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**Representações em Filme de Paternidade e da  
Família Americana em Crise**

**Film Representations of Fatherhood and the  
American Family in Crisis**

dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Estudos Ingleses, realizada sob a orientação científica do Prof. Doutor Anthony Barker, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro

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**palavras-chave**

livro, América, família, paternidade, filme, crise, finais 1980, início 1990.

**resumo**

O presente trabalho propõe-se examinar diferentes representações da família americana, em particular a crise da noção de Paternidade. Esta dissertação inicia a sua análise debruçando-se sobre o período compreendido entre 1920 e 1940 no que concerne a dados demográficos e alterações culturais, numa tentativa de determinar alguns acontecimentos que afectaram a História da Paternidade Americana. O livro é particularmente composto por uma definição de 'film genres' e uma análise de filmes dos anos 80 e 90, especialmente importantes no que toca ao desenvolvimento da importância e estrutura da figura paternal; por uma lista bibliográfica de obras citadas e consultadas, e por uma lista de filmografia seleccionada.

**keywords**

book, America, family, fatherhood, film, crisis, late 1980s, early 1990s.

**abstract**

This work deals with different representations of the American family, particularly the crisis of fatherhood. This Dissertation begins with an examination of some of the 1920s and 1930s demographic and cultural changes in gender roles in a drive to investigate trends which affected the history of American fatherhood. The book particularly comprises a definition of film genres and a study of key films from the 1980s and early 1990s focusing on the development of the significance of the father figure; a works cited and consulted bibliography and a list of selected filmography.

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# **Introduction**

Fatherhood and its importance within the American family household has become a subject prone to much debate, essentially due to significant shifts in the social construction of fatherhood. It is clear that our conceptions about fatherhood must take into account the constant need for reorganisation this topic requires.

Throughout the twentieth century American family structures underwent major changes, such as exposure to the Great Depression, new trends of late marriages, sex outside wedlock, the introduction of divorce and the women's liberation movement. In fact, these society-changing events helped to shatter many family related stereotypes and proposed a rethinking of the modernisation of fatherhood in the 1980s and early 1990s. Ralph LaRossa, in *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History*, has tried to:

Encourage a reexamination of some of the assumptions held about yesterday's fathers, assumptions which [he] think[s] distort both what we know about the past and what we perceive of the present. The belief, for example, that it is only in recent years that fathers have given any thought to the meaning of fatherhood, much less spent any serious time with their children, creates a surreal world where almost anything fathers do in the way of childcare is prized. (200)

LaRossa ingeniously points out that fathers have long been aware of their power within the home and importance regarding their offspring's growing up process, despite many stereotypes to the contrary.

In order to acquire a richer account of some modern ideas about fatherhood and the American family, which still remain a largely uncharted subject, Hollywood film productions can be extremely significant. In fact, films provide this work with the much needed study material for understanding the dilemmas and ideologies associated with the constant reorganisation of family structures and the reshaping of fathers' roles.

The development and redefinition of American fatherhood was mainly effected, as I will argue, during the 1920s and 1930s, but its modernised forms of diversity tended to be recorded, if not celebrated, in films of different genre groupings of the 1980s and early 1990s. The purpose of this work is to investigate and discuss the unevenness of social familial change and the challenges to the conventional representations of fatherhood on film.

As a socially and historically inflected institution, American fatherhood has become the subject of increasing interest. However, it is still an area in need of deeper exploration. Through the analysis of demographic and social developments, especially from the 1930s to the early 1990s, this work will try to provide evidence of the importance of family tradition and the evolution of legitimate, flexible and influential definitions of fatherhood.

The work will then take a chronological approach towards the analyses of female and male-centred films of the 1980s and early 1990s, and their reflection of the shaping and reshaping of fatherhood within the American family. The first chapter offers demographic evidence and illustrative cultural theories in respect of the reorganisation of the American family, and then assesses Susan Jeffords's views of the Reagan Era regarding the importance of film in the redefinition of traditional conceptions of fatherhood (from a conservative standpoint). The first chapter also deals with definitions of film genre and provides a brief account of female and male-centred films to support its argument. The second chapter discusses parental anxieties within an American extended family, focusing on the fathers' points of view in the 'feel-good' comedy melodrama *Parenthood* (1989). The third chapter deals with the 'social problem film' *Falling Down* (1993), reviewing some social controversies of the early 1990s and the imagined betrayal of middle-American ideals, through the depiction of a divorced father's inner conflict. The fourth chapter offers an analysis of the figure of the absent father and the need for surrogate fathers in the action-adventure melodrama *A Perfect World* (1993). Finally, the conclusion reviews the shifts in the balance of power and rights within the American family, and the reshaping of fatherhood as it is represented in contemporary genre cinema of the 80s and early 90s.

This work will analyse economic and cultural events that have worked to fuse people's familial expectations into new stereotypes of fatherhood which in the 1980s and early 1990s film production has laboured to re-examine. Most importantly, this work will try to raise original ideas about the evolution and power of the father figure within the American home as it has been depicted on film.

## **Chapter I**

### **The American Family on Film**

## 1. The American Family Structure

Before turning to film culture, which is the subject of my dissertation, I would briefly like to explore the situation of the American family in the last few decades of the twentieth century. The facts may be inconstant but as we shall see interpretations of these have led to a great deal of breast-beating and panic in influential circles.

Over time, change in familial composition and structure is understandable in terms of different social, economic and political components. According to Susan Kellogg and Steven Mintz, throughout the late 1980s:

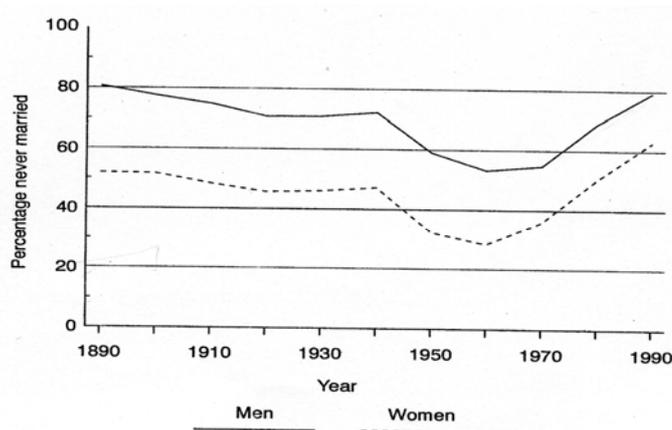
No area of American social history has attracted as much interest, or been subject to such drastic revision, as the history of the family ... family historians have debunked many myths about families in the past and corrected many misconceptions about the nature of familial change. Among the topics that have drawn the attention of family historians are subjects as diverse as domestic violence, courtship practices, family law, inheritance customs, child rearing, and birth control. As the result of sifting through census schedules, church records, family papers, paintings, house plans, marriage contracts, and other sources, and applying the analytical tools of demography, social anthropology, family sociology, and developmental psychology, the 'new' family history has challenged social scientists to reconsider many traditional notions about the historical evolution of the family. It has shown that diversity, and not uniformity, has been the defining characteristic of American family life since the beginnings of colonization. It has challenged the older view that industrialization produced a shift from an extended family system to the modern nuclear family. It has demonstrated that ... the recent increase in the divorce rate ... is no greater today than it was a century ago ... Most importantly of all, family historians have shown that the family, far from being an institution in decline, is instead highly flexible, resilient, and adaptive. (Vol. III, 1925)

Furthermore, in order to explain that family organisation can very likely vary across time Kellogg and Mintz go on to argue that:

In 1960 over 70 percent of all American households were like the Cleavers [from the television hit show *Leave It to Beaver*]: made up of a breadwinner father, a housewife mother, and their children. Thirty years later, 'traditional' families with a go-to-work

father, a stay-at-home mother, and one or more children made up less than 15 percent of the nation's households ... Americans in the 1990s were much more likely than their counterparts in the 1950s to postpone or forgo marriage, to live outside a family unit, to engage in sexual intercourse prior to marriage, end a marriage in divorce, to sanction the employment of mothers of young children outside the home, and to accept children living in families headed by a mother, with no husband present. The term 'family' has gradually been redefined to apply to any group of people living together, including single mothers and children, unmarried couples, and gay couples. (Vol. III, 1938)

Nonetheless, in the 1960s the majority of Americans supported marriage as grounds for well-being, social adjustment, and maturity. Moreover, couples would stay together because of their children, premarital sex was looked upon as wrong and unmarried couples would get married if they happened to be expecting a child. However, encouraged by the women's liberation movements, new job opportunities and a sexual revolution "during the 1960s and 1970s, popular attitudes toward marriage, sex and divorce underwent a dramatic change" (Kellogg and Mintz Vol. III, 1939). In addition, "demographic and economic factors also contributed to changes in family patterns. Slow economic growth, declining average earnings, and increase in premarital sexual activity may have discouraged early marriage during the 1970s and 1980s ... divorce rates, single parenthood, and out-of-wedlock births have risen among all segments of American society since 1960" (Kellogg and Mintz Vol. III, 1940). According to Andrew J. Cherlin, "some observers have expressed concern that later age at marriage and the increase in cohabitation ... might indicate a weakening of our system of marriage and family life. Others are more sanguine but accept that these changing patterns of coupling have greatly altered American family life" (8-9), because people have become more open to having sex in early adult life. The



author goes on to analyse a graph, Figure 1.1, concerning the percentage of women and men who had never married from 1890 to 1990.

Figure 1.1 – Percentage never married for men and women aged 20 to 24, 1890 to 1990. Sources: for

1890-1960, U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, pp.20-21; for 1970 to 1989, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, no. 445, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1989," table B; for 1990, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, no. 450, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1990," table B. (Cherlin 9)

Cherlin argues the graph allows us to see that:

The percentages changed very little between 1890 and 1940. But after 1940, when those who were born in the 1920s entered adulthood, the percentage never married decreased sharply. It stayed low during the years when people born during the depression and the war reached their early twenties. Then in the 1970s, as the men and women born during the baby boom reached their early twenties, the percentage never married turned upward. In the 1980s, the upward trend continued. The percentage never married has now returned to its earlier, higher levels for men and has even exceeded the earlier levels for women. (9-10)

Early marriage percentages still recorded throughout the 1930s and 1940s decreased. Couples stayed together for lack of option, namely due to the Great Depression, because they could not afford to get a divorce. On the other hand, baby boomers in their twenties chose to stay single longer and both throughout the 1970s and 1980s late marriages or just living together, became a popular trend among women and men alike. Therefore, cohabitation did in fact become a more appealing option among Americans, as opposed to early marriages, which Andrew J. Cherlin demonstrates in Figure 1.2.

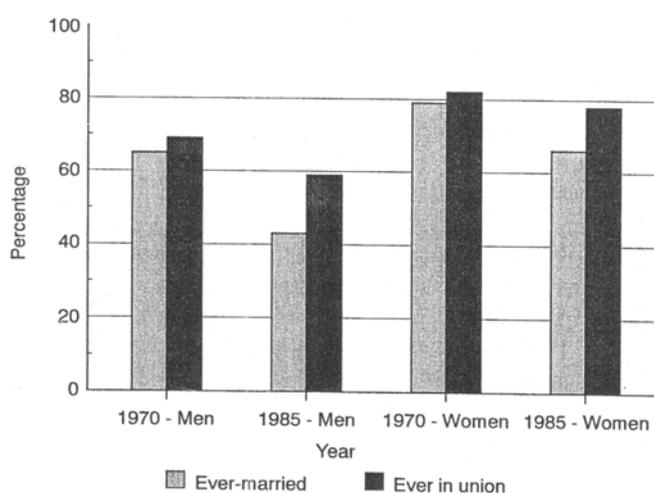


Figure 1.2 – Percentage ever-married and ever in union by age 25, 1970 and 1985. Sources: Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin, *The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage*. (Cherlin 13)

The author argues (Figure 1.2) that “in 1970, nearly everyone who had been in a union had been married; very few had just lived with someone. Between 1970 and 1985, as the lighter bar shows, the percentage of men and women who had ever married declined sharply. But the numbers who had only cohabitated increased nearly as sharply” (14). In fact, during these fifteen years the increasing numbers in cohabitation actually compensated the decline of marriages. Therefore, by the end of this period of time most young adults were in a union, but only a small portion might have been legally married.

Considering the return to the trend of late marriages in the 1970s and 1980s, it might be sustained that it represents a conceivable deviation from the much-cited ‘traditional’ patterns of family formation. In fact:

No trend in American family life since World War II has received more attention or caused more concern than the rising rate of divorce. The divorce rate, however, has been rising since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. [Figure 1.3] shows the number of divorces per 1,000 existing marriages (after 1920, per 1,000 married women) in every year between 1860 (the earliest year for which data are available) and 1988. These are annual measures, reflecting the particular social and economic conditions of each year. (Cherlin 20)

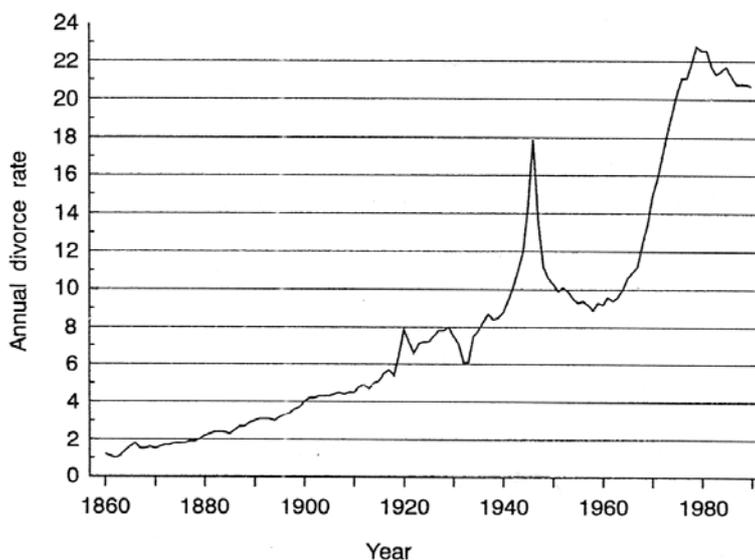


Figure 1.3 – Annual divorce rate, United States. For 1920-1988: divorces per 1,000 married women aged 15 and over; for 1860-1920: divorces per 1,000 existing marriages. Sources: 1860-1920, Paul H. Jacobson, *American Marriage and Divorce* (New York: Rinehart, 1959), table 42; 1920-1967, U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, series 21, no. 24, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce*

*Statistics* (1973), table 4; 1968-1987, U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, vol. 38, no. 12, supplement 2, "Advance Report of Final Divorce Statistics, 1987," table 1; 1988, U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, vol. 38, no. 13, "Annual Summary of Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: United States, 1989." (Cherlin 21)

According to Cherlin's analysis of the graph:

We can see, for example, that the annual rate of divorce increased temporarily after every major war: there is a slight bulge in the graph following the Civil War, a rise in 1919 and 1920 following World War I, and a large spike in the years immediately after World War II. We can also see how the depression temporarily lowered the divorce rate in the early 1930s: with jobs and housing scarce, many couples had to postpone divorcing until they could afford to do so. Ignoring for [a] moment the temporary movements induced by war and depression, there is a slow, steady increase in the annual rate of divorce through the end of World War II. Since the war, however, the graph looks somewhat different. In the period from 1950 to 1960 the annual rates are lower than what we would expect on the basis of the long-term rise. Then, starting in the early 1960s, the annual rates rise sharply, so that by the end of the 1970s the rate of divorce is well above what would be predicted from the long-term trend. After peaking in 1979, the divorce rate declined slightly in the 1980s; but it is still far above the levels of the 1960s. (20-22)

In fact, it appears that one should consider the lifetime experiences that might have led adults to divorce. For instance, during times of hardship and distress, like during major wars and the Depression, many unhappy couples had no choice but to stay together. Once social and economical conditions had improved they could make life-altering decisions, like getting divorced. As for the 1980s, the high divorce rates might be explained due to different familial attitudes, which challenged conceptions regarding the need for family unity. Staying together for the sake of the children was no longer a valid option for 1980s couples, which selected new trends of family organisation, namely cohabitation. Andrew J. Cherlin argues "period explanations for post-war changes in the family identity swings in attitudes and values, from the focus on family of the fifties to the individualism of the seventies and the eighties, or swings in economic conditions from boom to bust ... it is clear from the vantage point of the 1990s that period effects have dominated trends in marriage, divorce, and childbearing in this century" (31-32).

New attitudes towards women working outside the home were also crucial in the establishment of different and diverse households. Cherlin asserts that:

The fundamental weakness of the cohort-size model was its assumption that employed wives aren't very committed to working outside the home – that a wife's work is still seen as secondary to her husband's work, as a supplement to his earnings that can be forgone if he gets a nice raise. This is a reasonable description of what most people believed in the 1950s and 1960s. But about 1970, popular opinion began to shift to a much more positive view of married women's employment. Figure [1.4] assembles data on the work attitudes of women of childbearing age, based on national surveys conducted during the 1970s and 1980s. From the vantage point of the 1990s, it is startling to find that in 1970, just two decades ago, four out of five ever married women under 45 agreed that "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and the family." More than two-thirds agreed that "a preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works." Only half agreed with the statement that "a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work." (57-59)

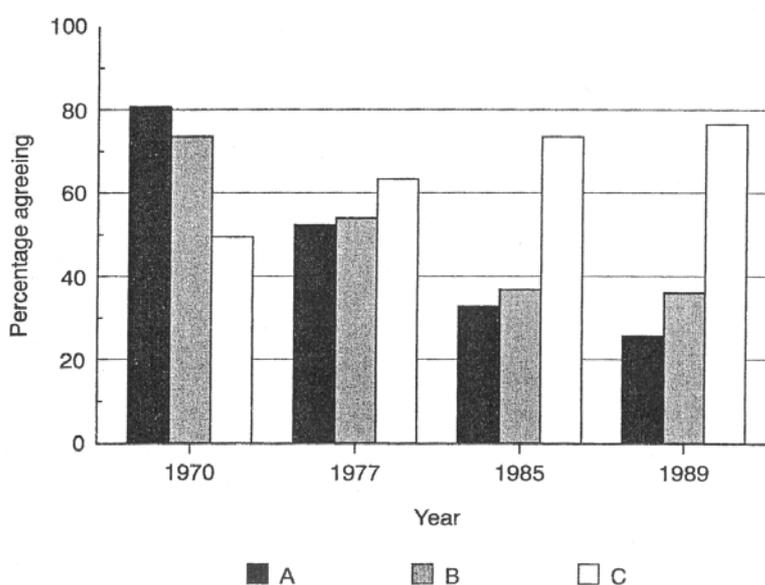


Figure 1.4 – Attitudes toward work and family, for ever-married women less than age 45, 1970, 1977, 1985, and 1989 (percentage agreeing among all who gave an opinion). A: "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and the family." B: "A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works." C: "A

working mother can establish just as warm a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.” Sources: for 1970, National Fertility Survey; for 1977, 1985, and 1989, National Opinion Research Center, General Social Surveys. (Cherlin 58)

Cherlin’s analysis continues:

Clearly, as recently as 1970, American women were quite traditional in their attitudes toward women’s proper work role ... During the 1970s and 1980s, as Figure [1.4] shows, a complete reversal of opinion occurred. By 1989, only 26 percent of ever-married women under 45 agreed that it is better for everyone if the wife stays at home – the mirror image of the responses in 1970. Just 36 percent agreed that preschool children suffer if their mothers work. Fully 77 percent agreed that a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children. This dramatic change was well underway by the late 1970s. At the start of this period, most women viewed employment as a potential danger to the family; at the end most thought it benign. (59)

Life-altering shifts and period explanations have greatly influenced American family history, regarding new trends, values and attitudes toward family organisation. New familial patterns are in constant formation and ‘traditional’ American family structures appear to be at best an ideal and at worst merely a concept coming from the past. Nonetheless, familial relationships have been endowed with the ability to adapt to diverse changes and which continuously tend to mark the American social fabric. Susan Kellogg and Steven Mintz assert that:

The United States appears to have departed farther than other nations from a commitment to the ‘traditional’ family ... [However,] while American family patterns have undergone far-reaching changes in recent years, it would be a mistake to conclude that the American family is in danger of imminent collapse. [So,] despite the declining birth rate and rising divorce and illegitimacy rates, commitment to familial relationships remains strong, though family ties are defined in increasingly flexible ways ... although the family is often considered to be the social institution most resistant to change, in fact it is as embedded in the historical process as any other institution, since the seventeenth century, diversity and change – not uniformity and continuity – have been the norm ... changes in family roles and structure represent simply the largest stage in an ongoing process of change and adaptation. (Vol. III, 1941)

Changes in the American familial structure are clearly mapped by different economic opportunities and ability for social adaptation. It appears that, as a flexible social institution the American family cannot prevent being exposed to a process of metamorphosis regarding its structure, roles and responsibilities.

In the 1980s, according to Walter Grünzweig and Roberta Maierhofer, “supposedly an ultraconservative decade, [America] saw the rise and popularisation of very tangible emancipatory developments among many groups, ethnic and otherwise” (17). Moreover, the authors argue that “in many ways, the eighties amounted to a political, social and economic watershed, but also a transitional period between two ages ... [and] without a doubt, the 1980s have brought about what has long been recognized as the post-industrial society” (13-14). From this sociological analysis of the decade, Grünzweig and Maierhofer go on to assert that:

Both in the domestic and global arena, [President Ronald] Reagan kept his promises as well as fulfilled the negative expectations of his critics. The American poor and those parts of the American middle class who subscribe most heavily to traditional American values, lost out while the wealthy made surprising, indeed worrying, gains at the expense of the rest of the society. Social programs that had taken decades to build were dismantled in favor of a renewed emphasis on free enterprise and unhampered capitalism. (15)

In fact, due to governmental interventions, “at the very end of the decade, government support of bankrupt savings and loan institutions throughout the country ... possibly even strengthened its position in the American socio-economic system” (Grünzweig and Maierhofer 15).

In the late 1970s Americans’ optimism was replaced by a greater sense of gloom due to a period of economic decline and insecurity about America’s role in the world. Therefore, the early part of the 1980s was marked by this same sense of unease. In fact, it managed to persist as the decade of the 1990s made its approach. Former president Ronald Reagan cited by author William F. Grover, asserted in 1984:

As we came to the decade of the 80s, we faced the worst crisis in our postwar history. The heart of America is strong, good, and true. The cynics were wrong – America never was a sick society. We’re seeing a rededication to bedrock values of faith, family, work,

neighborhood, peace, and freedom – values that help bring us together as one people, from the youngest child to the most senior citizen. (171)

With these words Reagan appeals to all Americans' faith in traditional community and familial values, in order to keep the people together fighting for the same goal as a united family. Historically, as mentioned earlier on, the family is at the heart of the American social structure. In fact, according to Allan Carlson, "the late eighteenth-century founders of the American nation had assumed a social system on which they would build their political-legal order ... it included: the primacy of the family economy; the power of kinship and ethnic and religious communities; a ... focus on land; and abundance of children; and the power of intergenerational bonds" (vii). Moreover, during the nineteenth-century "wives and children stood beside husbands and fathers as co-workers in the family enterprise, with no debate over issues of work and dependency. Indeed, family living was so central to life itself that it was largely taken for granted, being the social equivalent of breathing" (Carlson 1). Finally, Allan Carlson states that:

In the 1990s, to be sure, the modern system of state capitalism, combining personal liberation from traditional ties and an obsession with equalitarianism with an economy predicated on mass consumption and a common dependence on the welfare state, has no meaningful rivals. Rather than a return to natural human community the more predictable future is another round of futile social and political engineering in which Americans will continue their elusive quest for an artificial harmony between the domain of modern industry and the domain of nurture and reproduction. Failing societywide renewal, families may, of necessity, fall back on the more modest, but more perilous, strategy of simply protecting their small communities of virtue from extinction. (170-171)

Carlson's predictions regarding American family life ruled by capitalism is quite an apocalyptic vision. Demographically, to be sure, the domain of family, nurture and consequentially, reproduction appears to be worrying. However, stating that artificial harmony could be the answer or even to consider that community virtues are near extinction appears to be an excessively radical standpoint, even accepting that American society is as deterministically driven as he describes.

Culturally, family organisation has gone through plentiful shifts, especially since the 1920s and 1930s. Gender politics have defined the role and relevance of the man and/or woman concerning infant care for several decades, but early feminist movements stressed the significance of dual-career and dual-parenting new realities. Therefore, magazine articles, postcards, paintings, adverts, books and radio shows stimulated the crafting of new kinds of mothering, and led to an altered definition of fatherhood. According to Ralph LaRossa, “the modernization of fatherhood was fuelled by the growing belief that child rearing was a science and that good parenting required expert advice” (96). In his work *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History*, LaRossa provides an insightful study of the history of fatherhood, as well as the following illustrative examples of it. For instance, regarding Figure 1.5 LaRossa states that:

Picture postcards were a popular means of communication ... This card ... showed a father presumably forced to care for his child because of his wife’s political activities. Note how silly he was made to appear. Humor directed at fathers was common in the early twentieth century ... In the 1920s, men were significantly more likely to be depicted as incompetent by the media. In the 1930s, however, the gap between men and women converged, demonstrating ... that the modernization of fatherhood was not a linear process. (Inter 88-89)



Figure 1.5 – Postcard published in the early 1900s. (Source: Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History*; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.)

In the 1930s women/mothers were still expected to do most, if not all the housework. However, Figure 1.6 shows an advertisement for Congoleum Gold Seal Rugs where father and son work together as a team doing the washing up and mopping. LaRossa argues that “people who might see these activities as unmanly were sometimes told by the popular press that house work done *with* children was a good way to communicate the importance of duty and responsibility” (Inter 88-89).



Figure 1.6 – Advertisement for Congoleum Gold Seal Rugs, published in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1931. (Courtesy of Congoleum Corporation.) (Source: Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History*; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.)

