welles filmed *Citizen Kane* in deep focus so that spectators, as they would at a live theater performance, would be forced to construct meaning from the surplus of focused material on screen.

But who watches *Citizen Kane* on date night?¹³ With respect to managing interpretations, Hollywood movies are deeply conservative. And no movie is more conservative than the John Wayne movie, which, like Hamlet, deploys (the) John Wayne in a similarly desperate fashion, marshaling all its resources to ensure that the “text” be interpreted the way it demands it be interpreted, most specifically that its hero be interpreted as the ideal American Subject: male, white supremacist, heterosexual/heteronormative, virile, pro-capitalist, patriarchal. The *mise en abyme* corresponds to how ideology works: a manifestation that, in its overarching drive to preclude misinterpretation, nevertheless reveals a “surface riddled with holes.”

Additionally, Anamorphosis and *mise en abyme* are helpful figures in understanding how ideology works, more specifically how ideological apparatuses work. I want to interrogate the John Wayne movie, but the suspect is uncooperative and arrogant—it has attempted to cover its tracks because its milieu facilitates that covering. It seems possible, perhaps even probable, that narrative cinema itself materializes at the beginning of the twentieth century as a strategy to shore up the gaps extant in other art forms—especially the novel, with all its untethered voices, and painting, with this new guy Picasso, who revels in anamorphosis. Is the John Wayne movie itself a *mise en abyme* of the narrative film industry, so panic-stricken at the modern world that its most diligent work is not in the guarantee of but rather the preclusion of certain interpretations? Anyway, on to ideology.

Ideology is spectral, no “there” underpinning our political reality. Althusser defines ideology as “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (158), and there is no rule that those “ideas and representations” be based on material reality. If we use the extraordinary careers of Ronald Reagan and John Wayne as examples, we see that the “ideas and representations” constructing postwar American ideology are based on the opposite of material reality. Both Reagan and John Wayne are midwesterners (the former an Illinoisan, the latter Iowan) who nevertheless “signify” American West masculinity.

And, oh yeah, they’re *actors*, that is, their power as signifiers stems from their *pretending to be someone else*. Žižek calls this sort of rupture between the material and the ideological “the construction of a point which effectively does not exist” (*Interrogating the Real* 27), which is as accurate a description of Reagan and John Wayne as there is. Rambo is no more *real* than the Reagan imagined in the American conscious as a badass warrior. Insofar as his fictitious credentials are at least based on plausibility, Rambo, as it turns out, is *more real* than Reagan¹⁴.

* * *

Film theory has effectively analyzed the masculinity crisis mapped out so well in Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America* (discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Five). Laura Mulvey, bell hooks, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Tania Modleski, and many others have ushered in a golden age of film analysis, their work concentrating on mainstream cinema's function as an ideological apparatus supporting White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy.

There can be no overstating the importance of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to film studies, her famous assertion "Sadism demands a story" seeming a tailor-made description of the John Wayne film, a medium responding all too willingly to the punitive mandates of patriarchy¹⁵. While readers of this book are perhaps well acquainted with Mulvey's essay, it may be helpful to revisit it to show how (and how well) it pertains to a study of John Wayne, especially to show how heavily invested John Wayne films are in preserving the homophobic, misogynous, and racist elements of White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy.

I think it important to revisit "Visual Pleasure" because the generation of reassessments of it (a cottage industry itself) in many ways has distracted from the power of Mulvey's condemnation of mainstream cinema's practice of fetishism/misogyny, a practice writ large in John Wayne movies but metamorphosized into a different, though no less misogynous, creature in contemporary mainstream film. I will discuss these reassessments, most targeting Mulvey's assertions regarding the male body, below. Mulvey's argument, just as important now as it was in 1975, is that "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (6), furthermore that a crucial component of the preservation of patriarchal power is the "castrating" of the woman.

