

**PORNOGRAPHY, PANOPTICISM AND GENDER:
OFF-SCENE MASCULINITIES IN *THE PORNOGRAPHER'S POEM***

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the construction of masculinity and sexuality in Michael Turner's *The Pornographer's Poem*. Drawing on a performative and fluid conception of gender identity, it explores how panoptic structures like the family, school, and athletics all help to shape masculinity. Significant attention is given to the interaction between hegemonic and subversive masculinities and sexualities. In this context, the protagonist's pornographies serve as a focal lens through which to inquire into these gender dynamics. The instabilities in identitarian processes are likewise reflected in unreliable narration, cyclical structures, interrogative discourses, and nesting techniques as they influence the act of narration. The thesis concludes that coercive, conflicting, complicated images of masculinity propagating in contemporary culture are difficult to navigate, especially without effective attachment figures. It attempts to propose more nuanced, multifarious, and dynamic interpretations of manhood that allow to transcend societal stereotypes and prescriptions arising from current systems of power and gender.

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INTRODUCTION

The Pornographer's Poem begins with the protagonist answering a question from an unknown authority: how old were you when you saw your first porno? The protagonist, who will be referred to as michael from hereafter, provides his answers and testimony within a cyclically repetitive interrogation. It becomes clear that this interrogation will continue until the interrogators find michael's answers satisfactory.¹

My analysis will focus on the relationship between the changes in michael's cognitive expression (i.e., his films, pornographies, dreams etc.) and his socio-economic environment. More specifically, I will focus on the changes in his sexuality and his gender identity within this context. I will also examine the feedback loop paradigm of the cognitive process by relying on recent cognitive approaches to narratology as conceptualized by Uri Margolin. "In the broadest terms, this theoretical paradigm distinguishes the stages of information intake (sensation-attention-perception), encoding or internal representation, storage, retrieval, and transformation or further processing, leading ultimately to some symbolic or behavioural output" (62). By examining this information loop, I will show how *The Pornographer's Poem*, with its use of poioumena and as a nested künstlerroman, demonstrates the complex relationship of exchange between life and art, thereby giving visibility to the development of michael's gender identity. The benefit of this paradigm is that it can map fluctuating gender identities as they change in relation to panoptic structures (family, school and sports) within their socio-cultural environment.

¹ I will refer to the protagonist as michael (with a lowercase 'm') in order to relieve the tedium of writing and reading 'the protagonist' over and over. The lowercase letter serves to distinguish between Michael Turner and the character.

In my literature review, I focus on the recent expansion of cultural studies, which has shifted academic inquiry away from traditional areas of cultural representation to non-traditional ones like pornography. This postmodernist erosion of borderlines between high and low culture, which facilitates a more inclusive cultural analysis, has included increasingly relaxed attitudes towards sexuality in North America and has directed academia's gaze toward the intersection of a variety of cultural inscriptions onto untraditional texts like the human body. If we agree with Frances Ferguson that pornography acts as a panoptic structure – making visible the actions of individuals in a group and then placing social values on them – then the performances of socially constructed gender identities also become visible and susceptible to analysis within pornography. In order to be able to sufficiently deal with the vast range of performative gender identities, as conceptualized by Judith Butler, contemporary scholarship aims to expand public perception and reception of pornography by addressing texts that deviate from the kitsch-like productions of the Porn Industry. Here, the redirection of critical attention to subversive and transgressive texts will help to map out the “landscape” of existent gender identities and sexualities. Hence, the relationship between Michael's expression and the available models of masculinity will be of central focus throughout this project.

In *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), Angela Carter states that “Sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and never has been the intention of the pornographer” (20). In *The Pornographer's Poem* this intersection of sexual and social relations occurs within a narrative that combines prose with screenplay (as well as other formal genres like poetry and the epistolary novel).

The bricolage of narrative techniques makes michael's fragmented and shifting experience of gender construction spatially and temporally visible as he struggles against the hegemonic values of his society.

In the introduction to the newly founded journal *Porn Studies*, Feona Atwood and Clarissa Smith characterize the selection criteria for the publication: "Whatever its disciplinary origin, we are not interested in work that is either antagonistic or celebratory; in assumptions about porn as essentially oppressive or corrupting, liberatory, subversive, conservative, empowering, harmful or dangerous" (4). Atwood and Smith are adamant that any essentialisms or value laden conclusions are unproductive approaches to pornography. While pornography has been and still can be quite violent, the breadth of its variety is such that overarching claims and generalizations about the nature of pornography do little to add to its research. In addition, the practices and productions of the industry have recently begun to diversify, and the production, reception and distribution of pornography have become increasingly decentralized, due in part to the development of technologies that put production (audio/visual recording devices) and distribution (the internet) into the hands of new demographic groups. As a result, this decentralization of production and distribution has also made outlying representations of sexuality visible. Thus, we must acknowledge the disintegration of the Porn Industry's monopoly and homogeneity.

Yet, the existence of violence in pornography definitely merits acknowledgement; however, the complexity of this violence cannot be overlooked. Quite often violence goes solely interpreted as "real," and because of this, the fictional elements of pornography as a literary genre often go unacknowledged. What is problematic about this perspective is that it ignores the semiotic differences that arise when the sexual act is framed within fantasy. In his

book *Masochism*, Gilles Deleuze highlights the importance of fantasy in masochistic pleasure, where the context of violence is inseparable from its interpretation. Therein, the pleasure derived from the violence that is agreed upon in the contract is directly related to the masochist's pleasure in pain and suspension of desire. Deleuze says that "the violence that the masochist inflicts or causes to be inflicted upon himself can no longer be called sadistic, since it is based on his particular type of suspension" (107). We can extend these theories about fantasy in masochism to fantasy in pornographic violence. This is not to say that violence does not exist in pornography, but rather that *simulated* violence cannot be interpreted without understanding its contextual position within its own semiotic system.