During the 1930s American households were affected by the strain and hardship of the Depression, which had an influence in the decline of father-child relations and bonding. However, according to LaRossa:

The culture of fatherhood – the beliefs, norms, and values pertaining to fatherhood – continued to move forward ... and, if anything, became more modern. Most of the texts on fatherhood did not, however, acknowledge the Depression, which is one reason why this ... card is so unique. Calling on the President to take some action, it took the risk of mixing personal celebration with public woe. (Inter 88-89)

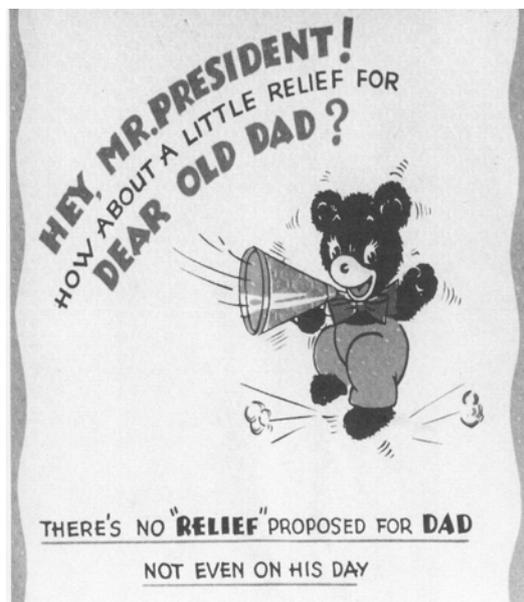
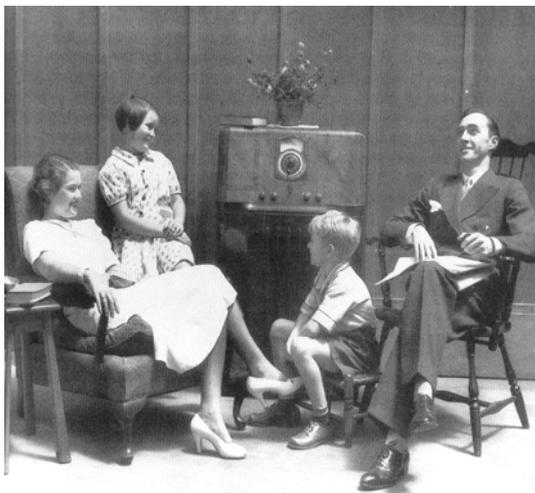


Figure 1.7 – 1935 Birthday Card (Courtesy of Hallmark Archives, Hallmark Cards, Inc.) (Source: Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History*; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.)

Technological innovations also influenced the much-cited modernisation of fatherhood. For instance, the massive popularity of radios in the 1920s and 1930s helped to spread experts' messages regarding child rearing. LaRossa asserts "radios also made it more likely that children would be directly exposed to the new child-rearing philosophies,



as some experts broadcast their advice in the evening when everyone in the household might be listening" (Inter 88-89).

Figure 1.8 – Radio broadcast of expert advice on child-rearing. (Aristock/Atlanta.) (Source: Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History*; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.)

The reshaping and redefinition of American fatherhood also profited from educational programs and child study groups. For example, Figure 1.9 offers a closer look over the education of fathers regarding their interaction with the child and concern for their welfare.



Figure 1.9 – In the 1930s, the Maternity Center Association of New York City began to offer classes for expectant fathers. This man, watched by his instructor, was learning how to change a diaper. (From Hazel Corbin, *Getting Ready to Be a Father*; New York: Macmillan, 1939.) (Source: Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History*; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.)

In fact, Ralph LaRossa argues that:

Historians sometimes have characterized the nurturant fathers of the 1920s and 1930s as model-airplane-building “daddies” or poor souls lost in a maze of child-rearing lore. Little mention is made of the contact these fathers had with infants. Evidence suggests that more fathers than generally realized took an active interest in the health and well-being of their babies and also cleaned them, fed them, and put them to bed. (Inter 88-89)

The author’s argument clearly supports the idea that the issue of fatherhood remains a sociological area dominated by misconceptions and is still mainly uncharted territory. In fact, Eric Hobsbawm’s review, “Retreat of the Male,” of author Göran Therborn’s most recent book *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World 1900-2000* supports the idea that “most of the public discourse on relations between men, women and their offspring is both unhistorical and deeply provincial” (8). Hobsbawm argues:

The family is a subject on which, for obvious reasons, there is no shortage of public or private views. Google records 368 million items under the word ‘family’, as against a mere 170 million under ‘war’. All governments have tried to encourage or discourage procreation and passed laws about human coupling and decoupling. All the global religions (with the possible exception of Buddhism) and all the 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologies have strong convictions on these matters. So have masses of otherwise politically inactive citizens, as the rise of electoral support for religious fundamentalism indicates. It has been plausibly argued that ‘moral issues’ (i.e. abortion and homosexual marriage) won George W. Bush his second term in office. (8)

It seems from the above that the American population has decided to support conservative family positions on ‘moral issues’ because it has been led to believe that they are under attack. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, economically independent women have begun to choose to marry late or not at all. To put this in perspective, “in 1960, 70 per cent of American women aged between 20 and 24 were married, as against 23 per cent in 2000” (Hobsbawm 8). Abortion is the flagship issue of feminist self-assertion, expressed euphemistically in the phrase “a woman’s right to choice”, and homosexual coupling also stands as a potential threat to the renewal of the generations. Moreover, economical

resources are also an important factor, because “the ways in which human groups earn their living – both limitations and opportunities – have always led to adjustments in marriage (by abstention or varying the age of partners) and in childbearing (by varying the birth-rate or infanticide)” (Hobsbawm 8). It appears liberal emancipation, capitalism and the satisfaction of individual choices and desires can lead to severe damage to social structures, of which the most grave is probably the ageing population. In fact, some of the consequences, according to Therborn, can be aberrant particularly due to the fall in western fertility rates.

## 2. The 1980s and Film Culture

Despite the periodical trends that seem to have had an effect on American flexible familial structure, family remains a strong and pivotal concept concerning community and social harmony in American life. In fact, throughout the 1980s President Ronald Reagan, a supporter of conservative family values, fuelled these aspects of American social life into and through both television and film production. According to Douglas Gomery's article "The Reagan Record":

Ronald Reagan ... instituted a major shift in policy toward television and film. His administration, favouring a perfectly competitive brand of economic efficiency over all other criteria, pressed to free business of all types to produce and distribute their wares, free of the constraints of federal regulation. This ... would offer the United States economy the proper path to economic growth, prosperity for corporations, and great choice for the consumer. (92)

Film has played a major role as a popular communicator and form of entertainment used to influence as well as please the public. Robert Brent Toplin argues that "many movies carry subtle messages of social and political significance, and some offer rather forceful perspectives on broad public issues ... [Furthermore,] Hollywood's interpretations of American history can make a significant impact on the public's thinking about the past" (1) and perhaps even offer appealing ideas about future social expectations. Throughout the Reagan era, America went through a redefinition of the nation's relationship with its people. According to Susan Jeffords:

Both Reagan and Hollywood participated in a radical shift away from attitudes, public policies, and national concerns that characterized the late 1970s and the Carter administration. And whereas both Reagan and Hollywood aided and abetted that shift through the promulgation of their own interests, both as well clearly capitalized on it to reap their own political and economic benefits. (15)

Jeffords goes on to argue that:

Certainly the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and his reelection in 1984 ... offered Hollywood some insight into 'what audiences want to see': spectacular narratives about characters who stand for individualism, liberty, militarism, and a mythic heroism. Through the blockbuster successes of films such as *First Blood* (1982, Ted Kotcheff), *Superman* (1978, Richard Donner), *Die Hard* (1988, John McTiernan), *Lethal Weapon* (1987, Richard Donner), *Terminator* (1984, James Cameron), *Robocop* (1987, Paul Verhoeven) [and] *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981, Steven Spielberg) ... Hollywood indicated that it had overcome the 'fragmentation' and 'distress' of the late 1970s [a decade marked by critical *auteurist* directors] and come successfully into a multimillion dollar era of action films that seemed to be 'what audiences want to see'. (16-17)

Furthermore, Hollywood depicted the Reagan era with plots whose "larger-than-life superman hero battles alone against an increasingly deteriorating society in which the only recourse from crime, violence, and corruption is the determined individual who acts on his own principles and commitments" (Jeffords 17). Thus, throughout the 1980s, hard-body heroes such as Robocop (Peter Weller), John Rambo and Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) and the Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) actually a bad guy until after Reagan became extremely popular since:

The heroes of the hard-body films suggest a different kind of social order, one in which the men who are thrust forward into heroism are not heroic in defiance of their society but in defiance of their governments and institutional bureaucracies ... Unlike the Dirty Harry [Harry Callahan played by Clint Eastwood] films, in which a lone hero is pitted against a widely corrupt society, the hard-body films of the 1980s pose as heroes men who are pitted against bureaucracies that have lost touch with the people they are to serve, largely through the failure of bureaucrats themselves to attend to individual needs. This was, of course, one of the primary themes of Reaganism. Ronald Reagan promised ... he would decrease the size of government itself and cut unwieldy bureaucracies that had come, according to Reaganites, more to serve the interests of the lawmakers and bureaucrats who depend on their budgets than to address real needs of citizens. It is this edge ... that enables the films of the 1980s to retain a sense of social cohesion despite the hero's need to defy many of society's chief institutions. Because individuals have come to misuse government institutions, the institutions themselves cannot be blamed for the failure and can be resuscitated, often by the hard-body heroes themselves. (Jeffords 19)

Nonetheless, in the late years of the 1980s and the George Bush presidency, according to Susan Jeffords, there was an indication of “changes in the hard-body mythology, particularly in the apparent negation of that body in favor of a more internalised and emotional kind of heroic icon” (22), such as the character played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) who develops into a surrogate father protective of his teenage son when confronted with life-threatening situations.

Filmic heroes of the Reagan movement could be divided according to their external appearance. As a consequence:

Bodies were deployed in two fundamental categories: the errant body containing sexually transmitted disease, immorality, illegal chemicals, ‘laziness,’ and endangered fetuses, which we can call the ‘soft-body’; and the normative body that enveloped strength, labor, determination, loyalty, and courage – the ‘hard-body’ – the body that was to come to stand as the emblem of the Reagan philosophies, politics, and economies. In this system of thought marked by race and gender, the soft body invariably belonged to a female and/or a person of color, whereas the hard body was, like Reagan’s own, male and white. (Jeffords 24-25)

Therefore, the hard body image became the collective symbol of Reaganist ideologies. Furthermore, Jeffords argues, “these hard bodies came to stand not only for a type of national character – heroic, aggressive, and determined – but for the nation itself” (25). In fact, “Reagan set out to coach America from acting the part of the ‘wimp’ of the Carter years, being a doormat for communism and fundamentalist Islamic revolutions, to becoming the economically and socially successful interventionist father of the Reagan years” (Jeffords 71). Moreover:

Reagan reworked history in order to produce ... the happy ‘present’ he desired. And, ... he hoped that the present full of poverty, failure, and social dysfunction could be mended, not by offering social programs to assist those bearing these burdens, but by waving the magic wand of ‘history’ over such scenes and thereby manufacturing a rosy image of those same lives. (Jeffords 73)

Reagan's intentions can be compared to those of Marty McFly's (Michael J. Fox) in the three *Back to the Future* films (1985, 1989, 1990), all directed by Robert Zemeckis, where father/son relationships can be mended if the past could somehow be changed and provide the family or the nation with a more heroic and optimistic future. In fact, films' representation of the 1980s reliance on relationships between fathers and sons, such as the *Rambo* (1982, 1985, 1988), the *Back to the Future* and George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977, 1980, 1983) films, or even the final *Indiana Jones* movie, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), suggest that the knowledge of the father is essential for completing the individuals' development and identity. According to Susan Jeffords, "what is possible to suggest is that both the Reagan Revolution and these film sequences captured in some sense the concerns of American audiences and offered a resolution to their anxieties through the restoration of a happy father/son relationship to the benefit of the community/nation/universe as a whole" (86-87).

Throughout the Reagan presidency, vice-president George Bush Sr waited to take up that role in 1988, acting as a son waiting to receive his inheritance from his older and wiser father. However, Jeffords argues that:

The ideals of external strength and internal goodness that Ronald Reagan had seemed so seamlessly to embody ... George Bush seemed ... to split apart, and in doing so tips toward the films of the early 1990s, in which internal emotions would take the lead over muscles and violent spectacles in defining masculine heroics ... [Therefore,] in the Bush presidency, the hard body [was] ... both rejected and embraced, recognized as a burden and as a necessity, as something to hide at the interpersonal level and as something to display in the public arena, as a source of fear and of attraction, of goodness and destruction. (96-97)

George Bush Sr put forward a philosophy of a tough at work but tender at home male figure. In fact, contrary to Reagan, Bush himself could outwardly display a more 'functional' family than the chronically disunited and estranged Reagan family. According to Susan Jeffords, "by 1991, Hollywood's interest in justice had waned and been replaced by a less socially troublesome topic – commitment to the family" (141). The image of the hard body that marked the Reagan era shifted toward a close focus on the family and the moral values which define it. Consequently, Hollywood films of the early 1990s also

shifted toward domestic policies, personal issues and the familial arena, such as Ivan Reitman's 1990 film *Kindergarten Cop*, where the hard body celebrity of the 80s Arnold Schwarzenegger stars as John Kimball, a tough policeman who goes through internal and emotional transformations and finds his way back into the family, due to his relationship with Joyce (Penelope Ann Miller) and her son Dominic. Furthermore, Jeffords goes on to argue that "James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) [both starring actor Arnold Schwarzenegger], films whose narratives center on masculinity and the repetition, or to be more concise, on the reproduction of masculinity ... [both] films [also] elaborate the shift [and evolution] from the hard body to the family man" (156). Additionally, "in films such as *Three Men and a Baby* (1987, Leonard Nimoy) [and] *Look Who's Talking* (1989, Amy Heckerling) ... fathering became the vehicle for portraying masculine emotions, and commitments, and for redirecting masculine characterizations from spectacular achievement to domestic triumph" (Jeffords 166). Furthermore, the first *Die Hard* films, *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) and *Die Hard 2* (Renny Harlin, 1990), also follow similar narratives centered on masculinity and are even better at dealing with the issue of the resurrection of broken marriages.

In conclusion, according to author Susan Jeffords:

At the center of this family [the American family] and the nation it represents is the hard body, a body that has shifted [and evolved] its constitution throughout the 1980s. From its appearance in the early 1980s as a resuscitated body of the Vietnam War era [Rambo], to its articulation in the mid-1980s as a remasculinized foreign policy heroic, to its exteriorization and critique of the hard body in the late 1980s in order to 'reveal' a more sensitive and emotional interior, to its reconfiguration in the early 1990s as a 'family' value [*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *Unforgiven* (1992)], to its resurfacing in 1992 as an aging but still powerful foreign and domestic masculine and national model, the hard body has remained a theme that epitomizes the national imaginary that made the Reagan Revolution possible. (192)

Considering this reconfiguration of the hard bodied male figure into a sensitive, emotional and family-oriented persona, Hollywood films also reflected the mutation of the significance of fatherhood within the familial arena in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ralph LaRossa cites historian John Demos who, in 1982, asserted that "[f]atherhood has a

very long history, but virtually no historians”, but according to LaRossa “that now has changed, and we are beginning to see histories of fatherhood being presented in ... articles ... books” (3), and eventually films. Nonetheless, author Ralph LaRossa is also conscious that “the possibility that fathers may have been active agents in the most significant transformation in fatherhood in the twentieth century, or that they were involved in not only the expressive but also the instrumental aspects of parenthood remains largely unexplored” (4). Thus, the goal of this analysis of movies selected from the Republican years (1980-1992) has the purpose of identifying which general ideologies films flatter and expose and which anxieties Hollywood aims to tranquilize regarding the relatively uncharted subject of fatherhood.

### 3. Genre Theory: Comedy, Social Problem Film, Action-Adventure and Melodrama

Turning to an analysis of fatherhood in film culture between the 1980s and early 1990s, it is of great significance to establish beforehand different definitions of specific genre groups, to which the three main film productions of this dissertation, *Parenthood* (1989), *Falling Down* (1993) and *A Perfect World* (1993) belong.

Any film associated with a specific genre, that is to say a characteristic type of film, is seen to be a product of the Hollywood world of commercially successful mass entertainment. Steve Neale describes this concept of identity by categorisation this way: “genre is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, a phenomenon that encompasses systems of expectation, categories, labels and names, discourses, texts and groups or corpuses of texts, and the conventions that govern them all” (2). Furthermore, Richard T. Jameson, cited in Rick Altman’s *Film/Genre*, asserts:

Genre isn’t a word that pops up in every conversation about films – or every review – but the idea is second nature to the movies and our awareness of them. Movies belong to genres much the way people to families or ethnic groups. Name one of the classic, bedrock genres – Western, comedy, musical, war film, gangster picture, science fiction, horror – and even the most casual moviegoer will come up with a mental image of it, partly visual, partly conceptual. (13)

Both authors come to the same conclusion, that films can be made sense of in terms of specific film genre. However, even a film genre is not as straightforward as it may appear, given the fluidity which influences each genre group separately. According to author Rick Altman:

The theoretical clarity of film genre criticism is quite obviously challenged at every turn by the historical dimensions of film production and reception. Where film genre theory assumes coincidence between industrial and audience perceptions, history furnished example after example of disparity. Where the theory of generic reception requires texts whose genres are immediately and transparently recognizable, the most interesting texts supplied by film history are complex, mobile and mysterious. (16)

Genres “frequently hybridise and overlap, thus blurring the boundaries of the genres concerned” (Neale 3), in fact the author goes on to assert that “on occasion, the term ‘sub-genre’ has also been used, generally to refer to specific traditions or groupings within genres” (9). Moreover, according to Neale, “the definition and discussion of genre and genres in the cinema has tended to focus on mainstream, commercial films in general and Hollywood films in particular” (9). Barry Keith Grant argues that:

Genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations ... they have been exceptionally significant in establishing the popular sense of cinema as a cultural and economic institution, particularly in the United States, where Hollywood studios early on adopted an industrial model based on mass production. (ix)

Genre films have the ingenious power to reach people, the power to satisfy expectations but also to ease anxieties that haunt a particular social-cultural group, at a specific period in history. Steve Neale rightly states that “the concept of genre has for some time served as a means to link Hollywood’s practices and Hollywood’s output to Hollywood’s audiences and to the social-cultural contexts within which its films are produced and consumed” (5). Rick Altman’s argument is that:

Genres might have been seen as developing within the film industry, according to a historically specific logic, [in fact] they [can] instead ... be seen ... as continuous genres pre-existing in literature (the Western), theatre (melodrama) and non-fiction writing (the biopic), or as volcanic eruptions of mythic magma, brought to the surface by the vagaries of technology (the musical), censorship (screwball comedy), or modern life (sci-fi). Whatever more current circumstances may play in formulating the surface structure of genre films, much recent genre theory has assumed that the deep structures come directly from the archetypal depths of myth, whether already apparent in other domains or newly brought to the surface by cinema itself. (20)

Genres can actually be considered as an active, living and mutable part of social expression and cultural development, in this case relating directly to my dissertation’s subject of

fatherhood and the myths surrounding American family history. Furthermore, genres are also of great significance in any film's narrative:

Genres do not consist solely of films. They consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding. They help render individual films, and the elements within them, intelligible and, therefore, explicable. They offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen: a way of working out why particular actions are taking place, why characters are dressed the way they are, why they look, speak and behave the way they do, and so on. (Neale 31)

Therefore, labelling a particular film with a specific genre creates expectations for audiences, which allows them to determine the extent to which each film will or will not address social concerns or one's personal anxieties. In addition, film production also relies on the overlapping of genres in order to ensure a film's appeal and success. In fact, an "amalgamation system operated for multiple decades, until the 60s and new methods of measuring and conceiving audience demographics" (Altman 128) have been developed since, in order to find out their filmic interests. According to Altman:

The old approach recognized only two variables, age and sex ... The more recent approach recognizes far more variables (not just age and sex, but also race, ethnicity, class, education, preferred activities, geographical location and income level), and breaks those categories into much smaller portions (... the old system had only three basic groups – child, adult and other audience – but the new system recognizes as many as eight different age ranges) ... [now] it is possible for producers to target their audiences more accurately, the splitting of the audience into multiple small sectors also induces publicity departments to imply the presence of an even broader selection of genres or sub-genres. (128-129)

Genres, audiences, and cultural interests together constitute a significant part of filmmaking. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the era of American film production designated as *auteurist* provided filmmaking with an opening that allowed film directors to explore new areas of filmic self-expression. Hence, there was:

A brief window of opportunity that existed from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, when an adventurous new cinema ['New Hollywood'] emerged, linking the traditions of classic Hollywood genre film-making with the stylistic innovations of European art cinema ... It was a period of productive uncertainty during which Hollywood became open to new blood and new ideas simply because no one knew for certain which direction to take. (Cook and Bernink 100)

This was a time period during which a generation of intellectuals decided to experiment with film form and production. According to Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink:

The 1960s saw Martin Scorsese graduate from NYU film school (as Jim Jarmusch, Susan Seidelman and Spike Lee would later), Brian De Palma attend Columbia and Sarah Lawrence, while on the West coast Francis Coppola, John Milius, Paul Schrader and George Lucas graduated from UCLA and USC. They were all reading the 1960s American film criticism of Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris and Manny Farber, absorbing the influence of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and admiring the cinema of Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman, Bertolucci and Godard. Accordingly, some accounts ... see this moment as the explicit inscription within American film-making of the critical practice of *auteurism*, resulting in a self-consciously *auteurist* cinema. (100)

However, this 'New Hollywood' notion of filmmaking came to an end due to certain spectacular *auteurist* failures and the resurfacing of the profit motive in the form of the action blockbuster. Therefore, throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s "the media hype surrounding the theatrical release" (Cook and Bernink 102) of calculated blockbusters like *Batman* (1989), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* or *Jurassic Park* (1993), turned the focus of the filmmaking process onto the mainstream A-Class films with great hit potential. Furthermore, Cook and Bernink go on to argue that "for some critics, this laudable moment of thoughtful metafilmic exploration [*auteurism*] was cast aside by the ascendancy of the late 1970s and 1980s films of Lucas [*Star Wars*, 1977] and Spielberg [*E.T.*, 1982], which marked a less philosophical, a more calculatedly naïve, relation to classical genres" (103). Thus, "thoughtful metafilmic exploration" was replaced by middle-class American popular film culture "found in most of Lucas's and Spielberg's blockbuster films of the late 1970s and the 1980s ... or as [Noel] Carroll said, 'after the experimentation of the early

seventies, genres have once again become Hollywood's bread and butter'" (Cook and Bernink 103).

Regarding this work's subject of family organisation and fatherhood, analysed in specific films contexts from different genre groups, a brief definition of each film genre in question is in order. As a comedy *Parenthood* (1989) is part of a major popular genre for comedy, according to Steve Neale:

In its various guises ... has always been a significant staple in Hollywood's output. It has also, since the days of Chaplin been a topic of critical debate, though generally within evaluative paradigms compatible with liberal humanist values, hence within frameworks of concern that have tended to focus on issues of aesthetic integrity, self-expression and direct or indirect social and cultural worth ... comedy can also entail an array of defining conventions (from the generation of laughter to the presence of happy endings to the representation of everyday life), and is able in addition to combine with or to parody virtually every other genre or form. (65-66)

Neale goes on to argue that:

For many commentators, gags, jokes and funny moments are fundamental to all forms of comedy, and hence to definitions of comedy either as a single genre or as a diverse but related cluster of genres and forms. An initial distinction can then be drawn between those in which they occur outside, or are dominant over, narrative contexts and narrative concerns, and those in which they are not. (66)

Thus, A.S. Horton's proposal regarding the definition of comedy, quoted in Steve Neale's *Genre and Hollywood*, is quite appropriate. Horton asserts that, "comedies are interlocking sequences of jokes and gags that place narrative in the foreground, in which case comedy leans in varying degrees toward some dimension of the non-comic (realism, romance, fantasy), or ... use[s] narrative as only a loose excuse for holding together moments of comic business (as in a Marx Brother's film)" (66). On the one hand, for some critics, comedy can be defined only by a narrative with a happy ending, and be detached from simple gags, jokes or a comic environment. However, other critics such as Jerry Palmer "argue not only that gags, jokes and funny moments are fundamental to comedy, but also

that they exhibit similar structural and logical features” (Neale 67). Notwithstanding, Steve Neale asserts that “local or not, gags, jokes, and slapstick humour in general have formed the basis for a tradition in film comedy that is virtually as old as film itself” (68).

By adapting to changing historical circumstances, comedy has survived and the romantic comedy attained great popularity, as well as attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the words of Steve Neale, “the existence of comedies of remarriage ... suggests an area of overlap between romantic comedy and domestic comedy. However, like other forms of narrative comedy, and in curious contrast to the attention given to domestic and familial drama, domestic comedy remains largely unexplored” (70-71). In fact, herein rests the originality of this investigative work, which aims to enter the world of domestic situations and relationships that have managed to remain a relatively uncharted subject. In addition, “comedy has often been viewed as either actually or potentially subversive, or at least an inherently positive force for social renewal and social change” (Neale 71), due to its concern regarding the transgression of the norms and its critical attitude towards it.