What is so vexing is, given the conditions of contemporary cinema—the era of superhero blockbusters—how little has changed since Mulvey's essay was published 40 years ago. While "Visual Pleasure"'s assertion that the mainstream cinema screen is showing the "male gaze" seems dated given the library of profitable "chick flicks" since 1975. But even those films—e.g., *You've Got Mail* (1998), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Amélie* (2001), *27 Dresses* (2008), *Just Like Heaven* (2005), *Hope Floats* (1998), *The Notebook* (2004), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Runaway Bride* (1999), *Ella Enchanted* (2004), *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), *Notting Hill* (1999), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *How to Lose a*

Guy in 10 Days (2003), *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), *Moonstruck* (1987), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *The Prince and Me* (2004), *Working Girl* (1988), *Kate and Leopold* (2001), *The Proposal* (2009)—insofar as they are primarily interested in directing the female lead, whose gaze is privileged in the movie, to the arms of the male lead as their “happily ever after,”¹⁶ are hardly “daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire,” as Mulvey hoped cinema would (8). Rather those films are appropriating the female gaze to further bind women to the “symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions” (7).

Before looking deeper into “Visual Pleasure,” with its coordination of Lacanian and Freudian analyses, it needs to be stressed that Mulvey understands that while both Lacan and Freud are interested in subjectivity, when they say “subject,” they mean “male subject.” Psychoanalysis is historically an apparatus of patriarchy, Freud famously saying to women, “you are yourselves the problem” (141), but Mulvey, in a brilliant move, is able to appropriate its vocabulary—“examining patriarchy with the tools it provides” (7)—to diagnose American mainstream cinema’s function as a key component in “the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (8).

“Visual Pleasure” is the ideal lens through which to examine the John Wayne film. In the first place, the John Wayne film is conventional: it is in lockstep with the standard features of classical Hollywood cinema, and, being unashamedly patriarchal, it knows what the male spectator wants, and it delivers the goods every time: John Wayne, 6’4” and 240 pounds, functioning as the “main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify” (8). The persistence of the John Wayne aura suggests that his continuing popularity, even four decades after his death, marks him as the *ne plus ultra* object of white male identification. The magic of the cinema is that it functions as a space where the male spectator can go to play out his fantasies, fantasies that (re)center and (re)assert the male ego. If we see the advent of the cinema as a reaction to women’s fight for full humanity, full subjectivity, John Wayne seems the perfect “representative of power”—the perfect bully—to duke it out with the ladies.

So when the male spectator sees John Wayne, especially John Wayne on the big screen, he sees not only a big, powerful man, he sees his own “screen surrogate”:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (Mulvey 13)

The power of that identification harkens back to the male subject's mirror stage, where, Lacan asserts, the male subject's subjectivity materializes: Between six and eighteen months, a child becomes an individual subject when he sees and recognizes himself as a separate entity in a mirror. But the specular image whom he recognizes as himself is not one cursed with "malaise and motor uncoordination of the neonatal months" (Lacan, *Ecrits* 6), as he most surely is, but rather an ideal surrogate:

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation – and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an 'orthopaedic' form of its totality – and to the finally donned armour of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. Thus, the shattering of the *Innenwelt* [inner world] to *Umwelt* [environment] circle gives rise to an inexhaustible squaring of the ego's audits.

The power of the cinema, with its obsessive privileging of the male ego, is that it functions as the ideal site where that "inexhaustible squaring" plays out. John Wayne, the "ego ideal" who year after year, generation after generation, compensates for the "organic inadequacy of [the subject's] natural reality" (Lacan 6). This screen surrogate "can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor coordination" (Mulvey 12).