Aside from the complications that arise when one discusses masochistic desire, violence is also complicated by structural differences. For a nuanced approach to violence, one can look to Slavoj Žižek's *On Violence*, in which violence is understood to exist in a triumvirate structure: subjective (personal), objective (ideological) and systemic (formal). Žižek argues that our contemporary social attitude is obsessed with the subjective manifestations of violence without sufficiently recognizing the objective and systemic correlatives. A more refined understanding of violence must overcome the impulsive compassionate appeal to subjective violence, and must consider the ways in which subjective violence is presented as a challenge to the "non-violent zero level" of objective violence, which is implicit and invisible in our symbolic and systemic socio-cultural organization. In other words, a point of view that accounts for subjective acts of violence by exclusively ascribing them to gender power structures may overlook the complex intersection of supplemental ideological and systemic power relations (like religious, racial and economic ones), thereby dividing and isolating violence in a rigid system of power relations. Thus, in

my approach, I have displaced gender from its position as a deterministic factor of violence and attempted to view it as one node among others with personal, ideological, and systemic restrictions. This approach necessitates a reconceptualization of gender as just one of a number of intersecting paradigms in a contextual environment through which the construction of identity occurs. R.W. Connell defines this as “a situational approach,” which possesses the potential to reconcile the “discursive and structural approaches to masculinity” (*Masculinities* xx).

Some of the most important scholarship on the social construction of masculinity and its dehomogenization in recent years builds off of Lynne Segal’s *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities* (1990). Several of these works include R.W. Connell’s *Masculinities* (2005), Todd W. Reeser’s *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (2010) and Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America* (2012). These authors address the problematic nature of approaching masculinity as a homogenous construction. They challenge the idea that masculinity can be blanketed under an overarching definition, and instead point to the changing forms of hegemonic masculinity against which all masculinities are measured. These studies identify a complex interaction of social and cultural projections of masculinity; however, the application of these approaches to scholarship on pornography is still quite limited.

Manhood in America by Kimmel is a historical account of the development of heteronormative manhood in America. It begins to trace the forms of contemporary masculinity from when the self-made man overcame the genteel patriarch and the heroic artisan as the dominant form of masculinity in the eighteenth century. Kimmel characterizes masculinity through self-control, exclusion or escape, and proceeds to explore the extent to which this ideal has been changed, challenged and sustained throughout history. Kimmel claims that a

“history of manhood must, therefore, recount two histories: the history of the changing ideal version of masculinity and the parallel and competing versions that co-exist with it” (4). This approach is productive because it shows the conflicting nature of masculinities at a national level; however, its scope is so large that the nuances of regional masculinities are incorporated into a grander narrative which subsumes specificity into generality. Therefore, any work that deals with regional masculinities must supplement Kimmel’s work with more situational studies in order to preserve its regional perspective and recount “the history of the changing ideal version of masculinity and the parallel and competing versions that co-exist with it” (4).

In terms of masculinity and pornography, Jensen’s *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (2007) attempts to criticize the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and its representation. However, Jensen’s dedication to Andrea Dworkin, who along with Catherine McKinnon led the anti-pornography movement of the 90’s Porn-wars, is indicative of the ideological approach which permeates it: that pornography is simply harmful to women. While Jensen does attempt to use an approach that explores not only the text but its production and its reception as well, the majority of the book relies on personal anecdotes and evidence from people who have been negatively affected by pornography without supplementing this with positive anecdotes. There is an absence of a strong conceptual framework and Jensen does not address the multifariousness of pornographic representations; for example, little attention is paid to queer studies and LGBTQ sexualities. Considering the book was published in 2007, it does not take the proliferation of pornographic discourse or gender discourse (due in large part to internet technologies) into consideration and thus limits itself to a moral condemnation of a genre instead of providing

an analysis of the exploitation that can occur behind the scenes of mainstream pornography. Ultimately, Jensen eventually finds the scapegoat that he is looking for: pornography and masculinity. He unrealistically concludes that we need to divest from the sex industry and do away with the ideas of masculinity/femininity in favor of humanity.

In order to expand my discussion of masculinity beyond a heteronormative lens, I also draw on Fred Fejes' *Bent Passions* (2002), which discusses homosexual desire by analyzing the differences between 'Gayporn' and 'Heteroporn.' Fejes appropriates Linda Williams's argument that pornography creates utopias of sexual abundance and applies it to 'Gayporn' at the same time that he attempts "to confront and resolve the conflict between such desire and the overarching dominant heterosexual sex system" (95). His approach challenges the dominance of heteronormative pornographic representations and attempts to outline 'Gayporn's' liberating possibilities. I will pursue a similar method; however, with less focus on a rigid sexual orientation in favour of a sliding scale of sexual practices and desires.

Michael Bader's *Male Sexuality* (2009) aligns itself with Connell's situational approach by discussing sexuality through a contextual imperative. He says: "Consider for a moment why the slightest brush of an earlobe by a lover's lips can be tremendously exciting while direct genital contact during a medical exam leaves us cold. The difference lies in the meaning of the events, and meaning is constructed by our minds, not our erogenous zones" (Bader 4). One of the most productive aspects of Bader's study is that it aims to "present a new theory of male sexuality that will call into question all of the stereotypes, caricatures, and 'common-sense' assumptions that we all hold about the erotic lives of men today" (1-2).