On the other hand, the ‘social problem film’, such as I would argue *Falling Down* (1993) is, has become an emerging genre label for a specific type of film. According to Steve Neale:

The term ‘social problem film’ is essentially a critical invention. Labelled ‘sociological’, ‘message’ or ‘thought’ films by the industry ... the films themselves have been grouped and described in ways which are recognizable and consistent, but also somewhat problematic ... Marcia Landy argues that ‘The social problem film was directed toward the dramatization of topical social issues – capital punishment, prison life, juvenile delinquency, poverty, marital conflict, family tension, and, to a lesser degree, racism.’ (112-113)

Adapted to accommodate social issues, one of the conventions of the social problem film “revolves around the interaction of the individual with social institutions ... such as government, business, political movements” (Neale 113), and perhaps even within the family structure. For instance, the 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause* testifies to the persistence of the social problem film, dealing with the maladjustment of three teenagers, “victims of their parents’ weaknesses” (Prouse 161). In fact, according to Derek Prouse:

The sins of their children are unsparingly loaded on to the shoulders of [their] ‘ordinary’ parents, who – lacking the emotional balance to permit a healthy assumption of responsibility – are shown as disastrously over-compensating along certain emotional channels, hysterically evasive before others. By extension the film is prepared to fault, on a serious level, the decadent nature of various patterns in American family life: not only in the obvious breakdowns of divorce, but in achievements commonly accepted as well-meaning and satisfactory. (161)

Moreover, in *Rebel Without a Cause* “the deficiency of the browbeaten father is firmly pointed out, the mother’s scared leadership and intelligence questioned, and ... the moment ... [the] son’s foot is placed squarely through her portrait” (Prouse 161), appears to depict an open attitude of estrangement and rejection of parental authority by the son. In the film “the hazards of life as an American [teenager] are again being explored” (Houston 178) and director Nicholas Ray ferociously proposes to depict a new “format of an American social problem [which] is ... juvenile delinquency or, more specifically, the incidence of troubled teenagers among middle-class American families in the fifties. The teenagers in this 1955 film are presented as rebelling against their parents and their way of life” (Wilson 166-167). Hence, as Steve Neale asserts, *Rebel Without a Cause* draws “on a tradition of films about juvenile delinquency, juvenile wildness and juvenile crime” (120), much as the film *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) does as well.

Furthermore, the action film genre has come to describe a film expressing rapid and exciting movement and conflict to the point of violence, proposing a range of films involving narratives of physical action, car chases, crimes or road journeys, such as *A Perfect World* (1993). However, due to “Hollywood’s propensity for generic hybridity and overlap[ping]” (Neale 52) the term ‘action’ has become more familiarised with its connection to adventure. According to Steve Neale, “the term ‘action-adventure’ has [in fact] been used ... to pinpoint a number of obvious characteristics common to these genres and films: a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and [/or] explosions, and in addition to the development of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and [/or] stunts” (52).

Finally, the melodrama genre, if indeed it is a genre in itself is used to label hybrid films. Steve Neale asserts that “a major point of reference for nearly all academic writing on melodrama and the cinema to have appeared since the mid-1970s has been Thomas

Elsaesser's article 'Tales of Sound and Fury, Observations on the Family Melodrama'" (181). Thus, cited by Neale, Elsaesser is said to use melodrama as a term which "in the dictionary sense ... is a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects. This is ...perhaps the most useful definition, because it allows melodramatic elements to be seen as constituents of a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to the story-line, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue" (183). In many aspects the melodrama identifies itself with the arena of the family and domesticity. Moreover, terms like melodrama are, on occasions, used in a pejorative sense, but it can also be used positively to describe films mixed with other genres, "thus a melodrama could be good, bad, indifferent or standard, depending upon the nature of the films" (Neale 185). For instance, the previously mentioned film "*Rebel Without a Cause* was called a 'juvenile delinquency melodrama'" (Neale 187), which comes to stress the idea that melodrama is in fact "a hybrid term used to indicate a hybrid film, a film which mixes elements of the thriller with an element of romance, as in 'Romantic Melodrama'" (Neale 187), or in the case of *Rebel Without a Cause*, it can also be labelled as a social problem melodrama.

In fact, on questions of American family organisation critics just cannot agree. It is important to notice the neglect film critics and historians have shown towards the domestic comedy, but also to acknowledge their interest when the social issue film is combined with the action-adventure melodrama, as is the case with James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), for example.

#### 4. Female-Centred Films

More than film culture itself, the main centre of attention of this dissertation is the role of the male figure and its significance within American family structures. Nonetheless, before identifying and focusing on male-centred films, I will in a few words give an outline of noteworthy female-centred films of the 1980s and 1990s. Many female-centred films offer the public a more feminist-influenced view of family life and in order to better understand the male-centred film it is important to know both standpoints on the subject of family. In fact, the female-centred world presents issues that are equally significant, despite being pushed into the background in the male-centred family film.

Up until the 1960s Hollywood films offered a distinctive and ideologically rigid insight into gender roles. For instance, any woman who dared to become a mother outside of marriage was portrayed as errant and was consequently punished for her transgressions through social rejection. Furthermore, the unwed mother's only way to be welcomed back into the proper life of domesticity was if she were able to attain the love of a good man. Hence, a woman's future and redemption regarding respectable family life was significantly dependent on male support and approval.

Nevertheless, during the 1970s, as mentioned previously, a shift in attitudes regarding new family patterns, such as single parenting, sex outside marriage and divorce, as well as the women's liberation movement and job opportunities outside the household, offered the average American female the opportunity to conceive new female alignments within the familial arena. As a consequence, mother/daughter relationships alternating between competition and judgment on the one hand, and comprehension and support on the other were also depicted in several of Hollywood films. Therefore, relationships between mothers and daughters received much attention from the early 80s onwards, as a sort of legacy of the 1970s into the early 1990s, in films like *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Steel Magnolias* (1989) and *Postcards from the Edge* (1991).

Written and directed by James L. Brooks *Terms of Endearment* sets out to relate in condensed form several decades of familial ties, particularly those of a mother/daughter relationship. From the very beginning the mother, Aurora (Shirley MacLaine), reveals her intolerance of her own daughter Emma (Debra Winger) telling her, "You aren't special enough to overcome a bad marriage". In addition to that, Daniel Curran argues that:

Although a variety of themes and ideas is explored, the core idea is the relationship between a mother and daughter – the demanding and disapproving Aurora Greenaway (MacLaine) and the strong, but unambitious, Emma (Winger) ... As a decade or so passes, Emma and Flap [Jeff Daniels] leave hometown Houston for the Midwest, Aurora's lunch with the astronaut [Jack Nicholson] becomes a romance, Flap falls for one of his students, Emma brightens her days by having an affair with a gentle banker (Lithgow), and eventually their world caves in when Emma is fatally stricken with cancer. Beginning as a comedy and ending as a teary tragedy, the film attempts to mirror the narrative of life rather than that of film. (344)

Emma begins the film as a daughter but soon she becomes a mother herself, and after leaving home in Texas she talks with her mother everyday on the phone, perhaps in a desperate attempt to get some sort of guidance as she carries on an affair with Sam (John Lithgow), and her own husband cheats on her with a younger woman, Janet (Kate Charleson). As a consequence and in spite of her fatal illness, Emma appears to have proven her mother's disapproval of her marriage to have been a wise judgment, since she willingly drove herself into a bad marriage and was unable to overcome the difficulties such commitment implies. So, mother and daughter re-establish their bonds of love and female support, despite the years of estrangement that bighted their relationship.

In 1989 Robert Harling's play *Steel Magnolias* was released as a motion picture and it was Harling himself who adapted it for the big screen. Apart from turning into real characters the male characters who are only talked about in the play, Robert Harling's goal remained focused on the strength of several female leading characters and particularly on the relationship between M'Lynn Eatenton (Sally Field), mother to a stubborn and optimistic diabetic daughter, Shelby (Julia Roberts). M'Lynn's circle of friends, Truvy (Dolly Parton), Ouiser (Shirley MacLaine), Clairee (Olympia Dukakis) and finally Annelle (Daryl Hannah) are all warm Southern women who get together to dish dirt, crack jokes and do hair and makeup at Truvy's beauty parlour, but most importantly they support each other and show female strength at its best through hectic times (Shelby's wedding), good times (Shelby's baby) and bad times (Shelby's death). Hence, this is a female-centred 'feel good' movie focused on female bonding, within as well as outside the family unit. In the film the woman's need and/or wish to become a mother is well depicted by Shelby's

character when she makes the decision to have her child despite the threat it poses to her own life. So, her wish to become a mother forces her to go against both her doctor's and her mother's advice: "I want a child of my own ... The one thing that would make me happy is to have a baby ... I look at having this baby as the opportunity of a lifetime ... Please, please. I need your support. I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful ... than a lifetime of nothing special" (Shelby to her mother M'Lynn). Despite being dismissively labelled a melodrama, the film rises above the ordinary shallow 'feel good' movie, particularly due to small comic sequences, such as the moment after Shelby's funeral when, after all the men have gone and the women are alone, Clairee proposes that M'Lynn hit Ouiser and they all burst into laughter, thus lightening up the tension in spite of the presence of the theme of death.

By 1989 Hollywood film production centred on motherhood tended to depict its worse aspects, aggressiveness and excessive control. In fact, troubled mother/daughter relationships were a subject that Hollywood films chose to focus on. Motherhood has remained a particularly important subject in film production, in particular the privileged position of power mothers hold within the family unit.

In *Postcards from the Edge* (1991) producers Mike Nichols and John Calley and screenwriter Carrie Fisher, based on her own novel, focused their attention on a shattered mother/daughter relationship. *Postcards from the Edge* is crammed with a fair amount of emotional tension between a chronically alcohol-dependent Hollywood mother (Shirley MacLaine) and her distressed daughter (Meryl Streep). Unable to deal with the circumstances she grew up in Suzanne (Streep) became a spoiled, selfish and conceited actress who, due to her drug addiction, is forced to move back in with her domineering mother. While Doris (MacLaine) seeks refuge in drinking, Suzanne does the same with drugs and only when both are ready to acknowledge their personal weaknesses, as well as their failings as mother and daughter, will they be able to reach some sort of understanding. Indeed, this only takes place after a drunken car accident that puts Doris in the hospital, where she finds herself physically and emotionally stripped of all arrogance and pretensions. Helpless and sincere, the incident will allow her to reconcile and re-establish the long-severed connection with Suzanne.

In the above-mentioned films, it appears that female-centred films work as a general vehicle for the redemption of mothers, the patching up of estranged

mother/daughter relationships as well as offering a popular arena for female generational bonding. However, as the image of the woman as a mother within the family structure changed throughout the 1970s and 1980s, so did the image of the man as husband and father. According to Martha May:

Between the 1930s and 1970s the depiction of the unwed father underwent what seems to be a particularly radical revision. Before the late fifties, unmarried dads in the typical American movie were portrayed as selfish, immoral, and irresponsible. A fickle sexual predator, the cad rejected monogamy and the potential benefits of domesticity; his power to fascinate lay in abandoning social convention. By the late fifties and early sixties, however, films dealing with parenthood outside marriage began to take a new dramatic shape, with lessened emphasis on the virtue of the mother and the transformation of her careless lover into a caring father-to-be. (2)

Historically, films like *No Man of Her Own* (1949), *To Each His Own* (1946), *A Summer Place* (1959) and *Love With the Proper Stranger* (1964) were, in fact, popular films that explored the evolution of fatherhood using “premarital pregnancy as a plot device” (May 2). These films are also clear examples of the evolution of the male from a “sexual outlaw to sexualised parent” (May 2-3). All in all, Hollywood films also appear to be a plausible barometer of American society’s shifting attitudes towards the eroding and/or reinforcement of family values, especially concerning the role of the male figure within the household and his attitude toward fatherhood.

The female-centred film on family relations obviously should not be left out of the picture, even though the development of the male figure within the middle-American household is the principal concern of this dissertation. Indeed, I shall have occasion to make reference to the female role in my subsequent observations. Suffice it to say for the moment, that in male-centred films the role of the woman/mother is exposed to equal interrogation. Mostly motherhood enjoys a privileged relationship with the natural and occasionally is elevated to the sentimental/sacramental.

## 5. Male-Centred Films

Until the Hollywood domestic melodrama shifted focus and settled on the production of male-centred films, male characters, especially fathers, had a tendency to receive less favourable treatment in motherhood-centred melodramas. Martha May argues that:

Of equal importance would be the gradual demise of the ‘woman’s picture’ in the late fifties and sixties, which meant a reassessment of audience preferences and a reordering of cinematic perspective. The maternal melodramas had been addressed primarily to female viewers and assumed what film analysts now term a female ‘gaze’. The gaze, the presumption of the audience’s point of view, would shift when filmmakers began to craft movies on domestic subjects that were directed at both women and men ... [Thus leading to] a new identification with a male character’s ability to navigate the perilous waters of sexuality and domesticity. (4)

Furthermore, according to Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, in the late seventies:

[Some filmmakers] found a key to commercial success by directing their attention inward, a reflection, perhaps, of how the social tensions of the previous decade moved from the campus into the living room. [Thus,] personal problem films like ... *Kramer Vs. Kramer* (1979), [and] *Ordinary People* (1980) ... concentrated on shifting social values in the intimate arenas of romance, family, marriage, cohabitation and sex – aspects of American life radically changed by the sixties and now confronted by the sixties generation meeting the first crisis of adult life. (255)

In 1979 the film *Kramer Vs. Kramer* was extremely successful in drawing attention to recent American heartache over the dissolution and reorganisation of the family unit, where father and son were abandoned and the father was left to fill in the typical mother’s role. Seth Cagin and Philip Dray argue that “*Kramer Vs. Kramer*, directed by Robert Benton from the novel by Avery Corman, won the era’s highest accolades as the most even-handed Hollywood depiction of the changing roles for men and women in marriage and parenting” (257). Moreover, the film also projected a raw message of divorce, custody

battles and the trauma of familial separation. Critic David Denby, quoted by Cagin and Dray, argues that “*Kramer Vs. Kramer* quite intentionally ... is a tragic and ironic summing-up of the decade of self-realization and women’s lib. Sex and marriage have failed for the Kramers ... [So,] the newly confident woman and the newly sensitized man are propelled away from each other” (257). Consequently, tired of being somebody’s daughter, wife or mother, Joanna Kramer (Meryl Streep) abandons the household, along with her son Billy (Justin Henry), who is then to be looked after by his father, Ted Kramer (Dustin Hoffman). By allowing a reversal of gender roles to take place, the film also “underwent a fascinating process of feminization” (Vlasopolos 119) of the father character. According to Peter Lev, “*Kramer Vs. Kramer* ... suggests that males can be sensitive, caring human beings ... In other words, gender roles are sufficiently flexible so that men can take on not only female strengths but also traditional female weaknesses” (156). An example of this might be, for instance, Sydney Pollack’s *Tootsie* (1982) where Dustin Hoffman plays an actor who pretends to be a woman and goes through an exterior feminisation by dressing and acting like a woman in order to get an acting job. On the other hand, a more recent example of the feminisation of the male character is Nancy Meyers’s *What Women Want* (2000), starring Mel Gibson and Helen Hunt. In the film, screenwriters Josh Goldsmith and Cathy Yuspa explore the infiltration by the competitive chauvinistic male ego of the female world, depicting the unlooked-for setting in of feminisation as the man (Gibson) becomes further acquainted with the feminine psyche (Hunt).

In *Kramer Vs. Kramer* Ted’s feminisation process is also a success and Anca Vlasopolos describes it like this:

[At first] he knows less about cooking, and, later, about shopping, than a five-year-old boy. On the way to school, Ted rushes the boy along ... hands him over to a young woman at the school door with the injunction that she take care of him, and hails a taxi ... [However,] the breakfast scene on the day Joanna is to take Billy away is matched almost shot for shot with the initial one [which had been a disaster] in order to emphasize Ted’s growth as a woman; he and Billy work in unison, and the French toast he prepares sizzles toward a golden-brown perfection while son and father cry in each other’s arms. (123)

Unfortunately, after Ted and Billy have struggled their way toward working as a team, Joanna comes to claim her son as any traditional mother fulfilling her role would and she does win the custody suit, leaving Ted desolate. However, she decides to give up her role as the mother and allows Billy to remain in his father's care, "not because she cannot accept the responsibilities, but because she courageously accepts the unexpected bond her departure has created between Ted and the child" (Vlasopolos 122). Despite Ted's feminised role as the hero, in the end Joanna appears as the truly selfless heroine of a woman's film and perhaps, taking into account the film's success, that was precisely what the audience was prepared for at the time, and since father and mother emerge dignified. According to Anca Vlasopolos:

Ted's feminization from young business go-getter into a nurturing, vulnerable, and self-sacrificing parent reinforces the notion supported by the structure of the woman's film that a woman who becomes the hero of her life rather than a supporting or bit player falls prey to sin, censure, and suffering, and may be redeemed from misery only by a miracle, a change outside her control. In *Kramer Vs. Kramer* the myth remains unchanged, even when the woman happens to be a man. (127)

Nevertheless, such would not be the case for very long, as the role of the father gained a greater degree of prominence throughout the rightist 1980s and into the early 1990s.

As early as 1980 Robert Redford's film *Ordinary People*, based upon the novel by Judith Guest, conscientiously approaches the tension and tragedy of an upper-middle class American family attempting to deal with the death of their oldest son. Unavoidably, the family's so-called ordinary life is shattered. What is more, this time it is not the mother, Beth (Mary Tyler Moore), who acts as a stabiliser or peace coordinator, rather it is the task of the father, Calvin (Donald Sutherland). It is he who in turn becomes much closer to the youngest son, Conrad (Timothy Hutton), while the mother continuously attacks both male characters with her contempt and passive-aggressive behaviour. Thus, in *Ordinary People* the female character, the mother, is in reality an agent of disaster and failure. She constitutes an obstacle towards a better father/son relationship. According to Marcia L. Ferguson:

Women in *Ordinary People* are consistently seen and shown from a male perspective in which they function mainly to devastate and disrupt the already shaky state of the film's protagonist, Conrad Jarret. Male bonding pervades this movie but is always overshadowed by the threat of invidious females, especially the chilling character of the mother Beth. The force of this threat is particularly evident during the daily rituals of eating, that domestic sphere traditionally controlled and orchestrated by women exiled in the kitchen. Around and within these eating rituals we best see the subtle violence and manipulation on the part of the mother ... [Moreover] when it is obvious that the family breakfast has been destroyed by the mother, the father Calvin tries to save the situation by suggesting that Conrad bring his friends home to 'play touch football on the lawn'. His attempt to rescue one ritual with another is more exactly an attempt to replace female trouble with male bonding". (98-100)

Consequently, the mother's aggressiveness and coldness, along with her inexplicably unapproachable behaviour, drive the men of the family closer forming a stronger bond, once they realise that it is the female who is the one to be blamed for the weak state of their relationship. Hence, in the words of Ferguson, "strength is what finally allows the men to banish the weak and destructive mother, and with her departure the men are free to bond in male embrace" (104).

To see mothers and daughters struggle with each other's shortcomings is actually quite a funny and often touching subject, but by the late 80s fathers in male-centred films were also getting their fair share of attention from Hollywood. Martha May argues, "that some films by the late 1980s resolved those unhappy questions [regarding male domesticity] by asserting a new couple, father and child" (7). In *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), three male figures attempt to bond with a child without the presence or need of a mother who simply represents the agent that endows men with control over the child, hence regaining fatherly control, as well as authority over the home and offspring.

Notwithstanding, both *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) and the sequel *Three men and a Little Lady* (1990), which turned out to be extremely successful around the globe, are actually a Hollywood remakes and reworking of the French hit *Trois Hommes et un Couffin* (1985). According to Ginette Vincendeu in *Sight and Sound*, "At the end of *Trois Hommes* – after Coline Serrau's protagonists invite the baby's mother in to discuss her plight and soon find her asleep in the cot – the camera moves to freeze frame of the little

girl: a classic open ending. Leonard Nimoy's three men, by contrast, work out a practical deal with the mother and stride out confidently wheeling the pram" (23). Considering the contrasts between the films, it is striking the extent to which, when dealing with family-centred remakes, both the screenwriter and the director gave due consideration to the age, the mood and most importantly the social and familial attitudes that were most appealing to American audiences.

All in all, the above mentioned films might appear to encourage both American male and female audience to ponder what might be the average American man's responsibility in relation to his role as a father, while suppressing a consideration of the role of the mother. Vincendeau goes further and cites Tania Modleski's claim that, "the function of [*Three Men and a Baby*] is simply to give men more options than they already have in patriarchy: they can be real fathers, 'imaginary' fathers, godfathers, and, in the older sense of the term, surrogate mothers" (24), perhaps this is why the baby's mother, Sylvia (Nancy Travis) only makes her entrance at the very end to take the baby with her, in order to drive home to the three inveterate bachelors the emptiness of their lives without fatherhood.

By excluding the woman in *Three Men and a Baby*, director Leonard Nimoy is giving three womanisers the exceptional opportunity to prove themselves able to be successful in the domestic arena of childcare. In fact, Carolyn A. Durham asserts, "if the maternal role is 'naturally' female, then men can prove themselves to be 'women' and (therefore) 'mothers' only through a process of direct substitution" (76), and such is the case in the film in question. Despite their need to prove their 'mothering' abilities, Peter (Tom Selleck), Michael (Steve Guttenberg) and Jack's (Ted Danson) masculinity is never turned into an issue, rather it is the way they deal with baby Mary (Lisa Blair and Michelle Blair) which leads to a redefinition of fathers through multi-tasking, and involving her in both their personal and professional lives (Peter, as an architect, takes her to construction sites and Jack, as an actor, to rehearsals).

Having accepted her failings as a mother, Sylvia agrees to stay on living with Mary's three very different father figures, but in December of 1990 director Emile Ardolino presented American audiences with *Three men and a Little Lady*, also based on Coline Serreau's *Trois Hommes et un Couffin*. This time around Ardolino's domestic comedy raises new questions regarding parental roles, as well as traditional family

structure. In Ardolino's film, the mother Sylvia (Nancy Travis) has regained her authority and her decisions regarding Mary (Robin Weisman) are not to be argued with by any of the three men in their lives, especially when Sylvia decides to get married in order to provide Mary with family stability. Ardolino brings back not only the issue of marriage, but also the matter of the claimed superiority of the traditional nuclear family, as a concept that one might consider necessary for the restoration of balance within a household. Since the solution at the end of the first film was found to be demonstrably unstable, a further conservative plot and resolution was required. Hence, Ardolino's remake-sequel aims at finding a fitting husband for Sylvia, as well as a suitable father for Mary.

Mary's biological father Jack (Ted Danson) remains a womaniser and along with Michael (Steve Guttenberg), is little more than a friend to Sylvia. On the other hand, Peter (Tom Selleck) comes to represent everything a woman should want in a husband. Moreover, he acknowledges his personal emotional needs as a man in love with the mother of the little girl he has already fathered. After accepting his feelings towards Sylvia, throughout the course of several comic events and overcoming of obstacles, Peter, Sylvia and Mary finally reconstitute the typical American traditional nuclear family, with the redemption of the unwed mother and the womanising bachelor through marriage.

Stereotypes of American fatherhood, as I said, were subjected to revision at this time. In order to do so, during the late 80s and early 90s, Hollywood consciously used top actors to get across the new ideas regarding the reshaping of fatherhood, namely Ted Danson, Steve Martin and Rick Moranis. After the success of *Three Men and a Baby* in 1987, Ted Danson's charisma in the comic role of a misguided father, along with his television success in the famous 1980s hit sitcom *Cheers* were redirected for the film *Dad* (1989). This dramatic comedy continues to explore the role of fathers and their relationship with their children. However, *Dad* goes a bit beyond by leading the audience to contemplate the grown-up child's sense of duty towards ageing parents. Jack Lemmon (Jake Tremont) and Olympia Dukakis (Bette Tremont) play Ted Danson's (John Tremont) parents, and as he finds his parents can no longer cope on their own and are in need of help, John also struggles with his teenage son, Billy Tremont (Ethan Hawke) and both try to find new meaning in their somewhat estranged relationship. Once past the confusion of emotions raised by ageing, and the eventual certainty of death, in *Dad* director and writer Gary David Goldberg raises the issue of generational responsibilities, that is to say the

accountability children have towards their parents once they cannot care for themselves. John (Ted Danson) describes it well, if somewhat idealistically, when he says: “I will raise you; you take care of me when the time comes”.

Furthermore, Gary David Goldberg’s background work experience in the television hit sitcom *Family Ties* (1982-1989) throughout an entire decade, gives a good indication of this director and writer’s influence on the 1980s representation of family life. In fact, television sitcom shows like *Family Ties* and NBC’s *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) were arguably much more influential than films throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. The television sitcom *Family Ties* also provides instances of the issues over which the clash of different generations took place. *Family Ties*, starring Michael J. Fox, Meredith Baxter, Michael Gross, Justine Bateman, and Tina Yothers, depicts an 1980s American upper middle-class white nuclear family, the Keatons, where parents Steven (Gross) and Elyse (Baxter), once political activists during the 60s supporting leftwing and liberal ideologies, try to cope with their children’s political disengagement, or in the case of Alex P. Keaton (Fox), a fierce espousal of conservative Republican viewpoints. Alex is portrayed as a good son and at times good-hearted brother, but he also represents the 1980s political and social agenda of self-help and self-advancement. For instance, Alex is a passionate Reagan supporter, a member of the Young Republican Club and dreams of working in the money-making environment of Wall Street. So, despite dealing with serious issues such as teenage pregnancy, the loss of friends or divorce, with fun sequences and laughs, Gary David Goldberg managed to sum up the 80s decade’s drift away from leftist causes towards conservative ideologies, both representing and mocking Republican influence on the younger generation.

On the other hand, *The Cosby Show*, starring Bill Cosby as Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable the head of an African-American middle-class nuclear family, attempted to depict a black family’s everyday life through comic situations. However, the show’s success was mainly due to white American audience’s need to have their anxieties tranquillised concerning African-American communities. In reality, many African-Americans were not pleased to be depicted like white families. The use of the super stable and supportive Huxtable family as a global portrayal of African-American’s lifestyle, invoking 1950s-era anodyne conflict-free styles, was actually a cause for concern for many African-American communities.