Where Freud figures most prominently in "Visual Pleasure" is in Mulvey's discussion of castration anxiety. In the movies, the woman is on screen, to be sure, "displayed for the gaze and pleasure of men"—for her *to-be-looked-at-ness*, using Mulvey's famous term. This can be seen in any number of scenes in the John Wayne catalog, but I will choose a remarkable scene from *Angel and the Badman*, where the gutshot Quirt is nursed back to health by a young Quaker woman, Penelope Worth (played by Gail Russell). Worth/Russell is in the film, of course, for her *to-be-looked-at-ness*, both for Evans/John Wayne and for the male spectator. The film authorizes this *to-be-looked-at-ness* when, after Penelope dresses Quirt's wounds, she turns away from him, walks a few steps and bends down towards a wash basin. The camera shows a close-up of Quirt looking at Penelope's bottom, his expression registering sexual stimulation, though quickly changing to sheepish embarrassment. I choose this scene because it seems remarkably postmodern: it simultaneously authorizes the objectifying male gaze while at the same time disingenuously chastising it, wagging a grandmotherly finger, so to speak, at the rascally badman. Boys will be boys.

The male spectator's pleasure in looking—scopophilia—at the fetishized woman, however, is mediated by the knowledge that the woman lacks a penis. According to Freud, the subject experiences a psychic trauma when confronted with this knowledge:

Before the child came under the domination of the castration complex, at the time when he still held the woman at her full value, he began to manifest an intensive desire to look as an erotic activity of his impulse. He wished to see the genitals of other persons, originally probably because he wished to compare them with his own. The erotic attraction which emanated from the person of his mother soon reached its height in the longing to see her genital which he believed to be a penis. With the cognition acquired only later that the woman has no penis, this longing often becomes transformed into its opposite and gives place to disgust, which in the years of puberty may become the cause of psychic impotence, of misogyny and of lasting homosexuality[!]. (*Leonardo da Vinci* 57-58)

Thus when the subject sees a woman, he is reminded of that trauma. “[I]n psychoanalytic terms,” writes Mulvey, “the female figure poses a deeper problem[:] her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure” (13).

On screen, then, the spectacle of the woman presents a bind: how does that fetishistic scopophilia square with the castration anxiety? The woman, “displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (13). Insofar as the mainstream cinema is for pleasure rather than unpleasure—*pace* Christian Metz, “cinema is attended out of desire, not reluctance, in the hope that the film will please rather than displease” (19)—the threat of unpleasure must be neutralized. Mulvey cracks this code by noting that those two affects, fetishistic scopophilia and castration anxiety, arise from separate drives. Fetishistic scopophilia, “aris[ing] from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation,” is a function of the libido, and castration anxiety, “com[ing] from identification with the image seen,” is a component of ego formulation. Narrative cinema is an ideal representational system to manage these contradictory elements because it “seems to have evolved a particular illusion of reality in which this contradiction between libido and ego has found a beautifully complementary phantasy world” (10-11). Castration anxiety trumps the sexual stimulation, so the drama unfolds in the following way: the narrative film presents the woman to trigger sexual desire, but, ultimately, because “the meaning of woman is sexual difference” (13), the film punishes her to neutralize the castration anxiety. Thus the male subject can have his cake and eat it, too.

This scenario strikes me as a kind of reverse *fort-da* game, Freud's famous diagnosis of psychic resolution. Freud's one-year-old grandson, using a reel attached to a string, "plays" the loss and return of his mother with the toy: holding the string, he says "fort" (the German word for "gone") when he tosses the reel away from him, then "da" ("there") when he brings it back. Freud writes,

The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child's great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach. (*Standard Edition*, Vol. 18, 14-15)

Because "the child cannot possibly have felt his mother's departure as something agreeable," the "pleasurable ending" of the game is the return of the toy. Perhaps the internal logic of the cinema mandates that the object—the sexualized woman—be presented (*da*), then subsequently punished (*fort*).

It bears repeating that in the *da* aspect of the game, the subject finds the return of the mother "agreeable." At that moment of his cultural development, he sincerely desires the mother's presence. The reverse *fort-da* game occurs because there has been a radical change in the subject in the years between infancy and adolescence: the abjection of the mother. In *Desire in Language* (1980), Julia Kristeva argues that in order for the subject to enter the "symbolic order," the world of language, he breaks from the mother via "abjection," that is, making her vile and wretched. In other words, the most profound love the subject ever knows—the oneness he experiences as an infant with his mother—must be disavowed. The *fort-da* game appears to be a process in that abjection: The *da* element of the game "works" in infancy because although the subject genuinely desires his mother to return, the *fort* element "plays" with the *possibility* of separation: Kristeva says, "Even before things for him *are*—hence before they are signifiable—he drives them out" (*Powers of Horror* 6). By adolescence, however psychically he may yearn for his mother's return, he has abjected her and, at the risk social stigmatization ("Mama's boy"), entered the symbolic order.