Another example of this situational approach is “The ‘World’ of All-Male Pornography: On the Public Place of Moving-Image Sex in the Era of Pornographic Transnationalism” (2004) by Rich C. Cante and Angelo Restivo. One of the most interesting contributions this article makes is its rejection of taking at face value the representations of regional cultures. It asks not just how the transnational pornographies distinguish themselves from each other, but how these pornographies fail to approach the ‘real.’ It asks how the transnational representations undo themselves in their efforts to produce their desires. The article’s use of the label ‘all-male’ is indicative of the way that terms like Gay lose their coherence in a transnational context, especially since in the United States a number of ‘Gayporn’ (to use Fejes’ term) actors are notably not gay but referred to as ‘gay for pay’ (111). This article points to the importance of studying sexualities in terms of their contexts, and acknowledging the imaginative aspects of this pursuit.

My methodology predominantly relies on poststructural literary analysis; however, there are several non-literary theorists who inform my approach and who require mention. First, Butler’s gender theory argues for the denaturalization of the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity, wherein gender is not contingent on the biological/physiological distinctions between male or female but on the performance of socially constructed acts:

The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. (145)

Masculinity and femininity are thus reiterated and engrained in social interactions to the point that they seem innate or natural. This de-emphasis on naturalized models of gender is

imperative to understanding michael's resistance, which can be seen as the performance of an alternative mode of masculinity, because it conflicts with the accepted norms of his society.

Often, research on gender tends to conflate the performance of gender with the performance of sexuality. While significant overlap between the two does occur, due to the normalization of certain sexualities within certain gender performances, I will rely on Gayle Rubin's *Thinking Sex* (1992) to inform my discussion. Her conceptualization of the "charmed circle" will be of particular interest. Rubin argues that certain sexual practices are deemed acceptable by our society. These tend to be monogamous procreative heteronormative practices between similarly aged individuals. Rubin also argues that our society's sexual negativity tends to result in the adoption of a hard and fast line between what is accepted and what is not. The fear is that shifting 'the line' to accommodate one bad type of sexuality will result in other bad types making their way over. Rubin's hierarchy is invaluable for my discussion of michael's struggle against hegemonic masculinity and his rejection of heteronormativity.

Next, I draw on Frances Ferguson's *Pornography, The Theory* (2004). Specifically, I borrow his definition of pornography as being an essentially panoptic structure. "The visibility of pornography is thus important not because it involves a tacit claim that visual imagery has an unusual immediacy by comparison with other representational media, but rather because of its obvious orientation toward viewers and their evaluations. It emphasizes individual value as it is assigned, that is, rather than a notion of intrinsic worth [...] or a notion of self-worth [...]" (37). Working from this perspective, I will analyze some of the more traditional panopticons like the family unit, the school system, and the sports team.

Butler's categorization of gender is of benefit as the active construction of identity and gender become highlighted and set up for evaluation under these structures. However, it is important to discern the way in which the novel acts as its own panoptic structure with the reader participating in the assignment of value. Thus, it is important to assess how each of these structures legitimizes a compulsory heteronormativity via its own particular semiotic system.

I also use current approaches to Attachment Theory, as originally propagated by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, in order to analyze the formation of Michael's identity and gender through specific characters, social circles, and institutions within the panoptical, conceptual framework. The basic assumption here is that "a child will wander between her secure base when her attachment system is aroused and will explore the world if not distressed" (Ainsworth and Bell et al. qtd. in Grossmann 311). These roles are examined with respect to the culturally specific gendered division of the novel's setting: the mother as the security attachment figure and the father as the explorative attachment figure. Deviation from these roles by Michael and his parents is of specific note.

In order to effectively analyze the non-conformity of the protagonist's gender performance, I first identify the nature of the hegemonic masculinity against which he can react. In doing this, I draw on R.W. Connell's "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" and *Masculinities* for the concept of multiple masculinities. In these studies, Connell defends the concept of hegemonic masculinity from a variety of criticisms. What is particularly useful about her approach is its compatibility with the theories of Butler and Ferguson. One implication of the term 'hegemonic masculinity' is the acknowledgement of multiple types of masculinity which reflects Butler's rejection of naturalized gender

distinctions and supports notions of performative gender identities. The notion of hegemony also lends itself to Fergusons's ideas about the utilitarian system of valuation. By favoring one performative role over another, there arises a type of masculinity which suppresses other 'less valuable' ones. Connell also argues that this hegemony is not absolute. The interaction of multiple gender roles creates a point of hybridity in which hegemonic masculinity is still affected by less dominant forms so that even within hegemony change is possible and power can shift. This change is accounted for in Ferguson's theory when she states that new panoptic structures are able to be constructed and old ones are able to adapt. Thus, Ferguson accounts for the change implicit in hegemony as well. Using this framework, I can analyze michael's gender performance in relation to the hegemony of hetero-normative masculinity and the social milieu in which it operates at the subjective, objective and systemic levels.

Within these levels, I will utilize Roland Barthes' theories in *Image/Music/Text* (1977) to analyze the interpretative aspects of michael's films. Specifically I will refer to the death of the author, the modern scriptor and the writerly/readerly text. In a hermeneutic sense, michael takes a back seat as the modern scriptor – as one who is born with the text and does not constitute it. Hence, his films receive a number of different and sometimes conflicting interpretations. Yet, on a personal level, michael's intentions are still relevant to his development in regard to masculinity, sexuality and his coping strategies. The interplay between these two paradigms will be explored.

Since the novel operates within a number of nested narratives, I have utilized several narratologists like Brian Richardson, Uri Margolin, Richard Gerrig and Wolf Schmid to guide my discussion of how narrative itself is a shaping and constricting panoptic structure. I have also explored the relationship between michael's psychological states and their

corresponding narrative levels. Drawing on Schmid's diagram of communication levels (35), I have constructed my own diagram to represent the narrative levels of *The Pornographer's Poem* (see Appendix A). The diagram helps to clarify the complexities of the nested narrative structure of the novel and provides a point of reference throughout my thesis, since the novel situates the primary narrative of the interrogation (within screenplay dialogue) between two distinct and competing narrative modes: michael's and the authority's.