I would argue that from 1989 to 1991 the question of generational responsibilities is central and the rediscovered bonds between grandfathers and grandsons, as well as fathers and sons are granted great significance. In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* the son Henry Jones Jr./Indiana Jones's (Harrison Ford) attempt to have an identity distinct from that of his father, Henry Jones (Sean Connery), is actually set aside and their differences come to a resolution when father and son are forced to acknowledge mutual love and concern for each other's well being. Moreover, in Sidney Lumet's *Family Business* (1991) based on Vincent Patrick (also the film's screenwriter)'s novel, the film revisits three generations of men brought together and simultaneously torn apart by an out of the ordinary comic attraction to the business of thievery. The head of the family, Jessie (Sean Connery) is an amoral patriarch whose son, Vito (Dustin Hoffman) holds grudges and resentments against him for the surrounding medium of crime he was forced to grow up in. On the other hand, Jessie's grandson, Adam (Matthew Broderick) is a privileged Ivy League young man keen to prove himself out of respect and admiration for his grandfather. In contrast, Adam finds himself at odds with his own father, who pressures him to stay away from Jessie. Vito wishes to avoid the mistake of allowing Adam to socialise within the same environment of crime he spent his adult life trying to escape. The goal of Lumet's film is generational male bonding, particularly in respect of men learning to relate to one another, as grandfathers, fathers and sons/grandsons. Hollywood filmmaking appears to have found a subject not only in fatherhood (father/baby and father/child relationships) but also in grandfatherhood.

As mentioned previously, family dramatic comedies are star-driven and once Hollywood found a successful formula it was happy to stick to it. So, through films like *Plains, Trains and Automobiles* (1987), *Parenthood* (1989), *My Blue Heaven* (1990) and *Father of the Bride* (1992), all starring comedic actor Steve Martin, Hollywood culture had finally found a formula that would induce audiences to reflect on the importance and inherent difficulties of fatherhood.

In *Plains, Trains and Automobiles*, produced, written and directed by John Hughes, Steve Martin (Neal Page) is partnered with John Candy (Del Griffith), both playing contrasting family men willing to undergo several embarrassing, compromising and comic situations in order to get home in time for Thanksgiving, after their flight is diverted to Wichita. Having to endure each other's company, sleeping in dubious motel rooms, eating

in crowded restaurants, riding in weird cabs, taking train trips, renting car and even hitchhiking by truck and hopping on the 'El', they finally sit down to a turkey dinner. Neal is a comic victim of circumstances and of Del's agitation, carelessness and good-hearted boorishness, they argue, disagree but always reconcile, while portraying real-life dilemmas of fathers on the road longing to get home and be with their family.

In 1989 Steve Martin is given a new partner, Rick Moranis in *Parenthood*, the film that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, and the formula worked so well it was repeated in the following year in the film *My Blue Heaven*, where they play a mismatched pair of guys, an odd buddy couple, in an optimistic comic fairy tale.

Finally, in 1992 Steve Martin returns in the remake of the 1950s film *Father of the Bride*, as the head of a nuclear family. As George Banks, Steve Martin gives expression to a father's anxiety when faced with the terrifying idea of losing his "little girl", Annie (Kimberley Williams) to her husband-to-be, Bryan MacKenzie (George Newbern). While the mother, Nina Banks (Diane Keaton) calmly deals with the situation, George has trouble letting go and finds himself in embarrassingly funny circumstances while trying to cope with his daughter's decision to get married and start her own family. For instance, when George plunges into his future in-laws swimming pool after snooping around their opulent mansion, things appear to go astray but the marriage rituals go on. Moreover, not until Annie has an argument with Bryan over a food blender and George is the agent behind their reconciliation, does he come to acknowledge that he is "no longer the man in [his] little girl's life". To put it another way, familial stability is only restored, and George's propensity for getting into comic scrapes is part of the process, when he severs the incestuous/Electra complex connection which underpins his anxiety. All in all, this film valorises fatherhood, specifically the father/daughter relationship, not in terms of more bonding, but in terms of a generous process of letting go. In conclusion, all the mentioned films focus on the issue of the *pater familias* and the evolutionary need for fatherhood to redeem itself and for the father to be adaptive, in order to keep his status and retain his power within the home.

## **Chapter II**

### ***Parenthood* (1989) and Comedy Melodrama**

## 1. Extended and Nuclear Families

In order to represent complex issues, such as the anxieties and difficulties of contemporary fatherhood and motherhood, filmmakers need to construct plots with tense and difficult life situations. As a comedy melodrama, *Parenthood* (1989) depicts the conflicts and heartaches of an extended family laced with a sense of humour. In fact, to director Ron Howard the familial arena, especially relationships between fathers and sons, was not unfamiliar territory. For almost two decades Ron Howard had starred in famous American television shows and Americans were given the opportunity to see him grow up before the camera, from a small child, Opie Taylor, in a warm and reassuring relationship with his father, Andy Taylor (Andy Griffith), on *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), to the growing teenager (and always the good son), Richie Cunningham, in *Happy Days* (1974-1984). *Parenthood*, written for the screen by Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel, not only ponders the state of the American family in the late 1980s, but also uses the well-known American comedic actor Steve Martin to take the lead in this familial story. In fact, comedians like Martin, the protagonist of *Parenthood*, are often given misfits roles and “often portray eccentric or deviant characters, characters given to dreaming, to disguise, to regression and to bouts of madness” (Neale 69), which is in fact the case of the Martin character Gil in this film.

I would argue that director Ron Howard’s *Parenthood* attempts to explore the domains of the domestic comedy through a direct portrayal of an extended late 1980s middle-class American family, using comedy as a positive means to express social renewal and even social change. Given the flexibility of the American family structure, the film suggests that the traditional definition of a nuclear family, regarded as being made up of a working father, a housewife mother and their one, two or more children, is outmoded. *Parenthood* deals with an extended family, beginning with four generations but ending with five.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, only a few male and female-centred film narratives focused on the development of a central male or female character(s). As I have tried to show, *Kramer Vs. Kramer* (1979) and *Steel Magnolias* (1989), respectively, tended to portray men unable to express themselves within the domestic arena, totally and naturally dominated by the female. However, as *Kramer Vs. Kramer* comes to prove, men/fathers

can, with some hard work, eventually learn to successfully dominate the domestic as well as the work arena, without having to surrender to women's inherent superiority in the home. In addition, the 1980s and early 1990s was a time period that allowed for the restoration of the image of the father within the household, an ideology that gained prominence in Hollywood's output. In *Parenthood* the film narrative specifically illustrates Gil's marital readjustments, as well as his parental conflicts with his father, Frank (Jason Robards) and his own problematic son Kevin (Jason Fisher), all within of a mainstream middle-income American extended family. As a consequence, Ron Howard's film subtly addresses Freudian undercurrents, namely the famous Oedipus Complex regarding problematic father/son relationships. Peter Krämer argues that:

The films' stories frequently focus on problematic father figures whose authority is initially being questioned, yet who will eventually 'be accepted and venerated', and on the 'Oedipal trajectory' of the young male hero [Gil] who has to work through his problematic relationship with the father, learning to accept his power and to identify with him, so that 'he will one day in his turn *become* the father. (295)

Krämer's argument relates directly to Gil's need to come to terms with his estranged father, Frank, in order for him to be able to naturally accept his own role as a father figure.

In *Parenthood*, as mentioned previously, the American extended family is portrayed in its many and various aspects by means of troubled relationships within one single family, Frank's, and its generational bonding implications. In the film there are seven fathers, seven mothers and, by the end of the movie, there are fifteen children. While all the mothers are depicted as relaxed and naturally ready to deal with their child(ren), all seven fathers have taken different attitudes regarding fatherhood.

Mothers	Fathers	Child(ren)	Fatherhood Attitudes
Grandma		Frank	
Marilyn	Frank	Gil Helen Susan Larry	<u>Patriarch</u>
		Kevin	

Karen	Gil	Taylor Justin +1	<u>Neurotic</u>
Helen	Ed	Julie Garry	<u>Absentee</u>
	New Husband	1 (end)	<u>Solid</u>
Susan	Nathan	Patty +1	<u>Obsessive</u>
Showgirl (absent)	Larry	Cool	<u>Irresponsible</u>
Julie	Tod	1 (end)	<u>Laidback</u>

Frank (Jason Robards) is the patriarch of the family, and as such assumes a position of authority and exercises a potentially negative influence over the entire family - as both a father and a grandfather, he is not looked upon as a figure to emulate. He is severe, self-centred, aggressive and completely absorbed in his own world. His three eldest children Gil (Steve Martin), Helen (Dianne Wiest) and Susan (Harley Kozak) all have different views on how to bring up their children, but most importantly they all share the same concern not to repeat their father's mistakes and follow in his footsteps. Despite having been negatively influenced by their father, who treats their mother Marilyn (Eileen Ryan) with disdain, they remain a close American extended family through familial rituals. For example, the whole family gathers around the dinner table at Helen's house, but in spite of a few desultory attempts to achieve some degree of harmony, this remains inconceivable and they cannot reach common ground for peaceful understanding. In fact, family tension is broken by an embarrassing comic sequence, when Gil shows up at the dinner table holding Helen's vibrator by mistake. Thus, as a domestic comedy the film combines sequences of farce with moments of critical social observation, in this case the sexual frustration of a divorced woman.

The only one of Frank's children who actually appears not to resent his father is Frank's twenty-seven year-old-son Larry (Tom Hulce), the youngest of the family, who moves back into his parents' home with his own son Cool, a five year-old-child he only met recently, result of an irresponsible and brief relationship with a showgirl. Therefore, Larry's influence on Cool's life can also be characterized as a negative one, as it is marked by detachment, absence and consequent abandonment. Nonetheless, despite his

irresponsible behaviour, such as inveterate gambling, Larry is protected and defended by Frank.

The father's relationship with his children, more importantly his son Gil, can be explained by Sigmund Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, which according to Ernest Jones exposes "the erotic and the hostile relations of child to parent [and] together with this goes the appreciation of infantile life and its overwhelming importance for all the innumerable developments that make up the adult human being" (228). In fact, with regard to the Oedipal situation, according to Freud, the Oedipus complex appears to originate from the boy's perception of the father as an obstacle between him and the mother:

His [the boy's] identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother. Henceforward his relation to his father is ambivalent ... it seems as if the ambivalence inherent in the identification from the beginning had become manifest. An ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-relation of a solely affectionate kind to his mother make up the content of the simple positive Oedipus complex in a boy. [However,] the Oedipus complex must collapse because the time has come for its disintegration ... Although the majority of human beings go through the Oedipus complex as an individual experience, it is nevertheless a phenomenon which is determined and laid down by heredity and which is bound to pass away according to programme when the next pre-ordained phase of development sets in. (Gay 640, 662)

It is important to notice that Frank's children, although adults, keep strong and deep recollections of their bad childhood and Gil exteriorises his hostility regarding the way his father has raised him, with lack of love and neglect, by stepping away from him and considering him as a parental example not to be followed. Though as a proper feel-good movie he is later reconciled with his father due to a somewhat tacked-on conversation where Frank admits to his failing of emotional withdrawal. In fact, this is justified by the fear of loss Frank experienced when Gil was a child and got very ill, which led to a feeling of impotence that eventually drove father and son emotionally apart. Furthermore, however close this family wishes to appear Gil's dire childhood has paved the way for his progress into parenthood as an over-protective father, in reaction to his father's aloofness and

estrangement. According to Freudian theories discussed by Peter Gay, the family romance, that is to say the child's union with the father must unavoidably come to an end:

The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development. It is quite essential that that liberation should occur and it may be presumed that it has been to some extent achieved by everyone who has reached a normal state. Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, there is a class of neurotics whose condition is recognizably determined by their having failed in this task. For a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief. The child's most intense and most momentous wish during these early years is to be their parents (that is, the parent of his own sex) and to be big like his father and mother. But as intellectual growth increases ... he [the child] gets to know other parents and compares them with his own, and so acquires the right to doubt the incomparable and unique quality which he had attributed to them. Small events in the child's life which make him feel dissatisfied afford him provocation for beginning to criticize his parents, and for using, in order to support his critical attitude, the knowledge which he has acquired that other parents are in some respects preferable to them. (298)

A father/son relationship proves itself to be a constant process of censorship and criticism that can affect the child's development. Gil regards Frank's inability to communicate and emotionally connect with him, through his growing up process, as a failure in his parental character and supports his hostility and criticism of Frank on the basis of these assumptions. Moreover, Gil, now a father himself, recognises there is in fact a better and hopefully more positive way to deal with his own children. Gil believes himself to be wiser as an adult and condemns his father for being an uncaring kind of parent. Therefore, in reaction to Frank's detachment, Gil has become a compulsive and obsessive neurotic father over aware of his eldest son's every problem.

In 1989 the American people was going through a period of adjustment concerning their new political father, George Bush Sr. This was a time period of political unsteadiness and changing family values also became part of Hollywood's filmic concerns. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> This opposition of generational upbringing ideals is depicted in the film through Frank and Gil's father/son relationship.

*Parenthood* focuses on the four siblings' trouble and difficulties in coping with their domestic responsibilities, demands and even the opportunities given by the raising of children in contemporary Western societies, while having to deal with unresolved issues concerning their father's influence on their lives.

Due to Frank's limitations as a father Gil grew up to be an over-solicitous father with obsessive behaviour, who will stop at nothing to work on and to some extent solve his eight-year-old son Kevin's (Jason Fisher) emotional problems, for he too, like his self-critical father, is also given to excessive worry and anxiety. In opposition to Gil is Frank's youngest son, Larry, who takes the easy way out and leaves his own parents to attend to his son's needs. Therefore, the film does allow Frank to be redeemed through giving him another chance, that of raising his Afro-American grandson Cool. The film establishes its credentials as a feel-good movie by laughter, emotional heartfelt talks, reconciliation sequences and a happy ending. In fact, this goal is reachable (and is Frank's reward) because ultimately he never abandons his family, despite his many character faults, his redemption residing in the realisation that his son Larry is so much worse. On the other hand, Karen (Mary Steenburgen) is a conscientious and tranquil mother who is much better adjusted to family life and its inevitable conflicts, as well as being at peace with herself as a mother. Helen is the divorcee, the classic working mother estranged from her teenager children, Julie (Martha Plimpton) and Garry (Leaf Phoenix), but always trying to make up for the absence of their father, Ed. In addition, Susan is married to Nathan (Rick Moranis) who is an exceptionally ambitious and pushy father who forces math, foreign languages, Kafka and even karate on their three-year-old daughter Patty, whose childhood is being damaged by her own father's ludicrous personal expectations.

In different ways Frank has had an influence in both his son's lives, as well as in his two daughters'. As mothers though, their role is assured and their natural motherly commitment to their children never questioned. However, having had such a stern father, their choices regarding their husbands might have been slightly impaired. Helen married a man who after their divorce distanced himself totally from his children, while Susan has to struggle to stand up to her husband and force him to understand and communicate with her. While the film is nominally about parenthood, the great emphasis is really on fatherhood. Nonetheless, wives and mothers should not be neglected. In general, there are no bad mothers in the film, with the exception of Cool's mother who is absent and who parallels

the absent Ed. In *Parenthood* mothers are more relaxed because they deal with the world of feeling and family relations more naturally (Karen) or with more sensible or flexible approaches (Helen) or they force issues to a crisis at the right time (Susan). The matriarch Grandma (ostensibly the object of easy senility jokes) is found not to be an idiot, and Marilyn is shown to have put up with Frank for the sake of the children, symbolising the sacrificing mother of older generations. Female sexuality is also very important as the cement in marriage. Granny is sex-mad, Helen must resume dating, Susan must lead her husband to change radically by paying more attention to her as a desirable woman, and the subtle Karen, in perhaps the film's best set-piece joke, is willing to offer oral sex to her husband as a way to cheer him up. In the film, men are obsessed and totally absorbed with their children, and so tend to neglect their wives. Therefore, there is a need to balance up both elements – wives and offspring – and consider sex as an active part of family life. Men should take more interest in their female partners and properly balance both sex and parental duty.

Despite pointing out several recurrent family problems, more specifically neglectful and obsessive fathering behaviour, the film offers a very conservative point of view regarding American family life and strives to reinforce the significance of the father figure within the American household. Thus, the archetypal American family continues to make its presence noticed throughout the years following *Parenthood*, in films like *Grand Canyon* (1991), *Father of the Bride* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993), which, with the exception of *Short Cuts* (as a deeply satirical black comedy), share with *Parenthood* the common narrative trait of being feel-good movies. These films depict and expose the virtues and vices that are inherent in fatherhood, either through genetics or society, but they eventually put the audience's fears and anxieties to rest with warm moments of reconciliation, shared triumphs and mishaps, family reunions and happy outcomes. Hollywood depicts social and emotional results within a family unit or a single couple's life, since audiences have not outgrown the ideals behind simple fathering. Furthermore, the conflicts related with relationships that undergo small but seismic shudders of doubt, disappointment or even disaster are also of equal significance.

An example of the tensions at the heart of the socially relevant feel-good movie might be *Grand Canyon*. In *Grand Canyon*, directed by Lawrence Kasdan, also co-written with Meg Kasdan, urban life and its inherent harsh realities of violence and death are

context to an out of the ordinary friendship between a black tow-truck driver, Simon (Danny Glover) and a white lawyer, Mack (Kevin Kline), whose families are so very different. However, both families appear to be searching for a reasonable explanation for the shape in which society finds itself, but more importantly they are all seeking a new meaning to give their own lives: Simon states, “Everything is supposed to be different from the way it is!” Mack and Claire (Mary McDonnell) must deal with familial choices when Claire finds an abandoned baby on the street and expresses her wish to adopt her, now that their son is grown up. Simon deals with the threat of violence that lurks in his sister Deborah’s (Tina Lifford) neighbourhood and her son Otis’s (Patrick Malone) involvement with street gangs. Finally, Davis (Steve Martin) who is shot by a mugger comes to the sceptical conclusion that as a filmmaker it is his responsibility to show the world as it is and not try to gloss it up:

There’s a gulf in this country, an ever-widening abyss between the people who have stuff and the people who don’t have shit. It’s like this big hole has opened up in the ground as big as the fucking Grand Canyon and what’s come pouring out... of this big hole is an eruption of rage and the rage creates violence and the violence is real ... I can’t pretend it isn’t there because that is a lie ... There’s always been violence, there will always be violence. Violence and evil and men with big guns. My movies reflect what’s going on. They don’t make what’s going on. And if I happen to make them better than anyone then I have a bigger responsibility than anyone to serve it up!

Davis’s statement mentions complex issues like violence, rage, misery and economical lack of equality (certainly partly the consequence of Reaganomics). However, as a feel-good movie *Grand Canyon* aims to make audiences feel better about themselves and believe that these problems are all resolvable with good will (rather than political change). In fact, the film’s final scene is the most obvious evidence of that by showing newly structured families, Simon with his girlfriend and Mack and Claire with their recently adopted daughter, looking over the Grand Canyon while the sun is setting and smiles, which can be compared to *Parenthood*’s final bliss at the maternity ward. In the end, due to the particular form of the feel-good comedy, *Grand Canyon* itself makes an ironic mockery of Davis’s speech regarding social and economical injustice.

For instance, the film *Short Cuts*, directed and written by Robert Altman, is a dark comedy, which contrasts with the feel-good comedy and depicts a kaleidoscope of subtly interlinked stories of family drama and marital conflict. Despite dealing with issues like male bonding (fishing trip), adultery, divorce, morality (ignoring and taking pictures of the corpse), resentment (the return of the absent father), suicide, the death of a child, motherly neglect, *Short Cuts* is a satire which aims to give the audience a darker vision of family relationships than Hollywood normally deals in. At the end of the film balance appears to be restored through a barbecue thrown by Dr. Ralph Wyman (Mathew Modine) and his wife, Marian (Julianne Moore), for a simple middle-class couple, Stuart (Fred Ward) and Claire (Anne Archer). Therefore, two couples that apparently have nothing in common come to terms with their differences and personal problems by getting drunk and watching the sunrise watching the sunrise together. However, perhaps due to the origins of the story segments in the short stories of a major American writer, Raymond Carver, family problems are shown to be endemic and not susceptible to the quick fixes of Hollywood feel-good formulas. This ability to accept strife as a natural state and not to want to gloss it can look like human littleness, which is perhaps the significance of the quasi-biblical medfly plague that is afflicting Los Angeles.

Like *Parenthood* some of the mentioned films also attempt an anatomy of traditional American family values. Each film's conservative core manages to focus on American family ideals and the significance they still have in American society, despite the dramatic issues that all try to seriously ponder about. As problematic issues as each of these films deal with, they are linked by comic actor Steve Martin (with the exception of *Short Cuts*) and due to the comic form these films manage to give the audience a warm-hearted ending, with the aim of establishing a sense of hope, be it through final codas of a baby being born that causes an entire family to come together (*Parenthood*), families looking and smiling at the Grand Canyon (*Grand Canyon*), a daughter's wedding and her emotional inability to go on her honeymoon without saying goodbye to her father (*Father of the Bride*) or even couples from different social status struggling to deal with everyday relationship conflicts (*Short Cuts*). Audiences are given a final chance to ponder about the rising of new opportunities to make their world a better place and their family a happy one, just like in *Parenthood*.

## 2. Paternal Anxieties: The Eternal Roller Coaster Metaphor

In *Parenthood* (1989) the examination of the dialectic interplay between fathers and their children, provides perfect ground to analyse the process of raising a child and how it affects the outcome of each person's life. According to author Joseph H. Kupfer, "parents are neglectful for a variety of reasons, ranging from self-absorption to some deeper need to deny the place of children, or family, in their lives" (96). In fact, *Parenthood* starts off giving Gil (Figure 2.1) centre-stage attention, while he lingers on his own private memories of his father's neglect. As a consequence of Frank's neglectful fathering towards his oldest son, Gil has made decisions concerning his personal role as a father that must necessarily contradict everything Frank ever taught or did to him. As a result, Gil grew up into a hyper-responsible father regarding the well being of his own children, in order to over-compensate for the attention he never got from Frank. As mentioned previously, according to Freudian psychological theories, there is a time when the child takes the liberty to criticise his parents' behaviour and choose to either become like them or blame them for his bad development process into adulthood. For example, in the noir proto-feminist melodrama *Mildred Pierce* (1945) there comes a moment when the daughter declares to her mother: "I'm rotten, but it's your fault. You made me who I am," illustrating Gil's fear of what could one day happen between him and Kevin. Gil has different fantasy projections about Kevin's future. For Gil, Kevin will either become a criminal or an accomplished scholar. If Kevin should turn out to be an assassin, shooting people from a bell tower, the comic public explanation for this is "his father totally screwed him up!" In contrast, if Kevin graduates from college, during his valedictorian speech, he hyperbolically thanks his father for his support ("He did everything right! ... Dad I love you. You're the greatest!").

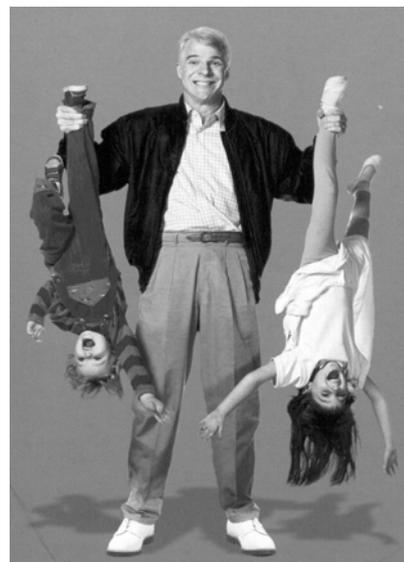


Figure 2.1 – Gil and the kids. (From: *Parenthood* DVD cover Package Design 2003 Universal Studios All Rights Reserved.)

As an adult Gil does not find other parents in order to replace his own father and be compensated for Frank's mistakes. Therefore, Gil takes upon himself the responsibility to

become that different and better father, which has made him such an apprehensive father when it comes to his own son, Kevin. On the other hand, Gil does not worry too much about his son Justin and the boy appears to be growing up much healthier and carefree than his brother. Perhaps Justin's difference when compared to Kevin is directly related to Gil's loosening up regarding Justin's growing up process. In fact, as Frank's firstborn Gil's resentment drives him to correct Frank's mistakes with his own firstborn son. Thus, one could argue that this is actually a firstborn child/son problem.

The film begins with Gil's whole family at a baseball game, the all American sport, and Gil cannot help reminiscing over the fact that Frank always took him to a baseball game for his birthday but left him alone to be looked after by an usher. According to Gil, his father believes children are "a prison rather than a playground", and this was something Frank had learned from his own paternal figure. In fact, as a young father Frank acted like Larry in respect of his irresponsibility towards Cool. Neglect appears to be a generational trait in Frank's family, and as a result, it is all Frank knows. However, unlike Larry, Frank decided to stay with his family, despite his emotional detachment regarding fatherhood, he has managed to pass on some sense of family feeling to his self-critical eldest son Gil.

Gil's belief that Frank was a truly bad father determines his private decisions and personal attitudes towards fatherhood. After Gil and Karen's meeting with Kevin's principal, where they were informed that a psychologist came to the conclusion that Kevin requires "special attention" and should transfer to a private school, Gil refuses to give up and takes upon himself the sole responsibility of changing everyone's opinion of Kevin, by spending more time with him and less at the office. Gil's goal is one of changing Kevin into a reasonable, strong, happy and confident child (Thompson 259) by taking Kevin to the video arcade and later on by dressing as Cowboy Gil, in order to turn Kevin's birthday party into a success and at the same time to get Kevin to enjoy himself and be accepted among his friends. As I cited before from Peter Gay's work on Freudian theories, "The child's most intense and most momentous wish during [his] early years is to be their parents (that is, the parent of his own sex) and to be big like his father and mother" (298). In fact, after his birthday party Kevin expresses the wish of becoming like his father and going to work with him every day when he grows up. Kevin identifies himself with his father and wants to be accepted as his equal.

Recalling that Frank dumped him at baseball games, as a father Gil is determined to get Kevin to play the game but Kevin is too anxious and is not able to play according to his father's expectations. Gil even coaches the team but when they lose a game, and Kevin gets blamed for it, Gil feels guilty and immediately thinks of his son growing up to be a criminal. Thus, once more reinforcing his anxiety about being a good father, and avoiding to have a possible negative influence over his son's life, the same way he feels Frank has done to him. Gil's paternal fears regarding his son's future come alive in his comically excessive fantasy flashbacks, but according to Freud when "day-dreams are carefully examined, they are found to serve as the fulfilment of wishes and a correction of actual life" (Gay 299). Therefore, Gil's projections are in effect the obverse of what this theory proposes, since his flashbacks deal with aspects in his son's life he does not wish to see fulfilled.