Within the economy of American mainstream cinema, which rarely interrogates the mandates of the Oedipal Contract¹⁷, this abjection of the *feminine* or the *womanly* results in what must seem the most satisfying power of the "screen surrogate": his control and punishment of women, goods and services provided all too eagerly in the John Wayne film.

I will discuss two examples of this *Discipline and Punish* phenomenon at length in later chapters—*In Old Oklahoma* and *McLintock!*—but, to be brief, in both films, the *to-be-looked-at* women are disciplined in order that they comply with culturally mandated, historically specific roles: domestic, subservient, compliant, subordinate. In *In Old Oklahoma* (1943), set at the turn of the twentieth century, John Wayne trains a historically specific “New Woman,” Cathy Allen (played by Martha Scott), that newfangled ideas about independence and agency have no place in the American frontier. In *McLintock!* (1963), also set at the turn of the twentieth century, cattle baron George Washington McIntock (John Wayne) uses physical violence to keep his estranged wife, Katherine (Maureen O’Hara), on the ranch.

Though both films have turn-of-the-century concerns regarding women, they *double* their disciplining agenda insofar as they are aligned with contemporary prescriptions for women’s behaviors: the films can correct women both in the past and in the present. But these corrections grow more sadistic as John Wayne grows older—an important consideration for this book insofar as it seeks to demonstrate how John Wayne films evolve. *In Old Oklahoma* was made during World War II and, as such, heavily invested in making sure women stay eager helpmeets—good for the war effort. Though the war necessitated that millions of American women enter the work force, Hollywood movies reminded them that their “natural” or “proper” condition was subordinate. *McLintock!*, set at the same historical moment as *In Old Oklahoma* though filmed 20 years later, is a panic-stricken response to post-World War II women’s subjectivity. Whereas *In Old Oklahoma*’s Cathy Allen could be taught her role as domestic subordinate, which she at film’s end eagerly accepts, *McLintock!*’s Katherine McIntock must be physically punished to return to that same role. It doesn’t seem much of a stretch to suggest that, given the radical changes in American sexual politics between 1943 and 1963, the World War II-era film might use a “lighter touch” in its management of women’s behaviors. By 1963, however, more corrective measures were required; at the end of *McLintock!* the townsfolk have had enough of G.W.’s being pussy-whipped. Exasperated by G.W.’s inability to rein in Katherine’s behaviors, the local merchant, Birnbaum, and G.W.’s major domo, Drago, urge their friend to be more heavy-handed in his domestic affairs:

Birnbaum: How long, G.W.?

McLintock: How long what?

Drago: She’s been ridin’ herd on your for two years now.

Birnbaum: I’m a peaceable man, but my father used to say, “You raise your voice, it doesn’t do any good, it’s time to raise your hand.”

Though set at the beginning of the twentieth century, *McLintock!*'s obsessions are specific to postwar male hysteria. *What are we going to do about these uppity dames!*

The John Wayne film, so heavily invested in the “squaring of the ego’s audits,” adapts to confront historically specific anxieties about women.

However transhistorical Mulvey’s argument appears to be regarding male subjectivity, the apparatuses culture deploys to manage that subjectivity are historically specific. In *The Woman at the Keyhole*, Judith Mayne notes that the advent of cinema coincides with the advent of psychoanalysis, making it “seem as though the cinema had some manifest destiny to embody voyeurism and fetishism—and needless to say, to embody them for the ideal male subject of culture theorized by psychoanalysis” (5). This “ideal male subject” is not ahistorical: he cannot be excised from the era marked by masculinity anxieties, most prominently the overarching desire to return to a “traditional” (i.e., pre-woman suffrage-era) masculinity.