My first chapter explores sexuality and gender within the institution of the family unit. I examine michael's attachments to family members and his reaction to the gender roles they prescribe. A major point of focus will be michael's ability or inability to form healthy attachments in light of a repeated succession of substitutes. From there, I explore michael's art-as-becoming by examining the development of his productions in a serial manner. After all, it is through the production of his films that michael comes to recognize and constitute his perceptions of familial authority, gender roles and sexuality.

Having begun to build an identity within the family structure, the next biggest change in michael's social life occurs when he begins to attend school. Chapter 2 examines the influence of the school system on his identity and culminates in an analysis of his school themed pornographies. The characters michael is most attached to are given special attention. I explore the extent of their mentorship in regard to michael's ability to think critically and express himself adequately. Attention is also paid to the hierarchical nature of these relationships and how they influence his perception of peers, adults and authority figures more generally.

Chapter 3 focuses on the influence of sports and athletics on masculinity. Interestingly enough, the novel does not actually contain any scenes in which sports are

being played. As a result I more broadly explore the role of competition and hegemony in the shaping of masculine styles. I begin with another discussion of michael's interactions with his peers; however, this time, I focus on the hierarchy created within the domain of sports and competition. Since, the corresponding pornographies for this section also omit portraying any formal sports activities, competitiveness as a major characteristic of sports activities is transposed onto his pornographies.

CHAPTER 1

Parents

Father

Upon studying the importance of challenging play in child-father attachment relationships Karin Grossmann et al. argue that “in most cultures, fathers are perceived to challenge the child’s competencies for adaptation to new elements of their culture as well as to their individual masculine style” (310). Because of this, a significant portion of my discussion focuses on the absence of michael’s father and the corresponding implications. First, his absence significantly impacts michael’s psychological development because, as Grossmann et al. argue, fathers typically serve as central explorative attachment figures: “A major aspect of the role of the father as an attachment figure might be to provide security through sensitive and challenging support as a companion when the child’s exploratory system is aroused, thereby complementing the secure-base-role of the mother as an attachment figure” (311). Thus michael’s ability to securely and comfortably explore outside of his comfort zone is undermined and he develops a self-exiling behaviour pattern. Notably, Grossmann points out that this gendered division of attachment roles has more to do with conventional practice than with any gender essentialism:

This viewpoint does not imply that both parents could not serve both roles, as in fact they often do. However, this perspective on parental roles does emphasize the two different ends of the attachment-exploration balance in children’s behaviour when mastering their developmental tasks. (311)

This approach is particularly useful because it denaturalizes gendered parental attachment roles without dismissing the social and cultural realities of the gender norms under which michael is raised.

I think my mother was known as a ‘bad girl’ when she was younger. But only because her father died when she was ten. What I mean by that is there was an assumption back then that the absence of a man around the house meant trouble. And I think my mother was always fighting that. She didn’t want people thinking that about us. I think that’s why she went on all those dates. She was a good mom. (46)

Hence, michael’s childhood is largely characterized by his mother’s heteronormative idea of what a healthy family and a strong male role model look like.

The novel first mentions michael’s father when a resentful michael sets fire to photos of him (12). The reasons for his father’s absence are not revealed, but michael makes a point of enforcing that he got kicked out and did not just leave. The fact that michael destroys the pictures, however, is enough to indicate that he is upset:

And it’s funny – you know, looking back – how I remember weighing those photos she so obviously chose to save against memories that I, at the time, was trying to forget. Yes, I remember feeling pretty adamant about some of those photos. So you know what I did? I took all the photos I didn’t like and I burned them. I remember thinking: She’ll never notice. (12)

In discussing 10 year olds’ reactions to separation from their parents, Grossmann says that “A child’s reported attachment behaviour strategy was classified secure if distress was expressed openly towards the parents or other attachment figures and their comfort or help was sought and accepted” (318). michael’s reaction is more representative of an insecure 6

year old, who responds to pictures of separation from parents in an emotionally volatile way (322). Hence, michael's actions demonstrate both his insecurity toward his separation from his father and an arrested development.

Since his father is not there to provide explorative support, and since his mother is unable to take over this role to the same extent, michael has difficulty adapting to emotionally turbulent episodes and exploring outside of his secure base. Although michael finds exploratory relationships through other characters, all of them are limited in scope. For example, Penny provides the necessary tools to channel his feelings into a constructive discourse (further to his mother's advice) and Nettie helps michael explore (especially in regard to sexuality) outside of his comfort zone; however, what is important here is that michael misses out on this support from his family. Instead he learns to deal with situations through escapism and evasion, which he learns from his father and at least partly, from his mother. This kind of escapist, avoidant behaviour is what Michael Kimmel cites as one of three reoccurring themes of masculine behaviour (6) – the other two being self-control and exclusion – and this defence mechanism eventually contributes to michael's inability to divest from the hegemonic masculinity of characters like the pimp, Flynn.

Mother

As noted before, michael's mother finds it difficult to imagine a healthy family without a strong father head, due in part to the large role of social expectations. Like michael, she also grew up without a strong father figure (feedback loop). Hence, she is extremely upset when michael burns the photos and erases these physical traces of his father from the family record. This is a possessive act, in which he supersedes his own desires (to

symbolically lash out at his father) over others' desire (to look at the photos). Yet, she does not punish him because she recognizes that michael is simply trying to resolve his conflicted feelings about his father. Instead she shows compassion and understanding. She tries to address the destructive method he uses to express his feelings:

When she returned she told me flat out that I wasn't going to be punished, and that she understood how I felt about things but that was still no excuse for burning her photos and then lying about it, and that just because I may not want to look at something doesn't mean I have the right to take away somebody else's right to look at something. She also said that there would be many more examples of this in life, and that as I got older these examples would become more and more complicated, and that I should try to keep an open mind, and that these situations can usually be resolved by talking about them, and that certain situations that begin as negatives often get turned into something positive. (15)

She teaches him about censorship by challenging his decision to impose his interpretation of events over others'. She also makes him think about how ownership works, since the photos did not belong to him. These lessons are arguably the most important ones learnt from his mother. She recognizes that the problem is in the method of michael's expression and not in the emotions themselves; however, she does not address or explore the feelings with him any further. She does not help him to resolve them by exploring them. By habit, she provides the secure base attachment, but her ability to fulfil his need for an explorative outlet is lacking.