On the other hand the mother, Karen, is portrayed as emotionally balanced and calm who in fact believes she is very good at motherhood, but most people think that means she has got no goals, when for her the most important and main goal of her life is related with how her actions and decisions will influence her children's growing up process, as well as their future lives as adults. Karen does consider going back to work and help Gil with their financial difficulties, since Gil has renounced his job after being passed over for a promotion. However, this family's problems reach a climax when Karen finds out she is pregnant with their fourth child and Gil subtly brings up the question of abortion but leaves it up to her to make the choice and since she decides they should have the baby, Gil bursts out in anger: "Women have choices. Men have responsibilities ... my whole life is have to." Finally, with these words Gil manages to verbalise the unbreakable bond, as well as apparent burden, of paternal responsibility. Always Gil is trapped in self-pity and low self-esteem.

Grandma's (Helen Shaw) wise use of the roller coaster metaphor for parenthood applies perfectly to Gil's life and attitude as a father. Therefore, regarding its ups and downs, Gil's life does in fact appear to consist of a constant roller coaster ride. The film appears to define the life of a parent as being made up of happy and calm but also unhappy and terrifying moments. Representing an older and wiser generation Grandma states that life is much better if it is more like a roller coaster than a merry-go-round, because it is when things get frightening or exciting that a parent gets to fully enjoy the role and

responsibility of parenting, by bonding with their offspring. As a consequence, after going back to his job Gil appears more relaxed and while attending the school play he metaphorically feels the roller coaster, which is depicted by a state of fear and panic represented in his facial expressions, then followed by release of laughter. In some respects it is metonymic of comedy itself – the narrative complication followed by comic relief.

Furthermore, Gil's change and loosening up as a father also has everything to do with his heart-warming conversation with Frank during one of Kevin's baseball matches. Frank asserts, "I know you think I was a shitty father" and actually tells Gil that in spite of the difficulties he has faced, Gil is a good father. During this feel-good dialogue sequence by permitting Frank to express his own limitations and failures as a father, the film appears to solve Gil's troubles with a simple talk, which allows him to reach a level of inner peace, enjoy Kevin's baseball game and fully celebrate his victory. Frank goes as far as to give Gil a piece of advice telling him that the caring, the worrying and the pain never ends despite how old one's child is. Hence, the roller coaster metaphor is once more reinforced, but this time in order to establish the never-ending need for a father's willingness to learn from his own child-raising experience (the result of knowing after all that he was loved by his father), throughout his entire life.

As a father Frank has been neglectful, with both Gil and his sisters, and also indulgent, but only towards Larry, who is shown to be the family's black sheep, but Frank does not see it until the end. Larry's behaviour will lead Frank to face the truth, as well as his own responsibility for the way Larry turned out. Larry's perpetual immaturity is also depicted through his relationship with his own son Cool, when he prefers to see Frank's car than spend time with his son: "Just plop him down in front of the TV. It's what he always does" (Larry to his mother). Therefore, Larry neglects his son the same way Frank neglected his wife and Gil, and uses the television as a substitute for fatherhood. Larry, who keeps acting like an over-grown child, has no regard or concern for his role as a father. In fact, Larry always had Frank to protect and excuse his every mistake, so he never really had to develop any kind of responsibility, which is a trait Gil has inherited in excess.

Frank's recognition of his failings, not only towards Gil through neglecting him, but also and most importantly towards Larry by indulging him, gives way to a new understanding of fatherhood. I would argue every mistake Frank made with his first son, he tried to correct with his younger one, although both the initial fathering mistake and the

over-compensatory strategy have backfired and negatively affected his sons' lives. According to Kupfer, "Focused on their own goals for their children, parents cannot see who or what their children are ... parents are incapable of acknowledging what their children wish for themselves, where their talents may actually lie, or what they truly value" (96), and this is true in the case of both Gil towards Kevin and of Nathan towards Patty. In both cases, both fathers are driven by their obsessive paternal ambitions, disregarding their child's individual needs or wishes.

When Larry gets into trouble due to gambling debts he eventually asks for his indulgent father's money and help. However, having acknowledged his past shortcomings and mistakes, Frank proposes to pay the debts only if Larry agrees to work with him to pay the money back. Since Larry always takes the easy and irresponsible way out of his problems he simply leaves, preferring to risk being one step ahead of his threatening creditors rather than rescue himself through hard work. Moreover, Larry goes as far as dumping his own son on Frank and Marilyn. Frank appears to be given another chance at fatherhood with Cool and maybe, having learned from previous errors, he will do better this time since Cool represents the child given to the infertile old couple, while every fertile young couple is having new babies.

With regard to Nathan's approach to fatherhood, he is obsessed with turning his daughter into a genius. At first, even his wife Susan is on board with his great plan and system of education, in order to insulate Patty from any form of academic failure. Nathan does not realise that his paternal anxiety, personal ambitions and obsessive behaviour might actually constitute an obstacle to Patty's healthy development as a three-year-old child. In fact, Patty's academic excellency seems to be Nathan's only concern and he meticulously arranges her life in the attempt to maximise her brilliance in several languages, such as French and Spanish, math, science and even martial arts. Nathan's personal need to see Patty triumph gets in the way of her having a normal childhood but as an excessively anxious and non-spontaneous father, Nathan is completely oblivious to that fact. For instance, at Kevin's birthday party Patty is unable to interact with Justin, her happy, funny and healthy cousin, who keeps spinning around until he collapses, because she cannot understand the educational purpose of doing something just for fun. In addition, Nathan considers himself a good role model as a father and the only positive influence in Patty's life, in detriment of the rest of the family. Actually, it is his unconcealed arrogance

and lack of proportion that eventually lead to Susan's rebellion, which starts with the eating of candy and sweets kept hidden from Nathan in a closet, and ends with her leaving Nathan. Actually, as a wife Susan feels her neglectful husband is not meeting her needs, and insists on pushing her into the background. Only when Nathan is willing to compromise and agrees to learn how to have fun, does she agree to return home, especially because he makes a fool of himself by spontaneously singing "Close to You" for her in front of her students. In fact, in the final scene Nathan can be seen acting silly, impulsively and funny with young Patty.

Ed, Helen's ex-husband does not physically appear in the film but his neglect and negative influence is felt by both Julie and, more significantly, Garry. As a rebellious teenager Julie goes against her mother's every rule and carries on a relationship with Tod (Keanu Reeves) who is also the product of a dysfunctional environment. They have sex in Julie's bedroom after Helen has forbidden it, they get married and have to move into Helen's house and eventually Julie gets pregnant, while Tod continues to enter car races that endanger his own life, perhaps as a means to escape reality and his responsibility as a father. However, after an accident the responsibility that he now has towards the unborn child is pointed out by Helen, who comes to terms with accepting Tod as her son-in-law and part of the family.

On the other hand, Garry does not even try to communicate with his mother, but actually attempts to get closer to Ed asking to go live with him and his father's distance is felt more clearly when he does not even recognise Garry's voice on the phone and brushes him off because he claims to need to spend time with his new family. As a consequence, Garry breaks in and destroys his father's dentistry office, in order to express his feelings of anger and revolt. Thus, due to his father's neglect Garry becomes withdrawn and insecure about his masculinity. When Helen finally finds out Garry has been carrying around pornographic films, she tries to talk it through and give him some advice but Garry feels the need for a male figure to have such conversations with. At this point, Tod's presence in the house is justified since he is the one who talks to Garry and explains it is quite normal for him to be curious about his own sexuality. In fact, I would argue that male sexuality is one of the things that parenthood and responsibility has to channel. In the film Tod's irresponsible behaviour is tamed by marriage and fatherhood. For instance, after his conversation with Tod, Garry changes into a more extrovert teenager and becomes Tod's

friend. Hence, Tod, who is to become a father by the end of the film, gets some experience of the role with Garry, for fatherhood means also being available for a simple honest talk regarding both dreams and fears.

All in all in the film *Parenthood*, fathers need to work hard in order to secure their role in the familial arena and the acknowledging of their personal failings appears to be the best or at least most ostensible way to achieve paternal redemption when it comes to their offspring's childhood, adolescence or adulthood. The purpose is to valorise the role of fathers in a world where their authority is constantly challenged and where their conduct constantly falls below what idealisations seem to demand of them. On the other hand, in the film mothers appear to be naturally more relaxed in dealing with family relations and conflicts. Therefore, the film rewards, as well as punishes the fathers, for the reason that father/child relationships can either guide a youngster to a path of future successes, in the same way it can lead to a lifetime of estrangements. Fatherhood is as rewarding as it can be damaging, due to its complex entanglements, not only for the child and its future life, but also for the father himself in the dealing of his own failings. Metaphorically, fatherhood is an eternal roller coaster of dreams, fears, epiphanies, panic situations, laughter and pain, and the film is very successful in getting that message across by introducing a tale of seven different paternal figures, Frank, Gil, Ed, Nathan, Larry, Tod and eventually Helen's second husband.

Nonetheless, as stated previously, despite dealing with serious paternal conflicts the film insists on providing the audience with an ending typical of a feel-good movie, introducing the birth of Helen's new baby, as well as her new family structure as a remarried woman, a mother and also the grandmother of Julie's baby. It is also important to see Frank and Marilyn getting along and taking care of Cool, Nathan playing with Patty, Tod holding his child, Garry's smile of happiness, and Gil extremely pleased with his now four children. Thus, the film projects an idea of hope for all parents, especially emotionally struggling paternal figures, whose children's future may eventually depend on how well they perform in the family arena. In the maternity ward, due to the gift of an excessively comic fertility, it all seems worth the sacrifice and the anxiety.

## **Chapter III**

### ***Falling Down* (1993) and the Social Problem Melodrama**

## 1. Social Controversy

In the beginning of the 1990s, many of the 1980s generational concerns regarding the social, political and economic directions the country was taking were still being felt. The most important of these were the effects of the 80s on the traditional American family, still struggling against ever growing rates of divorce since the 1960s. Unlike *Parenthood*, in *Falling Down* (1993) there is a new family structure posited and the strains of post-marital tension are introduced by a family of divorced parents. Furthermore, this new domestic situation has led to the break up of a child's bond with her father, aggravated by his problems of psychological adjustment to the new situation. Child custody, child support and legal rights of access to home and children are introduced as a new harsh daily reality.

Director Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* is in fact a cast-driven film centred on a single main character played by Michael Douglas, an actor who made his filmic reputation in films that focus on putting 'man against woman'. 'Love / hate relationships' are at the core of some of his best known films of the 1980s. Son of famous Hollywood actor Kirk Douglas, Michael Douglas grew up among a broken family. Later in life Michael himself also experienced a failed marriage by separating from and then later legally divorcing his first wife, Diandra Luker in June 2000. Therefore, the actor had established a reputation as a Hollywood womaniser known for his distant paternal relationship with his eldest son Cameron; as asserted by his ex-wife and quoted in Michael Douglas's Internet Movie Database mini-biography written by James Briggs, the actor was not "a proper father to Cameron". Thus, this distance from the family arena allowed Douglas to maintain his Hollywood lifestyle. So, for a certain period of time Michael Douglas was known to be an absent father in real life. Moreover, the actor's image on film throughout the 1980s was that of an errant husband or someone who expressed little respect for women. However, in time and perhaps due to his own ageing, he somewhat settled down into the role of husband to actress Catherine Zeta-Jones, and father to two young children, Dylan Michael and Carys Zeta Douglas.

With romantic action comedy *Romancing of the Stone* (1984), directed by Robert Zemeckis, and its sequel *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985), directed by Lewis Teague (which could be regarded as more comic/romantic versions of Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* films), Michael Douglas, co-starring with both Danny DeVito and Kathleen Turner, tried

to broaden his range as a comedy actor with these sharp, humorous and frantic film narratives. However, the love/hate filmic relationship of Jack Colton (Michael Douglas) with romantic novelist Joan Wilder (Kathleen Turner), as well as Jack's ability to show his virility and always come out a winner, were in fact one of the main keys to both films' success. Nonetheless, it was precisely in the late 1980s that Michael Douglas became one of the decade's most prominent actors in roles centred in depicting current social issues, like in director Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) in which the actor, as Gordon Gekko, attempts to sell the idea that 'Greed is good' and that the world of deceitfulness, questionable business deals, fast money and fast women, was one to be envied. Douglas stood as a symbol of virility at bay or exposed to temptation, that is, the American male succumbing to corruption, or trying to push himself back from the brink of it. As Michael Douglas takes the lead, co-star Charlie Sheen plays a young ambitious broker trying to penetrate the world of illegal practices, while fictional, as well as real life father Martin Sheen plays Gekko's opposite as an incorruptible working class hero. In fact, Gekko, as a villain, engages in much of what the 1980s culture became known for. A decade dedicated to hostile takeovers, buyouts and mega-mergers that paved the way for new billionaires, like Michael Robert Milken, nicknamed "The Junk Bond King" due to finance-related criminal charges, and property speculator Donald Trump. What's more, in 1987 Michael Douglas also starred in director Adrian Lyne's film *Fatal Attraction* playing a married New York attorney, Dan Gallagher who puts his ordinary but stable family life in jeopardy for a secret weekend love affair with his *femme fatale* colleague Alex (Glenn Close). However, Alex becomes a serious threat to his family, as she tries to coerce him into leaving his wife. As a consequence, violence, hate and love are at the core of this 1980s film, with Michael Douglas portrayed as an adulterous husband and an irresponsible family father. It's not difficult to see that the film, with its highlighted perils of the "one-night-stand", introduces an AIDS subtext as well.

Later in 1989 in *The War of the Roses*, directed by Danny DeVito, Michael Douglas is reunited with actress Turner and DeVito in a dark comedy about the end of marriage, as well as the legal intricacies of divorce. Again love and hate appear as filmic partners in this tale of bitter break up of marriage and family. A remarkable film, it is one of few Hollywood comedies to really push at the boundaries of marital malice and dissolution. Furthermore, in 1992 Douglas starred in director Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* with

*femme fatal* actress Sharon Stone, where sex and violence come into view as the film's main concerns, since the actor plays a single man and not a family man. Later, the actor played Tom Sanders, against another well-known *femme fatal*, actress Demi Moore, in director Barry Levinson's film *Disclosure* (1994), which carries male hysteria about female treachery from the bedroom to the work-place. There is nearly always an element of kinky pathology in the Douglas film persona. It appears he is drawn to sleazy encounters. In 1993 the character Bill Foster (Michael Douglas) appeared in *Falling Down*, a film that exposes not only the difficulties of family life after divorce, but also the economic and social controversies the 1980s have bequeathed to the years following.

In Schumacher's *Falling Down*, as I said before, Michael Douglas plays Bill Foster, denominated by other characters throughout the film by the name on his personalised vehicle license plate, D-Fens, revealed at the beginning of the film. Actually, it is half way through the film that the audience learns that he is a laid-off defence engineer who used to work for a military defence-related contractor and manufacturer. Hence, the personalised license plate owner is symbolically 'D-Fens', perhaps meaning self-defence. From a right wing point of view, since the end of the Cold War those who had worked to defend America from the communist threat had had their primary function superseded and were therefore callously dispensed with. In other words people like Bill have become a burden to a country no longer in need of defence workers, because in time of peace (or rather uncontested American hegemony) they have become obsolete.

Having had a frustrating and emotionally draining day and finding himself in the middle of an endless traffic jam on an extremely hot summer day in Los Angeles, Bill becomes infuriated to the point of leaving his car and setting off on foot, abandoning his sole protective shield from an angry society. Thus, the film deals with one man (Douglas) starting a long journey home through the streets of Los Angeles, in order to get to his daughter's birthday party at his estranged ex-wife's house. As an unemployed father, Bill is not even able to pay child support and help raise his daughter. In addition, his former wife, Beth (Barbara Hershey), has acquired a restraining order so as to keep him away from her household, which has made it against the law for him to come near her or their daughter, Adele (Joey Hope Singer).

Family structural realities have gone through various changes in the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to improved incomes, available housing, changes in social

acceptance of new attitudes (including toward illegitimate births), but above all the rise in divorce rates from the 1960s to the 1980s. As a consequence, divorce has become an issue of natural concern for everyone, as well as subject for Hollywood film production schedules. As mentioned earlier, in *Falling Down*, Bill is the self-styled head of a broken family unit, therefore the cohesion of the extended and nuclear family portrayed and reinforced in *Parenthood* has been eroded and replaced by division. In fact, Bill's ex-wife calls the police and describes Bill as being extremely prone to violence as she states "he has this horrendous temper", which leads the audience to conjecture that this aspect of his behaviour is this couple's main reason for divorce, given the ex-wife's frantic and fearful attitude towards Bill's possible arrival at her house.

Throughout his journey Bill makes what appear to be all the wrong decisions and according to Gillian Helfield, "In order to identify 'good' we must be able to identify 'evil'" (67), which are concepts that involve boundaries the instructing in which is traditionally the responsibility of parents. Nonetheless, Bill is an absentee father and in spite of him striving to do better, his efforts appear misdirected, and after committing murder there is no turning back for him, as the image of an angry vigilante replaces the initial portrayal of the desperate but loving father. In fact, Bill appears to drift away from ever regaining his role of proper father, due to his aggressive behaviour. Notwithstanding, the survival of the family in itself, regardless of its structure, seems to remain of paramount importance to American society. The trend of marital dissolution has received much attention and emerging flexible family structures have been the cause of concern, not only due to what they tell us about the state of male/female relations, but also because of the effect on the children of broken up homes.

With the city of Los Angeles in the background, Bill Foster's family life and his anxious concern for his daughter's birthday become secondary when compared to the social, political and economic issues which when put together give cause for Bill's emotional collapse. Thus, according to Andrew Light, "the breakdown of the antihero [Bill] at the heart of the film, an unemployed defence worker, is parasitic on a depiction of Los Angeles as [a kind] of wilderness" (14). In addition, as a film released in early 1993 it is confronted with a society mired in controversial racial issues, due to the relatively recent outbreak of that which became known as the Rodney King riots. In "Boyz in the Woods:

Los Angeles as Urban Wilderness” author Andrew Light provides his own testimony of those events:

I will never forget the moment I found out about them [the riots]. It was the evening of April 29, 1992 ... the night the riots broke out, I was in the middle of a lecture when a friend of mine ... Julia Pazzi, came to the classroom to get my attention ... Julia, looking stunned, said simply, ‘Los Angeles is burning,’ it had been a bit over a year since we had all seen the infamous footage of Rodney King, a twenty-five-year-old African American, being beat mercilessly by several members of the Los Angeles Police Department. An already racially divided city and region became even more divided as what many had long suspected was common police brutality toward minority residents was finally caught on tape by a plumbing company manager named George Holliday. After a long and caustic trial in Simi Valley, a suburban community north of the city, we had learned that evening that the jury had finally reached a verdict: The four officers accused of using excessive force in the beating of King were acquitted and would be let free. That evening, the riots, or as some would call them, ‘the uprising,’ began. Before the night was over, the city would see the worst urban disturbance it had experienced since the 1965 Watts riots. Motorists were taken from their cars and beaten, shops were looted, and an angry crowd gathered in front of the L. A. P. D. headquarters. The chaos would go on for days, the cleanup weeks, and the punditry for months. (79)

Hence, when *Falling Down* was released the social turmoil was still affecting Los Angeles and the film’s attempt to discuss the terms of a more egalitarian society fell into the controversy thus aroused, and for many seemed only to depict the false consciousness surrounding the deep division between enemy and victim, the White and the African American, and which is which. Moreover, *Falling Down* deals with the background of spatial politics and racial segregation that helped create the conditions for the uprising. Commenting on Mike Davis’s published book on Los Angeles *City of Quartz* (1992), Andrew Light argues that:

It did go further than almost anything else ... to explain the racial segregation of the city and the history of spatial politics that had created a place that was not so much a single entity (the city of Los Angeles) as it was several balkanized neighbourhoods whose borders were designed so as not to be easily crossed. Though certainly not providing anything by

way of a comprehensive explanation for the riots, Davis did make a good case that the spatial and racial divisions of L.A. had helped to create a city ripe for burning (again), so long as the right match came along to ignite it. It could have been the King incident or it could have been something else. Los Angeles was a siege city, dividing parts of the population against one another. When the top blew off, for whatever reason, the community would consume itself. (81)

Accordingly, in the same way that an entire community lost control over its own rationality, so Bill Foster in *Falling Down* started exteriorising his frustrations through violent and psychotic behaviour towards everyone and everything that crossed his path.

Michael Douglas walks through the entire film as its protagonist, and slowly unveils Bill's aggravations, concerns and anger about political, economical and social decisions made by various Republican administrations, and especially about America as a country of false promises. In a *Sight & Sound* film review, Cynthia Rose argues, "Douglas and director Joel Schumacher seize any credit for handling issues of moment. They clearly wanted to make a *Taxi Driver* for the 90s, to update the toll of urban stress on the 'working man's psyche" (53), and to a certain extent they were quite successful for there are several possible parallels to be made between *Falling Down* and *Taxi Driver* (1976). In director Martin Scorsese and screenwriter Paul Schrader's film *Taxi Driver*, actor Robert De Niro plays ex-marine Travis Bickle who has become a taxi driver in order to work long hours, since he suffers from insomnia. Moreover, Travis's psyche is depicted to be complex and he decides to keep his distance and observe society. He chooses individualism over community interaction and creates his own private world, a situation which he endures by drinking, taking medication, working long hours, and living apart even from his parents, whom he lies to in a 'Happy Anniversary' card, writing that he is doing "sensitive work for the government." In fact, Travis appears shunned by the world and as an outsider he observes with contempt those who surround him: "All the animals come out at night! ... Someday the rain will come and wash the scum off the streets," he intones in voice-over. Travis goes as far as to judge society as wholly degraded and does not get involved: "I don't follow political issues that closely ... I don't follow music too much ... I don't know much about movies," he says. However, his withdrawal and passivity comes to an end and he revolts against the state of things starting by carrying several guns and trying to get Iris

(Jodie Foster) to leave her job as a prostitute and go back to her family. Travis makes his own revolutionary monologue:

I've got to get in shape. Too much abuse has gone on for too long. From now on there will be fifty push-ups each morning. There will be no more pills. There will be no more bad food, no more destroyers of my body. From now on there will be total organization, every muscle must be tight.

Travis 'cleans' his body the same way his mind wishes society to be rid of all its scum. Travis states: "Listen you fuckers, you screw heads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit. Here is someone who stood up! Here is ... you're dead!" In this way, Travis's personal regime and manifesto for a moral order just degenerate into inarticulate violence. The personal and the public merge uncontrollably, as they do with Bill Foster.

In his white shirt and tie, Bill is a white man with the single purpose of getting back with his family, in order to be with his daughter on her birthday, whether he is allowed to or not. However, Bill is violently confronted by many of Los Angeles' social realities, those that his car separates him off from. Bill walks into a convenience store and calmly asking for some change in order to use the payphone, but the Korean storekeeper, Mr Lee (Michael Paul Chan), brushes him off demanding the purchase of an item. Once Bill picks up a canned soda he realises he would not have enough for the phone because the soda is so expensive. At this point the elevated prices charged in the store wind him up into a state of indignation, which leads Bill to demand being charged only the price of the product before inflation set in. Taking a baseball bat from the owner's hands, Bill destroys part of the store and argues with the Korean (a heightened awareness of Korean storekeepers was an outgrowth of the Rodney King Riots), "You come into my country, take my money and don't even have the decency to speak the language. Do you have any idea how much money my country has given your country?" At this time Mr Lee begs Bill to leave the store and treats him as a common thief, which makes his blood boil and shout, "You think I'm a thief ... You're the thief. I'm standing up for my rights as a consumer." According to Bill, anger making him prone to regressing back to a happier past, everything has become too expensive and prices should go back to those charged in the mid 1960s. The Korean storekeeper, having been forced to agree with charging Bill only fifty cents for the soda,

which was its old price, is paid that same amount, for Bill only takes his exact change from the register. After that, Bill walks out of the establishment carrying the soda and his briefcase, not to mention Mr Lee's baseball bat.

The use of the baseball bat to cause destruction can be traced back to *Taxi Driver's* scene of the convenience store robbery. Nevertheless, in *Taxi Driver* the thief is a black young man and Travis is not the causer of destruction but the one who prevents the robbery by shooting the perpetrator. On the other hand, in that film the shopkeeper is left irrationally beating the black man's inanimate body with a baseball bat. In addition, in *Taxi Driver* Wizard (Peter Boyle) precisely defines what appears to have led Bill Foster to breakdown, his distress at having been laid-off. According to Wizard, "A man takes a job and it becomes what he is. You do a thing and that's what you are ... you become the job." So, having lost his family and then his job, Bill rebels against society, for he has had taken away the last thing that gave him a sheltered sense of himself.

Bill's destructive behaviour defines him as an antihero, contrasted with the character of Prendergast, a middle-aged police detective on his last day of work, played by actor Robert Duvall, who helps to re-establish some semblance of balance in the film. Prendergast's family problems are also presented at an early stage of the film with a simple telephone call from his wife, Mrs Prendergast (Tuesday Weld) who is extremely agitated and anxious to move away from the city and its dangers. In fact, it is due to her emotional instability and personal fears that Prendergast has accepted a desk job away from the streets of Los Angeles. In order to calm down his hysterical wife on the phone, Prendergast sings to her *London Bridge is Falling Down* and consequently unveils the film's theme of urban collapse, as well as the probable origin of its title. That is to say, the song hints at the film's attempt to deal with the fact that white America's social fabric, which things like the family, the rule of law, home security, male hegemony, stable employment, and racial harmony are integral parts of, is falling apart.