A problem with “Visual Pleasure,” however, concerns the male body. Mulvey argues that the male body cannot “bear the burden” of objectification reserved for the female body: “According to the principles of the ruling ideology, and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like” (12). Subsequent scholars, though, such as Peter Lehman, Steve Neale, D.N. Rodowick, Paul Willemen, and Cynthia Fuchs, have challenged this assertion, arguing that the cinematic white male hero, who functions as the “more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego,” is displayed on screen for the visual pleasure of the presumed male spectator. Furthermore that there is a homosexual component to that pleasure. John Wayne is projected on screen primarily *for* the male gaze. It’s not that the male spectator “is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like,” but rather that he is reluctant to *confess* that gaze.

To be fair to “Visual Pleasure,” Mulvey’s assertions regarding the male body are within the context of understanding how patriarchy deploys the mainstream film industry to subordinate women. The persistent objectification and fetishization of the female body, one of most important calling cards of American mainstream cinema, has the twin “benefits” of titillating the male spectator and legitimating men’s control of the woman’s body. In *Running Scared* (2007), Lehman writes that in the mid-1970s, Mulvey and other feminist film theorists were not overly concerned with film representation of the male body because they

prioritized understanding the alienating ways in which women's bodies were controlled in representation via such devices as fragmentation and fetishism. Politically it was much more important to understand and change the ways in which patriarchy, and primarily men within patriarchy, structured oppressive representations of women's bodies than it was to worry about how the same patriarchal ideology structured men's bodies. (4-5)

One can certainly understand that the potentially destabilizing effects of the erotic male body is not so much of a priority for a feminism concerned with how the representation of women's bodies factors into the buttressing of patriarchal power. However, the representation of the male body is no less an assertion of male dominance. According to Lehman, "the silence surrounding the sexual representation of the male body is itself totally in the service of traditional patriarchy" (5).

In the early days of Hollywood cinema, the images of the male body did present a potentially destabilizing threat to traditional masculinity. The male body was there on screen for its *to-be-looked-at-ness*, especially inasmuch as that display was designed to bear witness to men's sufficiency, power, virility, and potency; but the body's sexiness—e.g., the long-running convention of showing the male lead's bared chest or Johnny Weismuller's near full nudity in his Tarzan movies (1932-1948)—presented a containment crisis: inasmuch as homosexuality was(is) proscribed in the culture to which cinema serviced, the homoerotic attractiveness of the male body was disavowed. As I will discuss further in Chapter Three, the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, materialized at the onset of sound pictures to contain this crisis. The Hays Code "disappeared" homosexuality from the movies, thereby liberating filmmakers to be less restrained in their representations of the male body: it can't be gay if gay is not permitted.

John Wayne's position as the *ubermensch* of American cinema is a post-World War II phenomenon. Beginning in 1947, one or more of his movies appeared in each year's top-ten highest grossing films for 27 out of the following 28 years, an unprecedented run of success, especially considering that, though he had been an A-list actor for 17 years before 1947, he had appeared in only one film landing in the annual top ten box office successes, *The Big Trail* (1930)¹⁸. His primacy is a reaction to the radical changes brought on by, using Kaja Silverman's term, the "historical trauma" of World War II, a time when "the male subject's aspirations to mastery and sufficiency are undermined from many directions" (52).

Silverman's essay "Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity" (1992) sets Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure" into a historical context, which is important in understanding how the crisis in masculinity metamorphoses. A potential problem with a psychological reading of movies is that insofar they seek a "unified theory" of film analysis, they may seem ahistorical, but films are of a particular time. The crisis in masculinity can be easily enough detected throughout the history of mainstream cinema, which, *pace* Molly Haskell, tells "The Big Lie" that women are inferior to men. But it is a crisis taking different forms depending on when it appears. The emergence of John Wayne as *the* ego ideal signifies a sea change in how "The Big Lie" is told, the kid gloves coming off, a more assertive man stepping into the ring. That John Wayne's privileged status doesn't occur until after World War II speaks to a increasing sense of panic. By 1945, John Wayne had already filmed two-thirds of his career, his a bankable, easily recognized name, but he wasn't a household name—certainly not on par with Clark Gable, James Stewart, Henry Fonda, or Mickey Rooney¹⁹. His transition from actor to icon is specifically related to the trauma of the war.