Yet, michael's mother works hard to provide a complete family unit for her children, as it is imagined through heteronormative social expectations. She goes on numerous dates in order to find a surrogate father figure for her children; however, the dates are largely

unsuccessful and the time she spends on them is time actually taken away from her children. Thus, she demonstrates behaviours typically characteristic of a divorced parent. Feeney and Monin argue that divorce related stressors can interfere with parents' abilities to consistently provide safety and security (943), and that "parents may fail to provide these protective functions following divorce by (1) inverting the parent-child relationship, so that the child becomes a major attachment figure for the parent; or (2) becoming psychologically and/ or physically unavailable to the child" (945). And, in addition to being unavailable, michael's mother begins to treat him as a grown up. He acts very much like a replacement man of the house despite his age. He does not have chores done for him; rather, he is expected to take on more responsibilities after his father leaves:

That's what it was like when I was a kid. Whenever the phone was for me – and if I was around, and if I wasn't sick or grounded – my mother always made me answer. Never made excuses, never took a message. No help that way at all... I mean, in a way she was right. After all, I was the man of the house now. I had to be responsible. But whatever. Nettie always called early on a Sunday. And my mother was always glad to see me up. She liked Nettie for that reason. My mother always had stuff for me to do after she kicked my dad out. (66)

michael's responsibilities increase faster than his emotional development does, as he slowly realizes that performing his father's role, by doing chores, for example, will grant him freedom and his mother's favour (168). michael's masculinity becomes a performance with the goal of appeasing his mother and getting what he wants.

Over dinner, Mom's new-man pitch evolved into a mini-tribute to my sister and me. A cavalcade of compliments, really. She went on and on. Told us what great kids we

were, how she could trust us with adult matters. And how with this trust comes rewards, freedoms. But with these freedoms come responsibilities, I kept thinking. There had to be a catch. I think my mom was aware of my scepticism, too, because she shifted her focus, began addressing me directly. She knew I was a tough nut to crack. But I was miles ahead of her. I was already thinking about how I could turn this around, use it to my advantage. (197)

michael wastes no time in using his newly acquired freedom. He uses his mom's diverted attention as an opportunity to go see his first porno. His motivation for this is due in part to Nettie's suggestion to do so after a botched attempt at anal intercourse, in part so that he can test out his new boundaries, and possibly also in part to the resentment he feels toward his mother's lack-love as he may perceive it. Regardless, the result is michael's further alienation. After he gets kicked out of the Venus – a pornographic theatre – he discovers that his vehicle window is smashed and that the Joan Armatrading tape, which he and his mother had bonded over, is gone. Notably, Armatrading is a strong, black, successful female artist from Britain, whose music is deeply emotional. The combination of his alienation from his mother and his trip to the Venus make michael turn away from Armatrading as a role model. When his mother asks about the incident, michael lies to cover his whereabouts and he breaks the tape deck so that the tape cannot be replaced (199). These actions mark a regressive return to the destructive coping mechanisms which he relied on when he burnt the photos of his father. Hence, michael's fear of abandonment, in light of Carl's increased involvement, results in the destruction of previously established bonds. Unfortunately this incident largely goes unaddressed because of his mother's preoccupation. She does not force the issue, thereby confirming michael's anxieties about losing her attention. So, he puts the

money for a new tape deck toward an editing block, which, although dishonestly acquired, does help him constructively articulate himself through his films.

Once Marty Flynn enters his life, michael's relationship with his mother is almost irreconcilable. However, since michael does not possess the coping strategies necessary to stand up for himself, he looks to his mother as a way out of his association with Flynn. Yet, this does not work out since it is imperative for michael that his involvement in the pornographic production company, Flynnskyn, remain secret. His ability to reconnect with her is undermined by this secret, because he fears exposing his double life to her. When Flynn threatens to tell her, michael capitulates to Flynn's control. Yet, michael does have a moment of insight (while shopping for Carl around Christmas) in which it becomes clear that his mother does the best she can, knowing what she knows; however, she does not really know how to be an exploratory attachment figure, as she herself never really had one.

Siblings

Sister

Mary Ainsworth says that "attachment theory as originated by Bowlby is an open-ended theory – open to extension, revision, and refinement through research" (463), and Grossmann adds that "in addition to their parents children named grandparents and much older siblings as attachment figures" (318). While michael's sister is younger, she does form an attachment bond with him that shapes his behaviour via her expectations and reliance on him – regardless of how antagonistic they may be toward each other. michael tells the interrogators that his family looked after each other when his father left: they all tried to fill the void. Yet, his relationship with his sister is competitive as well. The two compete against

each other for their mother's attention. After michael burns the photographs, his sister joins in their reconciliation even though she does not know what is going on. michael suspects that she does not want to be left out and that her concern about his wellbeing is minimal.