Prendergast's nuclear family has suffered a great loss, the death of his daughter, which has triggered his wife's emotional fragility and her demand that he take a desk job mentioned previously, in order that she avoid facing further violent or even life-threatening situations. Bill, on the other hand, has not come to terms with the break up of his family and continues on his quest to return home, a home no longer his. After the convenience store incident, Bill sits down to rest and drink his soda, but with the city of Los Angeles in

the background he is approached by two Latino gang members who get into a territorial disagreement with him, claiming he is sitting on a rock marked with a graffiti symbol as part of their home turf. Bill answers, "If you wrote it in fucking English, maybe I could fucking understand it. Are we having a territorial dispute? I wouldn't want you in my back yard either. This is your home and I respect that." However, the argument does not end there, for Bill ends up having his life threatened by a knife and being asked to hand over his briefcase. Bill defends himself and injures both his attackers by hitting them with the baseball bat he took from the convenience store. As his assailants run away amazed by his ferocity, he strongly declares, "I'm going home. Clear the path, you motherfucker. I'm going home." Bill then picks up the knife left on the ground by the two men and carries on towards the city centre. As much as Michael Douglas tries to make these short statements about his status as father and his fierce determination to go home despite all obstacles, it becomes quite obvious that the territorial altercation is not between a defenceless father and two teenage gang members. In effect, it is a violent confrontation of one (increasingly heavily armed) white man fighting against all other racial ethnicities, in Bill's case Latinos and the Asian in the convenience store, who are portrayed as having taken over his beloved country and Americans' jobs.

Yet again the film focuses on controversy between individuals struggling to stand apart from community, refusing to accept social interaction as a basic human need. The territorial division and segregation depicted in *Falling Down* leads audiences to understand America as a land of victims and enemies. Nonetheless, the film continues to court controversy, as Bill appears to position himself as both a victim of circumstances, but also an enemy of American community life. Bill has stated he is merely standing up for his rights, but he does it so violently as if to expose to the world that the American white man is being robbed blind of his rights as a breadwinner and citizen. Also as a contributing member of a democratic society, he is simply taking back what is rightfully his. On the other hand, Prendergast also represents a weakened and frustrated family man, which are precisely the elements that make him so similar to Bill. Since he has a profession that grants him the status of power, it is up to him to go about re-establishing balance in his family and professional life in a manner that is quite different from Bill. As a member of an older generation, Prendergast comes to represent the generational wisdom of a father opposing a son, Bill, and as such balance is restored in Prendergast's life mainly due to his

decision to remain a law enforcement officer and deal with his wife calmly despite her disturbing behaviour. It does in fact appear that if Prendergast wishes his marriage to work, he must resign himself to putting up with his neurotic wife. In ideological terms, Prendergast balances out Bill's male neurosis.

Bill finally manages to call his ex-wife and asks to come home, announcing he is on his way to Adele's party, but Beth heatedly answers, "This isn't your home any more." Bill feels crushed and frustrated as a family man but once again his personal distress is matched or drowned out by the violence of the city of Los Angeles. Thus, portrayed as a city under siege Bill becomes the main target of a drive-by shooting, work of the Latino gang of which his two assailants are members. However, the gang ends up in a car accident and shooting other people but not Bill, who goes over to the wrecked car, picks up a sports bag full of weapons and states, "You missed! Take some shooting lessons, asshole." He continues to walk the streets of Los Angeles and the camera focuses on the misery, the homeless and the side of a bus with a poster of a child crying. What really stands out in that image are the words "I love you daddy." Once more the film tries to direct the audience's attention to the reality of the streets of Los Angeles, but also links it to Bill's life and the conditions of a father living away from home and his daughter.

*Falling Down* depicts a world of contradictory behaviour within the City of Angels. Therefore, while Bill walks through a park, the audience is given a small montage of the



Figure 3.1 – Bill in his white shirt and tie. (From: *Falling Down* DVD cover Package Design 2000 Warner Home Video (UK) Ltd. All Rights Reserved.)

life of the underprivileged in Los Angeles, contrasted with shots of smiling children playing. One is able to witness the life of homeless people, to see the police breaking up street fights and beggars with posters announcing their condition as victims of the HIV virus. Furthermore, the social break up of the city is made clearer when after having heard Mr Lee, describing the man who trashed his convenience store as "a white man in a white shirt and tie" (Figure 3.1), Prendergast

also hears Angelina (Karina Arroyave), one of the gang member's girlfriend, giving the exact same description of the man the gang was after, and finally makes the connection wondering what a 'white shirt' is doing in Gangland.

In addition, with a bag full of weapons Bill walks into

a fast food restaurant, Whammyburger, and reveals his psychotic breakdown after being refused breakfast for they stopped serving it four minutes earlier. So, due to his psychotic and unstable behaviour, Bill has another outburst and pulls out a gun, changes his mind, asks for lunch and does not forget to pay for it. However, the film takes this opportunity to criticise the treacherous and artful nature of U.S. capitalism, since as a consumer Bill is yet again irritated by the fact that the burger sold is nothing like the advert picture of it: “What is wrong with this picture?” he says. Thus, the event at the Whammyburger restaurant provides the film with a chance to expose the controversy behind capitalism’s failure to meet its advertised goals of honest dealing and equal access to prosperity. Moreover, as Bill witnesses a one-man protest (Vondie Curtis-Hall) in front of the Golden State Savings and Loan, “Seven years I worked for this bank and when I asked for a loan it was denied”, for the man was considered “not economically viable.” Here, the film offers a further critique of the failure of capitalism and uses the Savings and Loan scandal of the Reagan years, echoing on into the Bush years, to do it. The film depicts the economic inequalities the country was registering at the time. The rich kept getting richer and the poor poorer, leading to a clear separation between the haves and the have-nots that is brutally apparent. Bill identifies himself with the protesting man, who actually ends up being arrested. However, Bill is in fact a more extreme case. He has become neither socially, nor economically, nor legally viable.

As Prendergast and Sandra (Rachel Ticotin) go to Bill’s mother’s (Lois Smith) house and learn of his jobless and violent character, Bill crosses a golf course and is insulted by a rich member playing golf, but when Bill pulls out a shotgun and destroys his golf cart, the man is so scared he has a heart attack. With this attitude Bill is bringing a bit of ghetto gun culture into the rich and privileged part of the city, but obviously the rich part of the city is not ready to be confronted with the other side of the reality of social segregation they have helped create.

Furthermore, in order to reinforce the controversial issue of class separation, Bill comes across a plastic surgeon’s house and witnesses the caretaker (John Diehl), his wife (Amy Morton) and daughter (Abbey Barthel) having a barbecue by the swimming pool. Bill is very surprised to learn about the house owner’s occupation and states, “Plastic surgery bought all this?” At this moment Bill, seeing the happiness of the caretaker’s

family, decides to tell his own story and how much he misses his family life as it was before the divorce, revealing a sense of self-pity for his present condition:

I lost my job. Actually, I didn't lose it, it lost me. I'm over-educated, underskilled. Maybe it's the other way around, I forget. I'm obsolete. I'm not economically viable. I can't even support my own kid. You think I want to hurt your family? I have a family of my own. You don't believe me? That's where I'm going. I'm going home to see my family. It's my little girl's birthday today. We were going to have a barbecue like you guys, she was going to play outside, my wife would hold my hand and talk about grown up things. And then when it got dark we were going to sleep together. We would all sleep together in the dark. And everything ... would be just like it was before.

When Bill finally gets to his ex-wife's house in Venice, it is empty for she and Adele have left through the back door. Bill sits in the living room watching old family videos and feeling sorry for himself and the life he has lost. Simultaneously, Prendergast decides to go to Venice and arrest him. Bill runs to the Venice beach pier because he remembers it was always Beth's favourite place and he believes his family might be there. Eventually, they do meet up and Bill holds Adele, regretting not seeing her grow up. Suddenly Prendergast appears and enters the scene, while a police car shows up and Beth takes the gun away from Bill, allowing Prendergast to make his arrest. However, Bill shows he is appalled and expresses his surprise, "I'm the bad guy? How did that happen? I did everything they told me to. Did you know I build missiles? I helped to protect America. You should be rewarded for that. Instead they give it to plastic surgeons. You know, they lied to me." Calmly, and speaking from generational experience, as a father who tries to give some advice to a son, Prendergast replies, "They lie to everybody. But that doesn't give you any special right to do what you did today. The only thing that makes you special is that little girl [Adele]. Now let's go. Let's go!" Nevertheless, Bill does not plan to go to jail and he coolly asserts, "I've got lots of guns. You want to draw? It's perfect ... my little girl can get the insurance." In truth Bill only has a toy gun in his pocket but Prendergast is forced to shoot him.

As mentioned previously, *Falling Down* and *Taxi Driver* have a lot in common but while Bill Foster is depicted as an anti-hero, Travis Bickle is ironically declared a true hero. In *Taxi Driver* newspaper clippings read: "Taxi Driver Battles Gangsters," "Parents

Express shock, Gratitude,” and “Taxi Driver Hero to Recover,” therefore by trying to force Iris to reunite with her parents Travis becomes a hero for the Steensma family who write:

You are a hero around this household ... [Iris] is back in school but the transition has been very hard for her ... but we are taking steps to see she has never cause to runaway again. In conclusion, Mrs Steensma and I would like to thank you again from the bottom of our hearts ... our deepest thanks Burt and Ivy Steensma.

In contrast, Bill’s wish to be reunited with his own family is deemed impossible and his only path towards paternal redemption is to get himself killed, in order for his child to receive the money from his life insurance.

Bill’s journey, in the end, is reduced to a question of money and despite the film’s attempt to give family life central attention, Bill falls willingly to his death the moment he realises his life’s work had been a big old lie. Thus, the deconstruction of one man’s belief in his country determined his tragic end and in this respect, as a social problem melodrama, *Falling Down* manages to be quite successful, in my view. However, the audience’s response to the film at a time when the echoes of the Rodney King riots were still present was to a certain extent negative, or at least box office returns were not remarkable. The film’s bald assertion of Bill’s alienation from multicultural enterprise America was too strident, too uncomfortable for an audience acclimatised to apolitical fantasies. Director Schumacher and screenwriter Ebbe Roe Smith were harshly criticised for these extreme ideas of white male victimisation. In atonement, in 1996 Schumacher directed the film *A Time to Kill*, adapted for the screen from John Grisham’s first novel by Akiva Goldsman. The film is a courtroom drama that comes across as apologetic over the white vigilantism of *Falling Down*, since this time violent justice is meted out by a black father, Carl Lee (Samuel L. Jackson) in defence of his raped daughter, by shooting the white rapists in front of several witnesses. Moreover, Carl Lee is defended by southern white lawyer Jake Brigance (Mathew McConaughey) and an idealistic law student played by actress Sandra Bullock, who eventually get a “not guilty” verdict for Carl Lee. At first, legally speaking they appear to have no case, but the words spoken to the jury, “Now, imagine she [the raped girl] is white!” make all the difference and the film gets away with its apologia for vigilantism, as well as social segregation, in spite of the film’s final scenes depicting a

possible closeness between Jake and Carl Lee's families, through the introduction of their daughters to one another.

Both Bill Foster and Car Lee act as vigilantes of different races, but while one is redeemed only in death because he has become not socially, economically and legally viable, the other attains redemption in life as a jury whose emotions are shamelessly appealed to understand him and to forgive him for his actions. In this sense, three years after the release of *Falling Down*, director Joel Schumacher takes part in a project that consists of an apologia for his previous ethnic insensitivity in respect of the social and racial upheaval of the early 1990s. In fact, these are the acceptable racial identity policies of a Hollywood, which has never been noted for its social courage in the face of hard decisions or controversial issues.

## 2. The Betrayal of War Vets and Cold War Casualties

Author Andrew Light has defended the idea that, “Movies have an astounding amount of power to shape popular discussion and popular opinion on important moral and social issues of the day ... [given that] they do inform our understanding of them and help to shape our interpretation of [current] events and eventually our response to them” (83). On the other hand, Richard Maltby argues that:

[In order] to avoid offending anyone’s political beliefs, politics is trivialized, reduced to the need for occasional individual action to regulate an essentially good, smoothly functioning process by pointing out flaws in the form of bad individuals and sometimes bad organizations like gangs, machines and corporations. [Moreover] the political subject matter must be dramatized in some way to make it palatable for the audience. (277)

Contradictory as it may seem, both statements can find support in screenwriter Ebbe Roe Smith’s film *Falling Down*, for as Bill Foster makes his way through the streets of Los Angeles, the audience is persistently led to believe his actions are the consequence of some sort of emotional stress or mental breakdown. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier on, he is in fact giving voice to some of the social order’s deepest failings regarding the economy, politics and social segregation. Therefore, *Falling Down* depicts much more than just the straightforward story of “an ordinary man at war with the everyday world” as it is advertised as being on the film’s DVD cover. The film deals with both socially controversial issues and Bill’s personal pathology. Moreover, the film allows audiences to empathise with the developing tragedy by dramatising a day in the life of a white-collar worker fighting against daily aggravations and inner conflicts. According to Joseph Sartelle, films such as *Falling Down* can be understood as one of many “white male paranoia fantasies”:

By the end of the 1980s, a number of critics were arguing that American Culture in general had become characterized by a fetishization of the victim ... Since white males could not credibly claim victim status by virtue of race, ethnicity, or gender ... disability films offered one way in which white males could be imagined as a victimized group. The relatively benign versions of a group of films which might collectively be called ‘white

male paranoia fantasies' ... examples include the series of back-to-Vietnam movies from the mid-1980s like *Rambo*, *Missing in Action*, and *Uncommon Valor*, as well as films as diverse as *RoboCop* (1987), *Die Hard* (1988), *Falling Down* (1993), and *Jurassic Park* (1993) ... these ... movies ... sought in various ways to present the normative white male as himself a victim ... these films featured a white male hero who overcomes terrible villains and circumstances. But unlike earlier heroes the protagonist of the white male paranoia fantasy must spend most of the movie enduring horrible physical and psychological punishment. (522)

Labelled a crime melodrama, *Falling Down* offers a version of Los Angeles by depicting crime scenes, showing a variety of lethal weaponry, portraying moments of extreme violence, as well as comments on America's social, economical and political status. According to Steve Neale in *Genre and Hollywood*:

The terms 'melodrama' and 'melodramatic' mean at the time the films were made: ... crime, guns and violence; they meant heroines in peril; they meant action, tension and suspense; and they meant villains, villains who in 'cheap melodrama,' at any rate, could masquerade as 'apparently harmless' fellows, thus thwarting the hero, evading justice, and sustaining suspense until the last minute. (179)

The film blends melodramatic elements of Bill's emotional ups and downs with crime, adding to the complexity of the intrigue. *Falling Down* can also be regarded as a performance-oriented social problem film and Steve Neale quotes author Marcia Landy who argues that "the social problem film was directed toward the dramatization of topical social issues – ... juvenile delinquency, poverty, marital conflict, family tension, and, to a lesser degree, racism" (113). In fact, *Falling Down* can read as a tragic melodrama/social problem film for it attempts to reflect upon inner disenchantment and the fragmentation of one man, the antihero, whose sad fate is the result of his own negativity and complexity.

Bill is, to a certain extent, reacting against a personal sense of betrayal concerning a country he once worked to defend from communism. Furthermore, Bill comes to represent all white males who supposedly have made this social intervention and now have had enough and decide to react violently against their society. According to Carol Clover's analysis in her *Sight & Sound* article "White Noise":

It goes something like this. The Average White Male is the guy everybody is mad at and wants compensation from – the guy who pays the bills whether he personally deserves to or not and whether he can afford to or not. The Average White Male is surrounded by people who have claimed themselves as his social victims and clamour for entitlement. By women who kick men out of the family and the home and expect child support (put aside for a moment the fact that D-Fens was evidently something of a problem husband and father), and by women who (like Prendergast's wife) play femininity (and feminism) for all it is worth to keep their husband in a state of guilt and control. By Chicano gang members who demand a 'toll' from anyone who chances into those chunks of Los Angeles they have claimed as their own ... By Asian shopkeepers who self-righteously overcharge. By homeless people who bully and lie through their teeth ... By blacks who shout racism whenever they don't get what they want. (The black man picketing the Savings and Loan believes that the phrase used on his loan denial, 'not economically viable', is code for racial discrimination, but it soon becomes clear that D-Fens qualifies for the same designation.). (8-9)

Therefore, Bill is arguably just reacting against the abuse he has suffered and expresses his anger, as well as his self-pity, through acts of random violence. In addition, Bill is the white man raging against the betrayal of the ideological dream all Americans are supposed to embrace, the right for equal treatment, opportunity and home security. According to Bill the rich golfers and most importantly the plastic surgeon have been given all that was once promised to him and other Cold War casualties like him, like preferential treatment, employment opportunities and honesty from the American government: "I'm the bad guy? ... I helped to protect America. You should be rewarded for that. Instead they give it to plastic surgeons." Hence, Bill is a male expressing his resentment regarding his country's betrayal of him and men like him during the post-Cold War period and his loss of an earned privilege, not because he is a born and bred American citizen but more importantly because he is white. In fact, Bill is coming to terms with the factual truth that America's social fabric has become a market. There has been a movement from a system based on rights, duties and their rewards to one based nakedly on economic power.

As Bill wanders through a multi-cultural urban landscape, the character makes several comments regarding the bad shape in which America finds itself in the early 1990s. Bill, as a white male, believes he is acting within norms and in accordance with Joseph

Sartelle's views, "The white man is 'normative' here precisely because he is understood as a victim, not because he represents the American success story, the privilege and security that others wish to achieve" (525). Nonetheless, it is exactly this type of American success story Bill lacks but longs for, so he rages against society because he feels betrayed by an American ideology of equality, justice and honesty. Bill blames America for his inability to reach his goals, which, in his head, has caused him to lose access to his family, regardless of his problematic violent behaviour. Thus, the core of Bill's complaint is about divorce and loss of home life security.

Jobless Bill also lost his power in the workplace within American society during the new post-Cold War period. Moreover, Bill, as a Cold War defence soldier and now post-Cold War casualty, is fighting to regain his place in American society, which has become extremely diverse, violent (Prendergast's mention of Gangland referring to Los Angeles' suburbs) and keeps escaping his comprehension. Los Angeles is depicted as a wild city and this urban environment has tainted its most pure inhabitants. As Liam Kennedy argues:

Los Angeles ... is very much an imperial city, economically and culturally formed by the dynamics of American empire building ... Imperial relations are also evident in the high levels of immigrant population from Mexico and Central America and South East Asia that have increased dramatically in the last twenty-five years. It is a city in which economic and cultural formations are rigidly stratified along racial and class lines. (33)

*Falling Down's* main character expresses social anxieties which have haunted America throughout the early 1990s, that is to say, Bill articulates concerns regarding economic inflation, urban change and social segregation, which have resulted in a society of fragmentation, contradictions, irrationality and ambiguity. Los Angeles has developed into a fractured society, divided ethically, economically and as the film shows even domestically. In fact, as if to suggest the imminent break up of the American family unit, women are introduced in the film as wholly apart from men. I would argue the film tries to point out that both the female and male world are drifting towards survival without mutual support, moving more towards independent single parenting.

According to John Gabriel:

*Falling Down*'s success ... can be partly attributed to the structure of the narrative, built as it is around the mundane, yet seemingly universal, daily frustrations of contemporary urban life. Traffic jams, shops, restaurants, parks, golf courses and 'home' provide ideal settings for Bill to play the role of Mr Ordinary. (134)

Bill does have his ordinary man vulnerable moments and the self-pitying scene where he tells his story to the plastic surgeon's caretaker and his family is definitely one of them, for it allows him "to demonstrate both his protectiveness towards children and commitment to the (white) nuclear family" (Gabriel 137). Nevertheless, after the murder of the Nazi storekeeper, not even his tears and vulnerability will win back lost sympathies and allow him a way back in his lost suburban life. In the end, Bill justifies his actions as those of a patriot trying to attain what is rightfully his, but his obsessive sense of national identity has led him down a tragic path of violence and almost certain death. The film's hypocrisy lies in the fact that Bill's hysteria is the product of multiple factors, like his exploration by the American nation, and the gangs and Asians regarded simply as criminals. There is no attempt to understand them, only to diminish their meaning or importance to the American social fabric. Moreover, this melodrama's ending becomes predictable and even appropriate, because the audience that can never expect to see Bill reunited with his family, regardless of any ambiguous feelings of sympathy they have for him, can at least enjoy his inner conflicts.

Despite all that has been said regarding his pathology, the film defends Bill, and exonerates white middle-class Americans from guilt, including them in the now universal entitlement to victimhood. In contrast, Prendergast, having lost his child, tries to keep his family life together by silently accepting his wife's demands out of pure guilt: "My wife was never cut out for motherhood. She did it all for me. Went through all that pain, lost her figure. All for me. Then the kid went to sleep one night and never woke up. She was two years old. She was a big girl. She was our baby." According to Gabriel, "Whereas the male characters, and Bill in particular, could be thought about independently of their relationships to women, female characters are invariably represented in the film in terms of their subordinate/dependent relationships with men, their traditional role in nuclear families" (145-146). The film does depict women as dependent of their roles as mothers as well as wives, the terrorised ex-wife (Bill's) and the needy wife (Prendergast's). On the

other hand, while Bill has taken a violent stand against his precarious situation, Prendergast on the contrary represents the passive white male resigned to his personal failures and low self-esteem. Prendergast has been beaten down, but he is still more stable than Bill, because he takes an analytical view of his own situation.

The mayhem caused by Bill develops into tragic events, which lead unavoidably to his death. As a divorcee unable to provide for his daughter, Bill is desperate and death is his only escape route to redemption. On the other hand, in *Falling Down* a new beginning is only possible for Prendergast. Bill claims not to be a vigilante, like Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson in many of their films, but his actions speak otherwise. Bill's attitudes might indeed be justified if Los Angeles were to be considered a jungle in which one must fight. The problem is that in leaving his car he actively seeks confrontation. In *Falling Down* Los Angeles is depicted as a wild arena, and violence is Bill's response to it. He is impelled to challenge all that is ruthless and security-threatening. Sci-fi films like *Mad Max* (1979) and *Escape from New York* (1981) use futuristic projection of the dangers and life-threatening situations that can be found due to fragmentation within the urban arena, precisely because it is less controversial to so project them into the future. Andrew Light asserts:

The classical view sees wilderness as something to be feared, an area of waste and desolation inhabited by wild animals, savages, and perhaps even supernatural evil. Here, human society is the standard by which the world is measured, and hence conquest over the nonhuman areas, the wild areas, signals a form of human achievement. (84)

Bill arguably uses violence (baseball bat, guns and missile launcher) to fight off the savages that (according to him) have overrun American society. Furthermore, there is another sort of evil that Bill ends up struggling against, and that is the erroneous administration of the country he once protected, which is unjustly distributing its wealth among the rich. In fact, the actual Cold War may have been a phoney one, but it has created real casualties at home since its outcome has left people's future uncertain and their welfare neglected.

Moreover, there is also a romanticised definition of wilderness, which concerns all that is pure and untainted, keeping a distance from corruption or human intervention. So, "by contrast, in the romantic view wilderness is that form of nature that has remained close

to its 'pristine' state" (Light 84-85). Putting to one side Beth's description of Bill as being unstable and violent, it can be argued that it is Bill who has been corrupted by his surroundings and transformed from his original 'ordinary man' condition into a vigilante.

Typically, a place that is regarded as wild is considered the opposite of all that is civilised. In fact, going back to the film, drive-by shootings, destruction of public and private property (convenience store, golf car) are not civilised actions. However, Hollywood loves the spectacular destruction of property and audiences crave this kind of cathartic violence, which requires little thought, just simple identification with the protagonist. Bill acts on his passionate primitive instincts of hatred and anger, and becomes a wild and uncontrollable threat to all that cross his path. Andrew Light goes on to assert:

On the classical understanding of wilderness, it is a place that is marked as the realm of the savage, who, in addition to other things, is thought to be distinct from the civilized human in terms of his rational faculties. The savage is that which civilized people are not. Part of what makes civilized people not savage on this view is our possession of reason or control over our passions. (85)

Thus, once Bill loses control over his frustrations and inner rage he mutates into a true wild unhealthy savage, acting solely as only an irrational human being would, with no control over his most primitive passions.

As a strong believer in his profession and country, Bill is at one level a victim of the end of the Cold War period, for America's greatest enemy has been defeated. In that sense, the Cold War could be regarded as a real war with real casualties, since as a consequence of the post-war peace a man like Bill is no longer needed to work on defending his country. Moreover, as a victim of circumstances, while crossing the city on foot, Bill enters gangland and is then out of his white collar physical environment. Therefore, the inner city separation is evident and those regarded as wild and unwanted are living in 'gangland', a fact submissively accepted by every American, even the Los Angeles police department. I argue that the message *Falling Down* appears to be trying to get across to the public is that in order to keep corruption and immorality from taking over what is left of honest hardworking American citizens, the partition of the city is essential. In order to get back a more idyllic America or for America to remain at all civil, these communities must be kept apart. Both Reagan and Bush Sr. went along with policies

supporting an ideology of harmony, unity and integration, but the practice was of separation and distance. The intention might have been to offer people more choice, but people could only choose within existing economic constraints (which increased under their stewardship) and they for the most part chose separation.

As Bill realises he has been walking across the city with a hole in his right shoe, he enters a Surplus store and gets a new pair of boots, while witnessing the owner (Frederic Forrest) insulting two homosexual customers (Peter Radon and Spencer Rochfort). Later the owner protects Bill from Sandra, as the police detective tries to track down Bill. The owner recognises Bill as the white man going around the city with lots of guns, whose description is being spread through police radios. In fact, the owner is convinced that Bill is a vigilante soldier in defence of white power and supremacy, therefore he sympathises with this and identifies with Bill for he is a follower of Nazi ideals, “We’re the same”, to which Bill replies: “We’re not the same. I’m an American. You’re a sick asshole ... I’m not a vigilante. I’m just trying to get home to my little girl’s birthday. If everyone will stay out of my way then nobody will get hurt ... I am just disagreeing with you. In America we have Freedom of Speech. The right to disagree.” Bill’s speech is specifically defensive of American liberalism and against fascism as an evil of foreign origin. Bill and the owner get into a fight and Bill kills the Nazi storekeeper. After this event Bill calls home and warns his ex-wife he has nothing more to lose: “I’ve passed the point of no return.” It is only when Bill is directly responsible for a man’s death that his way back into the civilised world becomes utterly impossible.