"Historical Trauma" focuses on three films that show a wounded male subjectivity, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *The Guilt of Janet Ames* (1947), and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). *Best Years* begins with close-ups of three combat veterans (Dana Andrews, Fredric March, and Harold Russell—an Army veteran who had lost both hands during the war²⁰)—flying home from the war, each suffering from psychological and/or physical wounds from the war. As their plane nears its landing, the film cuts to an aerial shot of hundreds of abandoned warplanes littering the landscape. These planes function as a *mise en abyme* of the sense of castration experienced by the postwar American male. In her discussion of *The Guilt of Janet Ames*, Silverman writes that the film

attributes male insufficiency not only to the war, but to the collapse of traditional gender divisions on the home front demanded by the war effort—a collapse for which it holds the female subject responsible. It moves relentlessly toward the reaffirmation of the sexual status quo, but the machinery of that reaffirmation is rusty, and its workings "show." *The Guilt of Janet Ames* thus renders unusually transparent the defensive mechanisms necessary for the construction of an "exemplary" masculinity. (53-54)

It's a tricky business, though, to show men in the vulnerable conditions we see in *Wonderful Life*, *Janet Ames*, and *Best Years*. That screened vulnerability, after all, opens up the possibility that men can be vulnerable. Lacan points out that subjectivity itself is founded on lack, that "what

everything starts from is imaginary castration” (*Seminar X*), but it is a castration that traditionally is disavowed. While mainstream cinema, part and parcel of the Dominant Fiction (discussed in more detail in Chapter Five), normally and normatively conceals this *castration-that-is-not-castration*, many postwar American films show a hero who “returns from World War II with a physical or psychic wound which marks him as somehow deficient” (53). This wound is potentially destabilizing to a fiction so heavily invested in male adequacy, especially insofar as that a key component of that sense of adequacy is that it is impervious to injury. Though its etiology is lack, the male ego has marshaled all its resources to protect itself from that knowledge, including the acknowledgment of vulnerability. For Silverman, the presentation of the traumatized male subject in the postwar film signals a disintegrating of the Dominant Fiction, that is, that though the heroes in *Wonderful Life*, *Janet Ames*, and *Best Years* triumph over the threats to masculinity, the threat that they might not overrides the sense of closure played out in the films.

However, the films described by Silverman are radically different than the John Wayne variety, which desires to put the genie back in the bottle. The secret to John Wayne’s iconicity is that he promises an impervious masculinity. In the American consciousness, John Wayne precludes inadequacy, precludes vulnerability, precludes castration. And, if anything, that desperate will to contain ostensible threats to masculinity has only intensified in the decades since John Wayne’s death. We are still in the John Wayne era.

Silverman notes that Althusser “provides the basis for elaborating the relation between a society’s mode of production and its symbolic order” (15). In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970), Althusser writes that, within any social formation, “no production is possible which does not allow for the reproduction of the material conditions of production: the reproduction of the means of production” (128). From a Marxist perspective, that is, it’s not enough that the social formation must provide labor for material production; what also must occur is that “the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology” (128). The state thus deploys certain “Ideological State Apparatuses” to preserve its power. While Althusser lists certain obvious ISAs such as religion, the law, and education, he also lists two that are crucial to this study: “the family ISA” and “the cultural ISA.”