Consider also the episode with the child erotica that Nettie takes from her dad's study and slips into michael's bag. When michael gets home, he discovers the photograph and manages to hide it only moments before his sister walks into his room. Thus, his sister's surveillance is a threat to his privacy at the same time that it is supportive. This conflict arises several times throughout the book and illustrates their relationship well.

michael also perceives himself to be more responsible than his sister due to their age difference. For one, he acts aloof, and sometimes, albeit unsuccessfully, even tries to play father figure to her, which she resents and which creates tension between them. For example, when michael hears that his sister has started seeing a boy, he gets defensive and wants to know more about who the boy is (137). Yet, the increasing lack of involvement in her life accompanies the gradual erosion of their relationship. They police each other when they are together and are thus more likely to take risks when apart. This is particularly significant when michael and Nettie go over to the Ragnarssons for dinner. His sister is babysitting in Kerrisdale leaving him free to go next door without anyone knowing. This exploration is largely unsupervised. While Nettie explores with him, she is barely more experienced and mature than michael. Yet, this attachment to Nettie is one of the few secure bases that michael maintains most of his life (with periodic exceptions), and, since Nettie is also inexperienced, they tend get into troublesome situations via her direction.

Furthermore, when michael finds out that his mom is seeing Carl, he brags about his new freedom to his sister, to which she responds by bringing up the burnt photos. They never

really get along and cannot rely on each other to keep each other's secrets or provide support. Rather their relationship, similarly to that with his mother, slowly disintegrates the more he experiences things which he cannot share, which in turn alienates him even further.

Surrogates

In light of his father's absence, Michael and his mother search out a surrogate father figure among two main characters: Carl and Kai. A major point of focus is Michael's ability (or inability) to form healthy attachments to them. Working from Bowlby's theory that "an inability to form deep relationships with others may result when the succession of substitutes is too frequent" (Bretherton 763), Michael's ability to legitimize a favourable model of masculinity becomes increasingly difficult with each failed and successive surrogate. More so, it becomes increasingly difficult to form a lasting relationship with anyone other than Nettie, who can be read as both a secure base and an explorative attachment figure.²

Carl

Kobak and Madsen highlight the importance of expectations of caregiver availability and maintenance in light of the disruption of attachment bonds, where threats to the availability of an attachment figure can produce fear, anger and sadness (24). During the family dinner after Michael gets his licence, Michael uses the news of his mother's new relationship to bargain for more freedom, while simultaneously alienating himself from his mother. In addition, Michael recognizes that there is a similarity between his father and Carl

² One wonders then why Nettie is the exception? Perhaps, the answer is because she retains a chronological priority. His attachment to her develops before his father leaves. Thus, he can return to her to find security, albeit he does ignore her in high school.

early on. In the first scene that we see them together, michael is waiting in his old room (now repurposed as a sewing room) for Nettie to come home.³ michael has moved to the basement at this point, due to an incident in which his high school coach, Longley, emasculates him in front of his peers. When michael initially returns to his room, he remembers being punished by his father in that room, and associates the two events. He moves out because he wants to get away from that association. When Carl comes in, michael tries to ignore him but Carl teases him, saying he didn't know michael sewed. This comment serves to emasculate michael by suggesting that he performs actions of a 'feminine' persuasion. Having experienced this emasculation before, at the hands of his coach, michael learns the behaviour and then projects it back at Carl. This is the second example of such behaviour; the first is when michael calls Bobby gushy and sentimental. michael attacks Carl's insecurities about his sexual ability and his relationship with his mother. As evident in Carl's body language, michael is successful in destabilizing Carl's fragile ego. At a loss for how to verbally respond, Carl reacts with physical aggression:

Carl came up behind me, slamming a hand down on my shoulder. A total Longely. 'Look, you little faggot. I'm gonna be around here a lot longer than you are. So the sooner you get used to it, the better. Got that?' Whatever. Then he pushed off and made his way towards the door. But he wasn't finished. 'I mean, I'm the one who's gonna be looking after your mom from now on – not you,' he said, as if to convince himself. Still, I spun around. I was all set to lay into him, tell him something truly nasty, but thought otherwise. He had his towel clutched so tightly it ate into his waist. And that was enough for me. (220)

³ The room shifts from a masculine space to a traditionally feminine one.

Here, michael's resentment for Carl is juxtaposed with his memory of the Longley incident and of habitually being disciplined in his room by his father. Thus, the conflict resonates on a nostalgic level. Furthermore, michael returns to this location by habit throughout the novel when he has feelings of guilt. So, michael is struggling not just with Carl's relationship to his mother but also with his resentment for his father. Since michael feels like the 'man of the house' after his father leaves, Carl disrupts a number of michael's attachments and roles. Carl becomes the illegitimate usurper. Thus, the exchange is largely a competitive *tête-à-tête* for dominance. In a way, michael wins the exchange by destabilizing Carl's confidence through sexual embarrassment, but this does not change the fact that his mother ends up favouring Carl's attention. While michael never really grows to like Carl, he eventually realizes that he must put up with him.

It is important to point out the several incidents where Carl makes a genuine attempt to reach out to michael. One of these incidents is on prom night. Expecting Carl to say something stupid to him while they wait, michael is surprised when Carl tells him: "I think it's big of you to attend your grad after all. You've made your mother very happy" (280). michael recognizes that Carl cares about his mother's happiness, which frustrates him even more because michael wants someone to lash out at, and without his father or Carl to blame for his feelings, michael has no scapegoat. He alone must take responsibility for his feelings of abandonment. Despite the brief moment of compassion, michael and Carl never truly manage to get past their differences. Very soon afterwards, Carl offers him his Cadillac for prom. The Cadillac serves as a symbol of masculinity, power and wealth. It is a status symbol which many men pursue often in the hope of attracting women's attention, but michael gets angry at this gesture. Aside from the condescending way that it is offered (as an

alternative to the non-masculine vehicle his mother owns), Carl does not understand that such a grandiose display of masculinity, power and wealth is not important to michael. In fact, the gesture simply serves to enforce Carl's self-image. michael, of course, sees this as unseemly. Thus Carl's offer is interpreted by michael as peacocking. In addition, when Carl gives michael a trip to Europe for graduating, michael perceives it as a way for Carl to get him out of the way. michael gets angry because the trip means that he will lose precious time with Nettie. At this point, he tells his interrogators that he "felt so unwanted" (285). It is with this backdrop that michael attends his prom. When he returns home, he finds out that Nettie is dying.