Approached by a beggar claiming to be a war veteran, sleeping in his car and not having eaten in a long time, for he is unemployed, Bill is both insensitive and incoherent by replying: “Get a job!”, since as a war casualty and victim of unemployment himself, he is quite aware of the government’s betrayal of its most loyal servants. While home and family appear to be at the heart of Bill’s breakdown, the fact remains that Bill mutates visually from decent family man to combat soldier prepared for war. Taking this into account, Bill Foster and the character of John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) in *First Blood* (1982) appear to share the predicament of the returning war vet who cannot recognise his country, which in turn does not need or even acknowledge his existence. Therefore, Bill is a Post-Cold War victim as much as Rambo is a Vietnam War casualty, for both are rejected by the country they have worked to defend. Bill Foster is the victim of internalised

rightist ideologies of self-help and patriotism. Therefore, while he is a casualty of “the Reagan policies of hard-edged anticommunism and ‘trickle down’ economics [which] may have seemed overwrought and misguided in a post-cold war, recession era” (Jeffords 155), John Rambo’s rejection by his country forces him to:

Fight ... against a town sheriff who is a Korean War veteran ... [and] is shown to have middle-class concerns and prejudices. He decides that Rambo is a hippie and acts to keep his town ... a quiet and safe place for its citizens. [However] the ease with which Rambo disrupts that quiet and destroys that town are ... evidence that ... the middle-class ethic he [the sheriff] represents are no longer sufficient in a post-Vietnam, New Right world. (Jeffords 79)

Hence, both Bill and Rambo, as returning soldiers, feel displaced and undervalued in their own country.

At one point, Bill comes up to a street worker (Jack Kehoe) and asks: “What’s wrong with the street?” to which the worker replies: “Nothing!” Consequently, Bill concludes that the government is doing unnecessary work on roads in perfect condition, in order to justify inflated budgets and get the same public funding they had the previous year. Once more Douglas’s character discovers national mismanagement of its economical resources, specifically corrupt decisions regarding the use of taxpayers’ money. Thus, in order to express his rage Bill takes matters into his own hands and in an act of pure anarchy he takes out a missile launcher from the sports bag and blows up the entire freeway, and gives the city some real repairs to carry out.

Bill becomes a savage white male driven by frustration, hatred, and emotional instability, abandoning the pretence of being the average 1990s guy he was once before embarking on his wild journey home. Bill’s speech throughout the film also reflects his disappointment as a white American who feels deceived, and decides to react by challenging even mundane and trivial conventions of American society. So, Bill’s external change from a

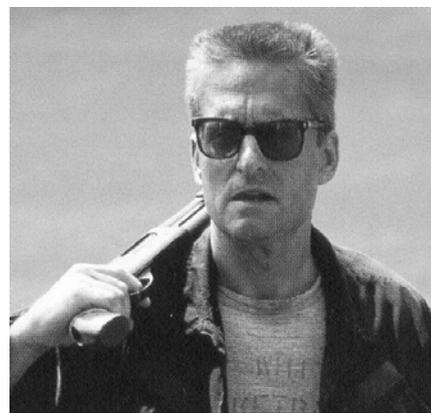


Figure 3.2 – Bill in a black military coat carrying a shotgun. (From: *Falling Down* DVD cover Package Design 2000 Warner Home Video (UK) Ltd. All Rights Reserved.)

white shirt to black military jacket (Figure 3.2) and boots reflects his own personal development and internal mutation caused by his contact with a world of society at war with itself, just as Rambo reverts to Native American visual styles to reflect his fighting oneness with Nature.

Notwithstanding, Bill does confess his regret and sadness regarding the loss of his family, and expresses pity for the loss of his condition as a family man. However, his regrets do not prevent his transformation into an out of control vigilante and an outsider among other white working middle class American citizens.

Referred to as a “Tale of Urban Reality” (DVD cover), *Falling Down* depicts more than a one man’s journey home, for it takes the opportunity to reflect the state of racial intolerance and tension at large in the early 1990s. According to Andrew Light, “it more accurately reflects the prejudices of suburban and rural populations, raised on the myth of urban wilderness, against the cities” (101).

In the end, the antihero Bill faces his better adjusted and more mature counterpart, Prendergast, and they have something in common for both define themselves as fathers, despite being on different sides of the law. While Prendergast wanted fatherhood to be part of his life, despite his wife’s lack of inclination for motherhood, he kept his family together even after his daughter’s tragic death and perhaps even because of it he reflects the image of a good father and husband, who in spite of his individual pain, accepted his loss and remained in touch with reality. On the other hand, Bill’s inability to deal with his divorce and the loss of his job, guides him into a futile fantasy of empowered anger and revenge



Figure 3.3 – Bill’s former happy family. (From: *Falling Down* DVD cover Package Design 2000 Warner Home Video (UK) Ltd. All Rights Reserved.)

that takes place throughout the city of Los Angeles and he never really manages to articulate his personal reasons for doing so. Finally, Bill’s choice to leave his daughter fatherless appears to be the most logical decision. Therefore, given the circumstances, he forces Prendergast to kill him, so his daughter can be financially taken care of by receiving his life insurance.

Apparently, much like Willy Loman’s situation in *Death of a Salesman* (a film version starring Dustin Hoffman was made in 1985

during Reagan's second term), which shows a man *in extremis*, trapped in an anguished existence during hard times pursuing economic stability by hard work, Bill Foster acquiesces in his own death because his country doesn't care about him and he has lost belief in its dream of happiness (Figure 3.3) and prosperity. All in all, if fatherhood does in fact involve a complex process of inner development, along with a sense of perseverance, as well as a need to always do better regardless of the circumstances, divorce, may be, as Prendergast suggests, the loss of a dream - and personal frustrations are not good enough reasons for a child to lose a father. However, capital (in this case, the life insurance money) proves to be more important, and Bill's death becomes his ultimate redemptive act of fatherhood. On the other hand, Bill's apothotic falling into the ocean also stands as a visual metaphor for the collapse of fallible patriarchy. In fact, since Bill has been reduced to a liability, as a father he still has a responsibility toward his offspring. Thus, the film reduces the father merely to his status as *homo economicus* when he is worth more to his daughter dead than alive.

## **Chapter IV**

### ***A Perfect World (1993) and Action Melodrama***

## 1. Childhood and Less-than-perfect Father Figures: The Absent Father

Both *Parenthood* (1993) and *Falling Down* (1993) work to critique the deconstruction of the father figure through their central characters, Gil (Steve Martin) and Bill Foster (Michael Douglas) respectively. However different the contexts such characters have been put in, both these representations of fathers depict a certain kind of male hysteria regarding the father's relationship with his child or children, as well as his place within the American household. While Gil goes through an inner compulsive obsessiveness not to mess up his child with his own behaviour, in the way that he imagines his father did with him, Bill becomes a somewhat-deranged father who storms out of his car in the middle of a Los Angeles traffic jam and goes on a hate rampage exteriorising his frustrations by blaming America for his inability to keep his family together (owing to his divorce), or to provide his daughter with child support.

On the other hand, Clint Eastwood's *A Perfect World* released later on in 1993, constitutes another conservative attack on the state the family unit has arrived at. In this film, there is an absence of any real father figures and the buttressing of the role of the father is accomplished through the implied need for surrogate father and son relationships. Hence, the film's theme is the dire effects of a lack or absence of the father figure. In *A Perfect World* Phillip (T.J. Lowther) is therefore emblematic of the fatherless child such as we find after Bill Foster's fall and symbolic of the absence of parental care such as we find in abundance in Kevin's life. Moreover, the film also shows over-compensation for the distress and problems caused by the fictional fathers to their sons, reinforcing Gil's apprehension regarding the probable negative influence on the child's development into adulthood. In *A Perfect World* there is no room for working through fictional father/son problematic interactions, and the way found for the positive growth and survival of the child appears to be in the replacement mechanism of substitute father figures. Moreover, a parallel substitute mechanism is also needed for fathers lacking sons, in order for the men to make amends for their mistakes and to have someone to pass on their experience to.

*A Perfect World* as an action/adventure melodrama involves two leading male stars from very different generations. According to Clint Eastwood, cited in "Clint Eastwood Stepping Out" by James Verniere, "It's a crime drama that's also about the family unit and

how it has changed” (9). Directed by Eastwood and written for the screen by John Lee Hancock, *A Perfect World* aims to depict unusual surrogate grandfather/father, son/father and grandson/son relationships of male bonding. Having escaped from prison, Butch Haynes (Kevin Costner) and his co-escapee, Terry Pugh (Keith Szarabajka) take hostage a seven-year-old boy, Phillip Perry (T. J. Lowther) on Halloween night in Dallas, Texas in the year, 1963. While being chased by a grizzled Texas Ranger, Red Garnett (Clint Eastwood) (Figure 4.1), both Butch and the boy hostage go through a series of adventures and develop a close relationship, which culminates with Phillip looking up to Butch

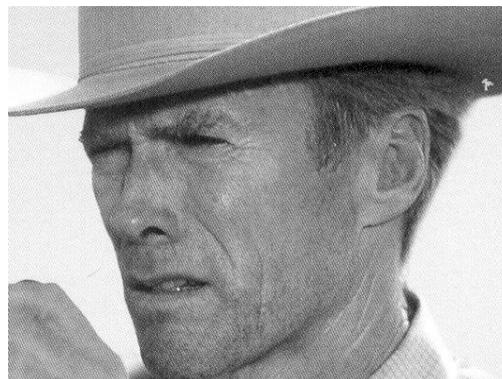


Figure 4.1 – Grizzled Texas Ranger Red Garnett. (From: *A Perfect World* DVD cover Package Design 2002 Warner Home Video (UK) Ltd. All Rights Reserved.)

and perhaps loving him as a son loves a father. On the other hand, travelling in a silver mobile trailer is Red Garnett, reluctantly accompanied by a woman criminal psychologist (Laura Dern), who has in fact met and had the opportunity to treat Butch in prison. Despite his general demeanour as a calm, wise and experienced law enforcer, Red appears troubled and haunted by a conflicting moral sense of guilt and responsibility towards the escapee, the reason for which is revealed only towards the film’s end.

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Clint Eastwood was extremely well known for the embodiment of hard, tough and excessively masculine characters, especially in spaghetti westerns and the famous cycle of Dirty Harry films. The first film of these was entitled *Dirty Harry* in 1971 and was directed by Don Siegel, then followed Ted Post’s *Magnum Force* (1973), in 1976 *The Enforcer* directed by James Fargo, *Sudden Impact* (1983) directed and produced by Clint Eastwood himself and finally director Buddy Van Horn’s *The Dead Pool* was released in 1988, which became the fifth and last of the cycle of successful films that gave life and shape to Inspector Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood), whose .44 Magnum Automatic became an important symbol for masculinity for more than two decades.

Nonetheless, personal and internal contradictions, as well as moral and family concerns, have also played a part in Eastwood’s filmic career in the 1980s, especially with the film *Honkytonk Man* (1982), which the actor also directed, produced and starred in.

The screenplay, written by Clancy Carlile based on his own novel, puts together a real life father and son, playing an uncle (Clint Eastwood) and nephew (Kyle Eastwood), whose relationship develops on an extended road trip. Furthermore, their journey serves the purpose of showing the young boy growing into manhood while the old and drunken musician slowly disintegrates towards his final days. As a road film, it is quite similar to *A Perfect World* in so far as it depicts different generations coming together for their individual and common good, and inner growth. However, unlike the more leisurely *Honkytonk Man*, *A Perfect World* is also a chase film involving action and adventure, as well as crime sequences. Furthermore, the film is also a melodrama and according to Steve Neale in *Genre and Hollywood*, melodrama is generically seen as one of the “areas in Hollywood in which masculinity in general, and ‘virile’ masculinity in particular, has been consistently qualified, questioned, impaired or castrated – unable to realize or express itself in action” (186). However, in *A Perfect World* male characters are able to challenge Neale’s position and assert themselves in the arena of melodrama. In fact, Butch, Red, and eventually Phillip, strongly reaffirm their masculinity despite having to deal with issues like problematic fathers and troubled childhoods. In effect, *A Perfect World* offers a reassessment of masculine strength through characters disabled by inner conflicts and childhood traumas. According to author Susan Jeffords:

Whereas the Reagan years offered the image of a ‘hard body’ to contrast directly to the ‘soft body’ of the Carter years, the late 1980s and the early 1990s saw a reevaluation of that hard body, not for a return to the soft body but for a rearticulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal, and family-oriented values. Both of these predominant models – the hard body and the ‘sensitive family man’ – are overlapping components of the Reagan Revolution, comprising on the one hand a strong militaristic foreign-policy position and on the other hand a domestic regime of an economy and a set of social values dependent on the centrality of fatherhood. (13)

As a film from the early 1990s, *A Perfect World* (1993) is strongly oriented towards an analysis of the family unit and the changes it has gone through, due to a domestic policy since the 1960s presumed to centre on the social marginalisation of masculinity and fatherhood. In fact, James Verniere argues that:

One goes to see Clint to check out the current construction of masculinity in American culture. For over 20 years, arguably since *Dirty Harry*, Eastwood has been the reigning icon of masculinity, a position he inherited from John Wayne ... But unlike Wayne, Eastwood does not only embody masculinity, he is also its analyst and critic. The Eastwood persona is riddled with contradictions, under siege from within and without. The contradictions are not resolved within any single Eastwood film, but are played out across the entire body of his work as actor and director. If *Unforgiven* [1992] is the most fully achieved and severely pessimistic of Eastwood's deconstructions of male violence ... [it also] seemed as much a parable of the end of the cold war as it was a reconsideration of the gunslinger as hero. (10)

Indeed, *Unforgiven* (1992) did mark Clint Eastwood's break with films that regarded violence positively (although not simplistically) as a part of normal everyday life. During the shooting of *A Perfect World* in the following year, Clint Eastwood was already sixty-three years of age and when questioned about his film's beginning to address moral issues Eastwood asserted:

I can't tell you how it happens, but as you get older you tend to get more concerned about the moral issues of society. I'm not talking about violence in movies. That's just entertainment. As I said when *Unforgiven* came out. I wasn't doing any penance for the mayhem in my other films. I suppose it's just a time in my life, and maybe a time in history, when violence shouldn't be so lighthearted or glamorous. Maybe there are consequences to violence, for both the perpetrator and the victim, that are important to address. (Verniere 8)

As a consequence, important moral as well as social issues, in this case the family unit under pressure, are in reality the main concerns dealt with in *A Perfect World*, despite the film's background elements of car chases, crime and violence. In this particular film, Eastwood confuses the boundaries of what constitutes the role of a filmic 'hero' which can no longer be defined by his personal sense of righteousness, power or the enforcement of justice, like in the *Dirty Harry* film cycle, but are now defined by internal conflicts concerning longer term consequences, related both to Red and Butch in *A Perfect World*. The origin of Red's conflict is traced to the fact that he knew Butch when he was still a young offender who stole cars and it was Red himself who was the first police officer to

arrest Butch as a teenager. In fact, it was Red who encouraged the judge to give young Butch a harsher and longer sentence hoping to put him on the right track. However good his intentions might have been, they backfired and it was in juvenile prison that Butch learned how to be a real criminal. On the other hand, Butch's inner conflicts come from his childhood history of parental absence and/or abuse. It is not entirely explicit but in Butch's case, the motherly influence seems to have been inappropriate and the fatherly one largely absent.

As mentioned previously *A Perfect World* is set in Dallas, Texas in the year of 1963, the very week before United States President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's visit mentioned throughout the film via radio broadcast. Furthermore, just before embarking on the making of *A Perfect World*, Clint Eastwood starred in the film *In the Line of Fire* (1993) by director Wolfgang Petersen, as Frank Horrigan (Eastwood), a secret service agent who was on duty in Dallas when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 during his visit. The agent is then confronted with the need to protect the current president from another assassination threat made by the character Mitch Leary (John Malkovich). Eastwood's character, Frank, is tormented by his former failure to protect President Kennedy from the second and fatal bullet. Therefore, Frank Horrigan is an emotionally conflicted character, a bit similar to Red Garnett in *A Perfect World*, but in the latter Clint Eastwood appears as a paternal and protective figure towards Butch and as a grandfather in relation to Phillip, stretching the plot narrative over three different generations and not just across two like in *Honkytonk Man*.

Having had his childhood years marked by the Depression, many of Clint Eastwood's films relate to a conservative concern and love for the state of his country, but in the 1990s perhaps due to his ageing, familial and moral concerns became issues his films no longer sought to escape through his conventional posture as a loner or mythic figure. Eastwood also felt the need to take parts of wise older characters, such as Red Garnett. As a compensatory mechanism, Red attempts to fill in the lack of guidance left in Butch's life due to the absence of his fictional father. On the other hand, Phillip allows Butch to take the place of his own absent father.

As I said before, Clint Eastwood became famous for his hyper-masculine roles in the Dirty Harry cycle films, as well as in innovative spaghetti Westerns, but according to James Monaco:

In the late seventies, the Western fell into decline as an increasingly urbanized America lost its zest for the wide-open spaces ... [but] the long Western drought ... came to an end in the early 1990s with two surprising Oscar winners, Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990), a poor movie but a great project, and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992). These revisionist homages serve as elegies to the genre. (306)

Ironically, both Clint Eastwood and Kevin Costner come together in *A Perfect World*, yet both were cast against their traditional character types, that is to say, Eastwood accepts the sympathetic and rather passive supporting role of Red Garnett due to his age, rather like Prendergast, a concerned onlooker unable to take control of the situation. On the other hand, Kevin Costner plays for the first time an anti-hero, not the pretty boy hero type audiences all over the world had become accustomed to see him play.

Kevin Costner is a well-liked film actor who has built his reputation on hero type roles in many successful films, such as director Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987), *Waterworld* (1995), directed by Kevin Reynolds, and *The Postman* (1997) directed by Kevin Costner himself. Indeed, his persona is not without a strong patriotic association. Costner's national hero type reputation as an actor is specially showcased in films like *Field of Dreams* (1989), directed by Phil Alden Robinson, in which the star plays an Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella (Costner), a family man searching for peace of mind by building a baseball field in the middle of his corn field, so that the spirit of dead American baseball heroes and legends, such as Shoeless Joe Jackson (Ray Liotta) can come and play one more time. Ray (Costner) only manages to ease his pain and be at peace with himself and his life, after being given the chance to play ball with his dead father and introducing him to both his wife and daughter. Therefore, it is within the perfect diamond of a baseball field that Ray's family finally finds its contentment and harmony. Furthermore, baseball as America's all time favourite sport, also suggests that in order for the average American family man to be happy he needs to keep his family together and to love the game. In the film the game is actually a mythologizing fantasy of union and bonding between father and child. In fact, the baseball field itself "condenses male aspirations and self-idealizations; [where] all struggles, father-son or black-white can be levelled" (Bingham 118).

In the following year, Kevin Costner took upon himself to direct, produce and star in *Dances with Wolves* (1990), in which the actor plays Lt. Dunbar, an American Civil War

soldier put in charge of a frontier outpost, where he develops a relationship of friendship and trust with both a wolf and the Sioux Indians. Next, in 1991 Kevin Costner starred in two more films, *JFK* (1991), directed by Oliver Stone, where with a feeling of national duty Jim Garrison (Costner) tries to get to the bottom of the conspiracy behind President Kennedy's assassination. In the same year Costner starred in the successful film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) directed by Kevin Reynolds, in which he plays the role of brave Robin of Lockesley who returns home from the Crusades to a rather Americanised Middle Ages England and finds his country and its people left without its ruler, King Richard 'Lion Heart' (Sean Connery). Hence, it is up to Robin to protect and defend the English people from tyrants (the only ones who actually sound English). Once more, Kevin Costner leads his yankee 'merry men' in protection of his country and its people with a great sense of national duty. Costner went back to the blue-collar world of sports movies in 1996 with *Tin Cup* directed by Ron Shelton, playing Roy 'Tin Cup' McAvoy, a retired golf player with a natural born swing who decides to take part in the American Open to win a woman's affection. Furthermore, in 1999 the perfect diamond baseball cliché returned in *For Love of the Game* directed by Sam Raimi. In this last film Costner plays a veteran forty-year-old baseball pitcher, Billy Chapel who decides to retire after having played the most perfect game of his career once again for the love of a woman, a journalist played by Kelly Preston.

Thus, type-cast in heroic roles, Kevin Costner made a surprising and potentially dangerous career choice by trying something new and playing his first anti-hero in *A Perfect World* as Butch Haynes, a character who while trying to escape the police, especially Texas Ranger Red Garnett, becomes engaged in a perilous but engaging getaway, in the company of seven-year-old Phillip Perry (T. J. Lowther), which becomes a journey of personal and emotional growth and maturity for both of them. Simultaneously, their trip endows Butch with the singular opportunity to give fatherly advice to a young boy, and as a consequence Phillip comes to see in Butch the father figure he never had in his own home. Butch not only becomes Phillip's surrogate father, but also a friend, for both are able to identify in each other's broken homes and bad childhoods a reflection of their own: Phillip questions Butch, "Are you going to shoot me?", but Butch replies, "No. Hell, no. Me and you are friends."

For a short period of time after his kidnapping Phillip finds himself in the company of two very contrasting male specimens, Butch and Terry Pugh. However, Terry's is a short-lived presence in the film, since Butch kills him early on, but he has been of great importance in order to offer a contrast to and analyse Butch's behaviour. Next to Terry's reptilian behaviour, Butch's inner gentility and kindness, despite his criminal past, shine out. Butch only shoots Terry, off screen, in an act of fatherly protection of Philip. Terry mocks and terrorises Phillip with comments regarding Phillip's 'small' sexual organ, leading the boy to doubt his own masculinity, but with such remarks his ultimate intention to molest the boy become quite clear once Terry starts talking about his underwear and maliciously touching him with intent to hurt him. Terry states, "You ain't never shot no gun before. Living with three women [his mother and two sisters], no daddy around. You'll probably go queer, you know that?". Therefore, it falls to Butch to reassure Phillip regarding his manhood by giving him some friendly fatherly advice, asserting, "Let's see. I'll set you straight. Hell, no Phillip. It's a good size for a boy your age!". Thus, with this simple remark Phillip seems quite content and smiles, looking at Butch rather proudly. Moreover, as author Anthony Barker's puts it:

His [Butch's] relative goodness is established in contrast with his escape partner, Terry Pugh, a standard issue movie degenerate at home assaulting women, molesting children and announcing acts of sadistic revenge. Butch Haynes's hostility to Pugh is declared during the jailbreak and he defends various individuals from Pugh before being moved to kill him ... Costner's protective role consists of both executing Pugh (off camera) and reassuring the boy that his organ is (quote) "a good size for a boy your age". (56).

Moreover, while developing a surrogate father/son relationship Butch and Phillip discuss their real fathers. They pretend that the car is their own private time machine, which works as a symbolic device for two people wishing to go back in time and undo or prevent certain events from ever taking place, such as Butch's mother's suicide and his poor relationship with his father or Phillip's father's desertion of him and his mother. On the other hand, travelling in a time machine where Butch is the captain and Phillip the navigator, Butch insists on something odd: "We're time travelling through Texas. We need to find us a Ford. My daddy always drove Fords." Butch finally reveals a certain degree of emotional attachment to his absent father. This against all odds surviving father/son bond

is not only made explicit because of the car trademark (Ford) his father always drove and that he (Butch) went to jail for stealing, but also due to the worn-out and faded postcard with a picture of Alaska his father once sent him and that he treasures dearly, in spite of it betokening his father's near permanent dereliction. The grubby postcard is a defining symbol of paternal absence all the while Butch was growing into manhood. Moreover, Alaska is where Butch claims he is headed, maybe as one last attempt to reconnect with his father and be close to him.

In spite of being named after his father, Phillip is not comfortable or happy talking about him, because he is never present in his life. Butch asks Phillip about his relationship with his father, "You two get along?", "Yes, sir.", Phillip replies. "Do you toss the ball?" (another baseball reminder), "No, sir.", "Why the hell not?", and finally Phillip is forced to answer sadly, "He ain't around really." Nonetheless, Butch tries to cheer Phillip up by stating common traits they share that allow them to become closer: "We're two handsome devils, we both like RC Cola ... and neither of us gotta a daddy worth a dam." At this point, Phillip remembers that his mother always stresses his father will one day be coming back home, but Butch confronts Phillip with the hard but obvious truth, based on his own personal life and experience, "She's lying to you. Pure and simple. He ain't ever coming back. Guys like us we've got to be on our own. Seek foolish destiny. That sort of thing." Male stoicism is one of the things you would expect a Clint Eastwood film to inculcate.

Butch not only gives Phillip some advice on his sexuality and family life, but also



Figure 4.2 –Butch and Phillip's complicity. (From: *A Perfect World* DVD cover Package Design 2002 Warner Home Video (UK) Ltd. All Rights Reserved.)

becomes the parent who actually teaches him how to enjoy himself as a normal child. However, Phillip's wish to be a normal kid and play like any other child is so great he is compelled to steal a Halloween costume, the costume of Casper – the friendly ghost, from Friendly's Store. In addition to that, when confronted with the decision to stay with the police and return to his mother or go with Butch, Phillip chooses his new-

found surrogate father. Phillip's resolution, then forces the audience to agree that Phillip is happier with Butch (Figure 4.2) than at home with his mother and sisters. Butch and Phillip

consider themselves a team, Butch complements Phillip, “You’re a hell of a navigator, Phillip.” And the boy smiles, feeling extremely helpful and important to someone he has grown to look up to. The point is that the censoring world of domestic patriarchy is marked by the denial of the male pleasure principle of adventure, action, endeavour and danger. Perhaps one of the reasons not much blame or rancour attaches to Bill Foster’s ex-wife is that what is at issue is the emotional development of a daughter.