“The family” is a crucial ideological site insofar as, according to Silverman, “our ‘dominant fiction’²¹ or ideological ‘reality’ solicits our

faith above all else in the unity of the family, and the adequacy of the male subject” (15-16). If the family is perceived to be under threat, other ISAs are deployed to protect it. For example, at the turn of the twentieth century, the “New Woman”—who wanted, among other things, the right to vote, the right to earn fair wages, and autonomy of her own body—was perceived as a threat to the American family. For example, in an 1895 article in *The American Naturalist* entitled “The Effect of Female Suffrage,” James Weir writes,

Woman is a creature of the emotions, of impulses, of sentiment, and of feeling; in her the logical faculty is subordinate. She is influenced by the object immediately in view, and does not hesitate to form a judgment, which is based on no other grounds save those of intuition. Logical men look beyond the immediate effects of an action and predicate its results on posterity. (821-22)

For the anthropologist Weir, woman suffrage would be “the first step toward that abyss of immoral horrors so repugnant to our cultivated ethical tastes—the matriarchate” (825). More bluntly, Gary Naler, in *The Curse of 1920*, asserts, “This is what has taken place in this nation by giving women the right to vote—we have been taken into a bondage that has destroyed the American family” (19). Naler wrote that in 2007.

Cinema, more specifically, Hollywood mainstream cinema, traditionally works as a “cultural ISA” doggedly fighting to preserve the dominant fiction, women’s autonomy being one of its most dangerous threats. Though Althusser asserts that the most powerful ISA is education, I suspect that cultural apparatuses such as cinema and television have grown more powerful since 1970, at least in America. In “Animating Youth: The Disneyfication of Children’s Culture,” Henry Giroux asserts that “films inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals than more traditional sites of learning such as public schools, religious institutions, and the family” (25).

The foundations of western subjectivity—homophobia, white supremacy, and misogyny—are old and durable, but their protectors have spent over a century fantasizing that they’re on their last legs, a tenuous condition requiring ever more vigilant policing. John Wayne’s career and continued popularity bear witness to the virulence of that policing; however, an interesting aspect of that policing is that it plays out in the past. Even when John Wayne was alive, his cinematic popularity, based primarily on his cowboy roles, was rooted in nostalgia. That his cowboys are always in the past serves as a proleptic device, that is, an attempt to neutralize homosexuality, race, and gender anxieties by presenting heterosexual

white male supremacy as an uninterrogated “fact” of the American past. Part of the magic of John Wayne cinema is to position its homophobic/racist/misogynous elements in the historical past so a) that the film can seem outside of contemporary politics, and b) that those homophobic/racist/misogynous elements appear to make sense within the context of the film’s diegesis.

And furthermore, there are all sorts of problems with having, of all “people,” *John Wayne* signify ideal masculinity. I’ve put “people” in quotes because it’s not clear whether John Wayne was an actual person: there’s no “there” there. As I’m fond of saying, not even John Wayne was John Wayne—he was Marion Morrison, an actor from Iowa. And though his cowboy and soldier personas are used as templates for ideal American masculinity, there are no facts underpinning those personas. He was neither a soldier nor a cowboy. But such assertions about the relative realness of John Wayne miss the point—ideology is not based on the real. But then again that absence of credentials might work in his favor, especially in light of the 2004 Presidential election, when Vietnam War veteran John Kerry was trounced by George Bush, who used his parents’ connections to get out of Vietnam. Military veterans nonetheless voted overwhelmingly for Bush, 57%-41%²². While America seems to desire a real hero, actually electing one seems more difficult than it should. Does America prefer the Subject who is so far from “I know not seems” that he is more “I know *only* seems”? Silverman accounts for this credibility gap, suggesting that “ideology can so fully invade unconscious desire that it may come to define the psychic reality even of a subject who at a conscious level remains morally or ironically detached from it” (*Male Subjectivity* 23).

John Wayne seems to be cinema’s “Absolute Subject,” which Althusser defines as *specular*, certainly in terms of the mirror image contemporary men desire; but also in terms of *speculation*, that is, something conjectured.

Hollywood Mainstream Cinema especially serves as an arena where masculinity seeks to reclaim its dominance. Cinema and the Masculinity Crisis appear simultaneously.