michael retreats to his old bedroom, which he has come to associate with episodes of being disciplined by his father. After a while, Carl comes in and makes a small though not entirely insignificant gesture. "A little later, Carl leaned in. 'Hey pal. Sorry to hear about Nettie. I had a sister who died at her age. Drowned. If you ever want to talk about it, I'll be around. Just letting you know'" (302). But, before michael can say anything, Carl leaves. Once again, michael is encouraged to explore his feelings but is never given the opportunity. Carl's good will, which is too little too late, becomes more symbolic than practical. Thus, at this point, michael feels completely alienated. With Nettie dying, his mother and Carl sending him to Europe, and his sister's increasing absence from his life, he feels isolated.

Kai

Although michael eventually comes to tolerate Carl's presence, he does not accept him as a role model. As a result, he searches out other alternatives – particularly ones that do not threaten the relationship between him and his mother. Shortly after michael reunites with

Nettie, his next door neighbours, the Billingtons, move out – presumably due to persecution for Mr. Billington's penchant for child pornography (138). michael and Nettie hear rumours that the new neighbour, Kai Ragnarsson, is a big-time drug dealer, and, upon seeing him pull up to the house with his wife, Nettie and michael find themselves enamoured. They develop their relationship to the Ragnarssons around readily available advertising images of rock'n'roll idols:

Nettie pointed out that Kai and Dottie reminded her of one of those rock'n'roll couples you'd see in record-store promos. I had to agree. Not that we thought that was something to aspire to – but, again, compared to the world we were living in. So: think Paul and Linda McCarthey, James Taylor and Carly Simon, Buckingham/Nicks. Imagine the deep tans, the wind-blown hair, the look of a couple who just flew in from somewhere important, somewhere that mattered, somewhere sexy... But whatever. We were most impressed with the Ragnarssons. (141)

Eventually, michael and Nettie come to recognize the incongruence between their imagination of the Ragnarssons and their experience of them. One evening, michael's sister and mother are both out of the house, making it easy for him and Nettie to sneak over to the Ragnarssons' for dinner. Once inside, michael recalls the layout of the house and makes particular note of remembering the basement even though he cannot remember why he had ever been down there. Once Kai comes downstairs, all four of them get drunk, smoke weed and talk about Dottie's "love experiments". When Kai and Dottie fall asleep at 9:30, michael and Nettie snoop around their house; once again Nettie initiates the exploration here and encourages michael to join in. In the basement the mustiness gets michael excited, and they find the Ragnarssons' sex dungeon in the master bedroom. This is one of several ambiguous

references to a sexual tension between him and Billington, as the possibility of michael's having been molested as a child comes up several times. Even though michael tells his mother that he was never molested by Billington (137), he does have a "dream" in which Billington performs sexual acts on him (297-8). Eventually, michael and Nettie have sex in the basement, at which point michael decides that their own sexual experiments are no longer a game like they once had been. michael realizes that he really cares for Nettie, and the narrative fragment ends with them sneaking out of the house.

Eventually, michael decides to part ways with Kai. Similarly to how he parts ways with John and Penny, the inclusion of sexual elements into their relationships, which are pseudo-familial, intimidates him, specifically when they transgress the socially accepted conventions of those relationships. Otherwise michael is generally comfortable with the erosion of boundary lines between teacher/student, adult/youth, parent/child. It is sexuality that complicates the erosion of these boundaries most. michael is very wary about his sexuality and who he explores it with (Nettie being one of the exceptions) probably due to socio-cultural attitudes toward child sexuality. After all this element of mentorship or exchange (from old to young, white collar to blue collar, authority to subordinate) is something that resonates strongly with michael. He continues to develop it in his later productions, which suggests that michael is searching for some transference of knowledge or expertise: some sort of coming of age ritual. Yet, sexuality is one of the few areas in which the boundary lines remain rigid, and as we will see later, michael uses his pornographies to challenge this.

It should be noted that Kai's involvement in michael's life is predominantly indirect, and it is this peripheral influence that overwhelmingly connects him to michael's father.

After all, michael himself draws the comparison in his introduction to his first porno, *The Family Dog*, when he “casts” Kai as the father. However, unlike the photos he burns earlier in the novel, the “found pornography” re-appropriates the text rather than destroying it, which shows some developmental progress on michael’s part.

Still, Kai’s presence lingers over michael throughout the rest of the novel, in the leitmotif of the castrating father: Flynn tells michael that Kai is his boss, which is partly why michael never stands up to him. He knows that he cannot escape because Kai knows where he lives. michael fears for his privacy (lest Kai should reveal his pornographic involvement) and for his family’s safety. Hence, he cannot come clean because the nature of pornography as something hidden and illicit (especially in regard to his age) works against him. While secrecy helps michael avoid persecution or criticism from the general public, it also makes him susceptible to manipulation by others.⁴

It is unsurprising that this connection between Kai and the father persists. However, before this persistence is examined, there is one key element that requires attention: Kai’s capacity for violence. Before having sex on the porch, Kai and Dottie are discussing Mrs. Smart’s nosiness: “‘Well,’ said Kai, ‘the next time somebody sticks their nose in our business, I’ll just shoot it off’ (182). The threat of violence here is fundamental because it reinstates the fear of the castrating father within michael. Kai’s lack of hesitation in resorting to violence reminds michael of his father. Thus, the possibility of michael being punished, which disappeared with his father’s departure and was discontinued by his mother, is reinstated by Kai. This is perhaps the reason why Flynn is able to control michael so easily: michael has grown up without having to resist the power of a patriarchal figure, which is not