As Butch and Phillip’s relationship becomes more intimate and a sense of trust is established between them, Phillip tells Butch about his limited life, the consequence of his mother’s prohibitions enforced by her chosen religion as a Jehovah’s Witness. When asked if he would like to go Trick’r Treating Phillip sadly replies, “I ain’t allowed. It’s against our religion.”, but Butch insists, “Phillip, I’m asking you. I ain’t asking your mother or Jehovah. Do you want to go Trick’r Treating or not?” and finally Phillip happily agrees, holding Butch’s hand as they go Trick’r Treating as both a sign of trust and claim for affection. So, looking like a father and son they approach a house in order to get some supplies and money, which the woman (Margaret Bowman) gives, frightened by Butch’s gun, but compelled to play along with the spirit of Halloween, and Phillip could not be happier. Besides Halloween, Phillip is also not allowed to celebrate Christmas, go to parties of any kind or celebrate birthdays. However, he has the dream of riding a roller-coaster, which he has only seen in pictures. Therefore, as another act of male father/son bonding Butch ties Phillip to the roof of the car and Phillip pretends to be riding a roller-coaster. Therefore, Butch becomes the sort of fantasy father who appears in Phillip’s life to make all his wishes come true.

Butch becomes the sort of father who offers his child brief moments of joy, instead of rules to be strictly obeyed. In fact, Butch’s attitudes towards Phillip, as Anthony Barker points out, can be compared to a divorced father’s behaviour when spending short periods of time with his children, such as custodial weekends. Given this situation, there is a connection to be made with Clint Eastwood’s personal life as a divorcee and father of seven children. Eastwood is quite familiar with a divorced father’s need to compensate for his absence from his children’s lives, by introducing them to fun activities, like carnivals, roller-coaster rides, cotton-candy and such like. Therefore, Clint Eastwood appears to use his own personal paternal experiences to depict Butch and Phillip’s relationship. Much as in *A Perfect World* Clint Eastwood appears to have transferred aspects of his life as an

absent father onto other filmic projects, such as *True Crime* (1999), directed and produced by Eastwood himself. In this film Eastwood plays investigative reporter Steve Everett, who as a divorced father takes his daughter to the Zoo and rushes the visit by racing the child around, ending up by hurting her because his professional life is more important to him and leaves him little time to spend with his child. Therefore, many of Eastwood's later films appear to be legible in terms of *apologias* from Eastwood, as an absent father, to his own children.

Butch also attempts to teach or pass on some of his life experience to Phillip, for example when he says that Bob Fielder (John M. Jackson), a family man that does not put up a fight when Butch takes his car, is in fact a good man just because of it, "I might have had to shoot him and then where would that family be? Bob is a fine family man. And that's about the best thing a fellow can hope to be." Hence, Butch tries to make Phillip realise and understand the importance of the family and the importance of the father within the family unit, as a person responsible for the life and future of his offspring. However, despite his teachings and knowledge Butch has gone beyond being a family man himself. In *A Perfect World* fathers are made responsible for the legacy they leave their children, which can be material, but here is felt to be more importantly emotional, and could determine whether their future will be harmonious and balanced, or chaotic.

As a male-centred film *A Perfect World* goes through three generations of substitute fathers and sons, trying to overcome the shortcomings of their real fathers. Both Butch Haynes and Phillip Perry had less-than-perfect father figures while growing up, but throughout the film they become partners, friends and most importantly a family. Phillip gets a functioning father for the first time, along with precious advice and several happy and fun memories. On the other hand, Butch is given a son to pass on his personal experience to regarding his own mistakes and failings

(Figure 4.3), as well as the mature development of a friend that is eventually forced to



Figure 4.3 – Butch and Phillip side by side like father and son. (From: *A Perfect World* DVD cover Package Design 2002 Warner Home Video (UK) Ltd. All Rights Reserved.)

shoot him in order to prevent Butch from committing a crime against his nature, murdering Mack (Wayne Dehart) and leaving his family without a male breadwinner. Butch reaches a psychological breaking point due to the aggressive behaviour of the old man towards his perceived wife, Lottie (Mary Alice) and Cleveland (Kevin Woods), the man's son or even grandson (the film is not clear about their familial bond). Thus, the film's climax is reached when Butch's psychotic aggressiveness towards Mack induces Phillip to take control of the scene by shooting him, as a way to cut short his irrational and homicidal intentions, and bring him back to reason.

Throughout the film Red Garnett is a wise but ineffectual substitute father figure in Butch's life. In addition, Red is also the only 'guilty' father figure physically present in the film, since as mentioned previously he was the reason for Butch entering a life of crime, despite his good intentions. In fact, "not until the climax would it be revealed that Red Garnett arrested Butch Haynes as a juvenile, then convinced the judge to throw the book at him to 'save' him from bad influences; the harsh punishment had the reverse effect of triggering a life of crime" (McGilligan 481), thus the origin of Red's inner conflict toward Butch. In fact, Butch's death becomes another reason for Red to blame and doubt himself as he mutters, "I don't know nothing. I don't know a damn thing." And walks away from a Butch who has been slain by an unrelenting FBI agent. Although, he is not directly responsible for Butch's life choices, Red chooses to feel responsible for him. However, Butch's death turns Red's final paternal attempt to protect him into another failed fatherly effort to be of any help to his boy.

## 2. Sampling Female Role Models

*A Perfect World* is an almost entirely male-centred film with strong male characters, which establish bonds of intimacy between them throughout the film. On the other hand, most of the female characters appear to be negatively portrayed in the film, in order to counterpoint the subtle good intentions of the main male characters, Red and Butch. Thus, the balance of both male and female interventions is deliberately played out so as to give the male-centred world the upper hand. With exceptions, like Sally Gerber (Laura Dern) and Eileen, the waitress played by actress Linda Hart, all the women in *A Perfect World* are shown to be inadequate, either for their unattractive physical appearance or most importantly due to their weak, shallow and hysterical attitudes. Moreover, these traits can be associated with the minor influence and importance women have in Clint Eastwood's films in general.

The first female character the audience comes across is Phillip's mother, Gladys Perry (Jennifer Griffin), whose hysterical behaviour while faced with the escaped convicts, Butch and Terry, alerts the neighbours to their presence and consequently leads to her only son's kidnap. Phillip's home is also largely female because, besides his mother, he also has to share the house with his two sisters, Naomi (Leslie Flowers) and Ruth (Belinda Flowers), but no male presence is to be found within the household and this is a fact used by Terry to torment the boy in respect of his manhood. Hence, the female-centred and managed household in which Phillip lives comes to symbolise the origin of Phillip's fears regarding his masculinity and his need for a father figure able to support and help him during his growing up process. Moreover, Gladys's stern character, as well as her extremely authoritarian parenting is revealed as Phillip gradually unveils his inner sadness about having to follow the Jehovah Witness religion and all its austere prohibitions, imposed by his own mother, such as not being able to celebrate Christmas, Halloween or even go to a Carnival or eat cotton-candy. Therefore, as a mother Gladys is portrayed as an unsympathetic female character, due to the imposing of her personal beliefs on Phillip. Gladys does truly seem worried for her son's safety and physical integrity, but she allows herself to be pushed around by everyone, including the Governor (Dennis Letts), who uses her and her family crisis in a political stunt in order to get ahead in the polls during political campaigning. In fact, Phillip appears so emotionally distant from his mother that

when reunited with her at the end of the film in the hovering helicopter, his tears and sadness go out to Butch, as the boy flies away from his dead body, from his friend and ultimately from his surrogate father. However, at some point in their adventure Phillip defends his mother to Butch, perhaps in a careful attempt on the part of the writer not to seem misogynistic.

After Phillip's kidnapping, Red Garnett is faced with a work partner, Sally Gerber a state criminologist, whom he reluctantly accepts. However, at first he mistakes her for his new secretary, which is a gender prejudice on his part. Sally is in fact the only female character to resemble a confident, and liberated modern woman. However, Sally's gender is an aspect the film is not ready to excuse or forget. Thus, despite her intellectual abilities, her female frailty is pointed out on two separate occasions. First, when Red opens the getaway car's trunk and finds its owner's dead body in it, despite her attempt to stand strong, Sally ends up throwing up, while all the male characters around her are calm and not in the least bothered by the man's corpse. Additionally, Red turns Sally into his confidante, by expressing his guilty feelings regarding Butch's criminal background to her, since it was Red who had insisted Butch should be sent to Gatesville, described as (quote) "the toughest juvi farm in Texas" for four years just for a simple car theft. Laura Dern's character is also used to reveal Butch's history and his abusive childhood. Sally reveals that Butch's mother was a prostitute, he grew up in a whore house, killed a man at the age of eight and when his mother hung herself in the bathroom, his father took him away to Amarillo but eventually left him. Sally's depiction of Butch's bad childhood appears to work as an attempt to excuse him to the audience, but she is also exposing her female emotional and sensitive character in the film. Sally is a self-assured, highly educated and professional woman, who becomes a companion to Red, and eventually does manage to fully integrate the chasing group of law men.

Throughout their road journey, Butch and Phillip come into contact with other female characters, such as Lucy (Lucy Lee Flippin) and Paula (Elizabeth Ruscio), the clerks at Friendly's Store, who are depicted as not especially physically attractive and morally shallow, annoying, and foolish women who will not stop grinning, "You are the grinningest bunch I've ever seen", states Butch, in order to get a monthly bonus of twenty dollars. Hence, these women are not friendly at all, they are actually portrayed as purely stupid human beings displaying fake smiles out of personal interest and material profit.

Furthermore, the women in fact eventually turn very nasty towards Phillip, contrasting with the kindness and understanding he receives from his new male friend Butch.

Butch and Phillip also come in contact with a series of parental vignettes and due to a road block they find themselves in the company of Bob Fielder (John M. Jackson) and his wife (Connie Cooper), who give them a ride in their new car. So, unknowingly Bob helps Butch escape the police and Phillip shows a bit of envy of Bob's children, for they are part of an apparently happy nuclear family. The kids, Bob Jr. (Cameron Finley) and Patsy (Kathy Wottrich) have both a mother and a father, who take them out on picnics, but Phillip soon realises that Bob's wife is also frightening, very strict and harsh with her children, going hysterical over the spilling of some drink on the car seat. Hence, the health of Bob's family is to some extent a matter of appearances since in this particular family the mother is a rough authoritarian figure who causes distress within the family, while even Butch acknowledges Bob as (quote) "a fine family man." The evidence for this is his consciousness of the need to provide for his family, and his unheroic prudence in the face of danger. The woman's role is focused on her motherly relationship with her children and since her behaviour is shown to be shrewish (registered by Phillip's fear of her and Butch's glares), she is depicted as a bad motherly example.

Further along Butch and Phillip walk into "Dottie's Squat 'n' Gobble" to get a bite to eat and they get to know Eileen (Linda Hart), an easygoing bored waitress willing to have sex with Butch despite their short acquaintance. Strangely, this apparently cheap and shameless, but also sexy woman is the only female character who actually shows any signs of genuinely motherly concern for Phillip. So, Eileen is one of the few female characters depicted as kind and truly friendly, both to Butch and Phillip. A possible connection can be made between Eileen's character and the fact that Clint Eastwood's films have had little use for female characters except for the purposes of sexual dalliance. This sense of women's instrumentality seems to derive from Eastwood's chaotic romantic relationships and family life. In fact, Butch's decision to give up having sex with Eileen, in order to spend quality time with Phillip, is also similar to the situation of many divorced fathers (a reality which his biographers say Eastwood is personally acquainted with).

Finally, Butch and Phillip accept the help and kindness of Mack who takes them into his home and introduces them to his family, Lottie and Cleveland. Nonetheless, they soon come to realise that Mack is an abusive husband to Lottie and extremely aggressive

towards Cleveland. It is in fact Mack's aggression and violent behaviour that lead Butch to his psychotic breakdown. Therefore, when Butch is forced to recall his own childhood traumas (which, we should remember, includes his killing an abuser of his mother at the age of 10) he almost kills Mack, whom he forces to tell Cleveland he loves him, rather as we imagine his own father never did with him, "Take that boy and tell him you love him!", but the film reaches its true climax when Phillip bravely shoots Butch. Faced with Butch's violence, as well as her husband's, Lottie appears to be reduced to the role of many physically abused housewives and psychologically broken down defenceless women, who when threatened by cowardly men have nothing but their prayers to turn to. Thus, women appear to be reduced to their condition of fragile human beings that can be pushed and shoved around willingly by men. However, even Mack does not appear to be portrayed as all that bad, since he is a good provider and even shows remorse for his actions.

Due to his traumatic background, Butch is a damaged character who cannot distinguish a family spat from something more systemically abusive. Whereas in *Falling Down* ethnicity was everything, in *A Perfect World* there appears to be no reading of social or ethnic politics insisted upon. Nonetheless, while Butch identified with Bob (his contemporary in age and ethnicity), Mack's blackness distances Butch from him. Consequently, Mack's age and aggressiveness lead Butch to relive his childhood traumas. The film does not intend to portray African-Americans as more aggressive or abusive. In fact, the film appears to wish the audience to sympathise with Mack's family. Eastwood treats the poor black family with some sensitivity because he is aware he's entering the minefield which is the politics of contemporary cultural representation.

In *A Perfect World* all things male appears to take precedence over all things female, given the focus provided to male and fatherly concerns. In fact, several female characters chosen by the film's narrative tend to seem reduced to the old stereotypes and prejudices traditionally associated with their gender, such as frailty, over-emotional behaviour, weakness, mindlessly shallowness and finally even as property owned and disposed of by men. The structural counterweight to this misogyny is the Sally character, who at first checks but is ultimately educated in the ways of the world, by the Eastwood character. In the film most women are portrayed as needy and most importantly dependent on male assistance. Notwithstanding this, there seems to be no deliberate attempt to qualify women as either morally good or bad, either because Eastwood's films in general are not

sufficiently interested in women and the female world or because they are only needed to suggest that things have tipped too far socially away from presumed masculinist virtues of self-reliance, virility and daring, virtues which even the damaged Butch possesses in abundance.

### 3. The Ironic Definition of a Perfect World

The title of the film *A Perfect World* poses an interesting paradox which can initially be quite bewildering, but which can in fact be traced to the film's deliberately ironic intention, given its various sequences of powerful tension, crime and violence. In the film itself the only mention to any sort of definition of what a perfect world should be is made by Sally and discussed in the trailer while in pursuit of Butch Haynes: "In a perfect world things like these wouldn't happen." However, the things she appears to be referring to are acts of violence towards children, which ends up giving them childhood traumas they might never overcome. Moreover, Sally's speech is not just referring to Phillip's condition as a kidnapped child and a witness to Butch's aptitude for violent behaviour, but also to Butch himself and his troubled past while growing up in a whore house, dealing with his mother's suicide, his own act of homicide and eventually being abandoned by his father.

Nonetheless, Butch's interaction with the boy and his influence on Phillip's life from the moment he takes him from his oppressive female home, later killing Terry in order to protect him from molestation, allowing Phillip to go Trick'r Treating, letting him ride a 'roller coaster' (top of the car) and giving him advice regarding his masculinity, all amount to compensating parental, especially fatherly, love. Thus, by becoming Phillip's surrogate father and taking his development as a boy under his protective wing, Butch makes Phillip's world a better place. Perhaps he even provides Phillip with the necessary confidence to build himself a better world, as a grown man regarding his choices, beliefs and even deeds toward others, be it outside or within the family. Butch's initially intended bad influence in fact becomes a positive one, which works towards the building of a better Phillip as a man and not just a boy, therefore the point is that as it is not a perfect world, surrogates are better than nothing.

*A Perfect World* might refer not only to how much better the world itself could be without violence, crime, traumatic childhoods, bad father figures or poor child rendering, but also appears to be tapping into the myth of how near-perfect a political father and leader the American people had in power in 1963, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Thus the title *A Perfect World* attempts to establish that America's political father was in fact professionally close to perfect while in office, but the violence and crime depicted in

the film symbolically suggests that something is about to go wrong. In the film, the radio broadcasting of President John F. Kennedy's visit to Dallas, Texas in the following week in the current year of 1963, could suggest the feeling of a perfect world on the verge of disappearing and falling into oblivion, due to the President's untimely death caused by his violent assassination. However, audiences might and did find this conclusion difficult to reach. In fact, James Verniere questioned director and actor Clint Eastwood about the possibility of a connection between the film's title and the anticipation of President Kennedy's assassination, which Eastwood confirmed: "The title and pre-Kennedy assassination setting of *A Perfect World* suggest a ... world that's about to go sour. Is there a specific look that you're trying to get to parallel that theme, if that's your theme?", Verniere asked. Eastwood replied, "That's exactly the feeling we're trying to get across – a ... world that's on the verge of fading. Jack Green [cinematographer] ... is trying to get some of that ... feeling into the film. But it's difficult, and it remains to be seen if we've achieved it" (9). However, it must be said it is difficult to see how the survival of Kennedy could have stemmed the march of civil rights, the women's movement and all the other social forces that have so challenged white male middle class hegemony.

Both Clint Eastwood and Kevin Costner had recently starred in films related with the assassination of democratic President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas in 1963, such as the previously mentioned film *JFK* (1991) by director Oliver Stone, with Costner as Jim Garrison and *In the Line of Fire* (1993) directed by Wolfgang Petersen, where Eastwood plays secret service agent Frank Horrigan. Hence, both actors have a history of filmic stories devoted to the subject of President Kennedy's murder. As a young democrat and idealistic president, John Kennedy's death was a devastating blow for all Americans, both politically and socially. Reflecting on its political future in the early 1990s, in the year of the making and release of *A Perfect World* America had once more elected a young democrat president, President Bill Clinton, after over three decades of the much older and more or less troubled presidencies of Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and George Bush *père*. Of course, truth be said that Clinton's presidency also turned out to be troubled. However, such trouble was unforeseeable at the time, and Eastwood and his screenwriter Hancock are entitled to their *sebastianismo*.

President John F. Kennedy is known to have had the privilege of coming from a large and strongly united family and as a leader he became a symbol of dynamic change

towards equality and progress for all Americans, and their families. However, ever since the assassination of President Kennedy America had undergone a process of disempowerment of fatherhood within the household, that is to say that the father could no longer make comfortable assumptions about his position within his own family. So, the film *A Perfect World* takes its theme and location as a golden opportunity to confront the idea of the fallen/absent father figure within the American homeland and the lack of adequate father figures, to call for surrogate father figures as a compensatory mechanism that will allow the American people in 1993 to accept elected President Bill Clinton, as their new source for a strong potential leadership and dominant father figure. However, surrogates testify to the need for fathers, it provides no evidence of their adequacy once found.

I would argue that *A Perfect World* also offers American fathers an opportunity to recognise and acknowledge their many limitations, as well as their mistakes regarding the bringing up of their children. Moreover, the film also alerts parents of the child's need for surrogate father figures when faced with abandonment or neglect, as victims of parental abuse or absence. The film urges the average American father to try and do better for his offspring perhaps simply by trying to be present and claiming back his place, and significance within the American household. In fact, from a conservative standpoint, the family continues to be the backbone and most important foundation of American society and the American father needs to be conscious of the importance of his mere presence in his child's life. However, the film can also be regarded as taking up a number of other positions in relation to the emotional importance of fathers to sons and allows us to generalise from this ambiguity. It is not a political issues film in the way that *Falling Down* is. It is a more cunning state-of-the-nation film for an age with patriarchy in crisis. The male 'place in the home' will probably never again find a rationale for its restitution along the old lines, given the flexibility and diverse new trends that have affected American family structures throughout the twentieth century.

## **Conclusion**

The 1920s and 1930s were important decades in the history of the restructuring of the American family. After World War I, and before World War II began, Americans witnessed the changing times of the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, and the technological innovations of the decades, such as radio. It was a time of collective anguish and personal adjustment due to constant social redefinitions. In addition, it was an especially important time in the history and development of American fatherhood, witnessing the establishment of new gender relations. According to Ralph LaRossa's study, the 1920s and 1930s were pivotal in the transformation of stereotypical ideas regarding fatherhood and "while it may be gratifying for men in the late twentieth century to believe that they are the first generation to change a diaper or give a baby a bath, the simple truth is that they are not" (3).

On film, however, for a long time the male figure remained basically a symbol of protection, security and external prowess. In the home the father was mainly the economic provider and not an emotionally involved participant. On the other hand, the 1950s would prove a favourable time for dealing with the maladjustment of many teenagers. In the 1960s and early 1970s film production was defined by a much more adventurous kind of cinema, a 'New Hollywood,' which allowed several filmmakers to experiment and offer a more personal view of the world on film.

The late 70s, 80s and 90s would testify to the ascendancy of the blockbuster and prove to be a time of less deep and philosophical reflection in film culture. Nonetheless, the film productions of the 1980s and early 1990s would prove particularly important in the representation of American fatherhood. In the 1980s Hollywood commercialised the 'hard-body' ideal of masculinity in films like *The Terminator* (1984) and *First Blood* (1982). These films sold the general idea that it was normal for male heroes to sacrifice family ties and emotional attachments, in order to focus on external prowess, the greater good and collective welfare. But the early 1990s witnessed a change of heart and the 'hard-body' hero from *The Terminator*, played by popular Hollywood actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, became one of the greatest filmic proofs of that particular shift from fantasies of male power and masculinity to fantasies of masculinity and nurturing, in films like *Kindergarten Cop* (1990), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *Junior* (1994) and *Jingle All the Way* (1996). In *Kindergarten Cop* the change of the emotionally unattached 'hard-body' cop occurs when he finds his way back into his role as a family man.

Moreover, in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* the transformation is identified due to the character's mutation from a simple killing machine to a self-sacrificing father. Susan Jeffords argues that:

Rather than acknowledge a point at which masculinity must recognize its own negation – what seems on the surface to be the conclusion of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* – the film's complex reasonings supply a 'new' direction for masculinity, not, as in the 1980s, outward into increasingly extravagant spectacles of violence and power (as Rambo and Ronald Reagan showed, these displays had become self-parody), but inward, into increasingly emotional displays of masculine sensitivities, traumas, and burdens. Rather than be impressed at the size of these men's muscles and the ingenuity of their violence, audiences are to admire their emotional sacrifices that are being made, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* reminds its viewers, for the sake of the future. (172)

In Ivan Reitman's *Junior*, former 'hard-body' hero, Schwarzenegger goes through the ultimate feminisation process by giving birth to a child, allowing fathers to usurp the biological as well as the nurturing function of women. Finally, in *Jingle All the Way* the actor plays the role of a father trying to compensate his son for his neglectful behaviour by getting him his favourite action-hero toy for Christmas. In becoming the action hero toy himself, Schwarzenegger merges his old and his new screen personas.

In fact, this new focus on masculinity and the male figure's place within the home accords with the chronological organization of the three selected film productions, *Parenthood* (1989), *Falling Down* (early 1993) and *A Perfect World* (late 1993), and their over-riding concern with posterity and male influence and inheritance.

*Parenthood*'s narrative focuses very schematically on an extended family and the troubles of one particular father, Gil (Steve Martin) due to his over-compensatory behaviour in a desperate attempt to help his eldest son's growing up process, instead of being remote like his own father. As a 'feel-good' movie, the film takes a comic approach to fatherhood and the messy but good intentions of an over-anxious father of three.

After Gil's extended family and hopeful ending, *Falling Down* introduces the dramatic conflict of a divorced father, Bill (Michael Douglas) struggling to cope with the distance created between him and his daughter. *Falling Down* is a pessimistic social problem film dealing with the turmoil and confusion that affected the America metropolis

in the early 1990s, namely the famous 1992 Rodney King Riots, and the American economy at the end of the Cold War, which led to a presumed betrayal of American War workers. The film narrative attempts to put Bill's fatherly concerns at its center but it ends up being pushed to the background, and the breaking up of the American social fabric is given center-stage attention. However, the fact remains that as a father figure Bill falls and what prevails is a sense of the crushing effect of unchecked capitalism on the family unit. The point here is that capitalism offers no special protection or privilege to the so-called responsible and dutiful white middle-class male, who thus becomes surplus labour.

Since the main father figure of *Falling Down* has fallen, in *A Perfect World* there are no father figures present. In fact, the film is marked by a total absence of the main characters' real fathers. Given the sequence of an over-anxious father, a distant and divorced father, up to the complete absence of a father figure in *A Perfect World*, it would appear that these films together convincingly suggest an erosion of the place and presence of fathers within modern family structures. Furthermore, due to the decline in the prestige of fathers (and even physical presence in the last film), the importance and power of the father in American society seems to be in peril. Notwithstanding this, the fact that Phillip finds it necessary to have a surrogate father figure in order to enjoy his childhood and to grow emotionally stands as evidence that fathers are not so easily erased from the American family structure. It can be maintained that fatherhood is indeed a truly important social and cultural study subject. Despite its mutations in new and diverse family structures, the truth is that society has proven itself able to adapt to different historical circumstances. Therefore, it is my belief that a father's position and authority is assured by every child's need for the presence of a father, or his surrogate.

Nevertheless, one cannot help wondering how present a father can actually be if all it takes is for a man to be ready and able to procreate. In fact, it might be that no emotional attachments are required to exist between a father and a child, unless fathers are forced to give ground by society's pressure. Fathers should be willing to trust their own adaptative abilities concerning different family structures in order to retain their place within the household. Moreover, there are already many foreseeable reshapings of the American family that affect the institution of fatherhood.

In reality, different non-traditional families are already gaining ground in American society. For instance, legal homosexual marriages and even lesbian couples' opportunity to

conceive, adopt and raise a child without the need of a male father figure are being proposed throughout America. Some states have acquiesced with this, others seem set on fighting it to the death. In fact, the economic independence of the female has allowed males to some extent to be relieved of the burden posed by the conservative view of fatherhood, based on duty and sacrifice of personal freedoms in the cause of collective family stability. In the culture of choice, it may be that fathers will take up or lay down their economic and moral responsibilities as matters of personal will, instead of responding to a sense of obligation.

In this context, whether fathers are really necessary remains a doubtful issue. Given that educated modern women tend to either marry late in life or not at all, dedicating most of their fertile years to their professional careers, fathers could become only necessary for generational renewal. However, this too leads me back to the previous argument of free choice. A man is either willing to be a father or not, coerce-able into becoming one or not by social pressure. Certain communities are not ready to give up on conservative family ideals, to put it mildly. But even with a Christian heartland unwilling to entertain modern *mores*, the fact remains that marriage no longer wholly regulates sexual behaviour or parental bonding, and that patriarchy has been giving ground. All in all, fatherhood and the American family are discussion subjects in permanent mutation and therefore allow us to draw no easy conclusions.

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## **Selected Filmography**

### Primary Filmography

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