⁴ Witold Gombrowicz’s *Pornografia* serves as a seminal work regarding the connotations of pornography as that which is hidden.

to say that he would be able to successfully confront Kai or Flynn otherwise, but rather that michael is very submissive to physically violent forms of power. Thus michael struggles very little when Flynn uses his association to Kai as a threat. And although we only ever see Kai acting friendly to michael, it is the *threat* of violence that looms over him for the rest of the novel: “And I was talking less. I mean, there was no one around to talk to. After Kai finally got busted, Dottie went psycho and hid behind the blinds all day. So that took care of them” (189). However, Kai’s imprisonment does not really “take care of them” like michael thinks. For three nights in a row michael has a dream in which Kai ends up killing him. These dreams occur on the three days leading up to a meeting with Flynn (266). So it appears that michael’s subconscious knows something that his conscious mind yet does not. During the meeting, Flynn beats michael up when he tries to quit working for him. It is here that Flynn tells him that his boss “[is] capable of the most heinous things” (274), and then reveals who his boss is. “[W]hat Flynn had to say next convinced me that no matter how fast I ran, no matter how hard I tried to hide, he would find me eventually. Hell he might even kill me! So what did he say? Flynn told me his boss was none other than Kai Ragnarsson” (274). So, Kai comes to haunt michael even in his absence, and Flynn uses this threat to co-opt michael’s talents. While Flynn is the one who directly uses michael, it is Kai’s indirect influence that keeps him inline. Thus Kai’s legacy for michael is one of anxiety which effectually situates michael in a position of inaction and subservience.

Films

This section will explore the development of michael’s art-as-becoming by addressing his films in a serial manner. A chronological examination will show both how

pornography allows michael to deal with his experience of family and how his craft develops over time. What initially begins as a few leaps and bounds at articulation and representation becomes an active struggle for control over his mode of expression. In his films, michael builds off of many prefabricated tropes in order to shape and make meaning of his experiences. Furthermore, the films simultaneously help michael recognize and constitute his identity.

In discussing attachment theory's application to therapy, Jeremy Holmes identifies the hermeneutic aspect of psychoanalysis in regard to individual cases:

Recent developments in Attachment Theory suggest an existing bridge between the narrative approach of contemporary psychoanalysis and the science of developmental psychology. There is a strong link between the kinds of attachment patterns found in infancy and the narratives that people tell about themselves several years later. (9)

He suggests that securely attached children tell coherent stories about their lives, while insecurely attached children have problems with narrative competence. Therefore, the shift from coherence in his initial films (within the narrated world) to fragmentation and incoherence in the acid trip and the interrogation shows michael's eventual descent into insecurity. I will discuss this more in depth later on.

Joe and Barbie

The first film that michael makes is called *Joe and Barbie*. It is born out of an assignment given by Mrs. Singleton. The film follows a married couple, Joe and Barbie, as they deal with marital troubles (29). In the final cut, however, Joe and Ken run off together at the end, thus diverging from the conventional heteronormativity of family structures as

represented on television. The exact amount of fidelity between *Joe and Barbie* and michael's home life, according to michael, is minimal. When Penny asks him about the film, he says that *Joe and Barbie* was more similar to what was on TV at the time than to what was happening at home. Several things are happening here; michael is sensationalizing his plot, satirizing television programs and choosing marital trouble as his primary subject matter. Perhaps given that this is one of michael's first works, he relies heavily on prefabricated tropes to ground his lived experience. After Penny teaches the class about the monolithic and homogenous representations characteristic of TV, and after she critiques michael's treatment, michael makes significant changes to the film. He uses idealized mid-twentieth-century suburban family sitcoms as a template from which to challenge the functionality and gender regime of the nuclear family. michael introduces marital trouble as well as homosexual desire into the formula in order to produce a more diverse representation of family life. Specifically mentioned is the show *Leave it to Beaver*, which is as much about American boyhood as it is about the idealization of American families. The show's framing of the narrative from the boy's point of view was quite innovative for its time, which explains why michael is so drawn to it as an exemplary model. michael says, "I wanted to make fun of TV. I wanted to do something that would remind people of TV, but then twist it into something unexpected, something you wouldn't see on prime -time" (63).

In discussing narrative processing, cognitive narratologist Richard Gerrig argues that we are more likely to use exemplary schemas from our long term memory than prototypical schemas (as classically thought): "Rather than invoking static, bounded schemas, the exemplar view suggests that the particular narrative contexts in which information appears helps to determine the memory traces that will flesh out readers' representations" (40). While

Gerrig is concerned with the interpretative process of narrative competency, we have already established the similarity between production and reception. Hence it can be argued that in the production of his films, michael uses exemplary schemas stored in his long term memory to construct a coherent narrative. These schemas rely on cultural codes drawn both from his lived experiences as well as from mass media like films, books, music etc. It is, then, the choice of subject matter (marital trouble) that gives us the biggest insight into his frame of mind.

As michael develops his craft, the rest of his films become increasingly referential to his lived experience (although the crucial aspect of fiction/fantasy persists), and the sensationalism he employs becomes a tool dealing with past issues by reframing them in new ways. Thus expression serves a dual process, at once both reflective and intuitive (Gerrig 37). One other thing to note is that michael's final version of *Joe and Barbie* is quite different – perhaps due to Penny's critique of it as 'a pitiful male fantasy.' Penny's criticism of heteronormativity makes michael expand his conception of masculinity and its performance. While Penny's involvement is minimal, it still demonstrates the collaborative aspect of the production of the film, and it brings visibility to michael's role as a scriptor rather than as an author. After all, the text takes on new meanings after its initial conception and production, and in defending his final version, michael says that despite his own intentions, even he is not quite sure what message he was trying to convey. Thus, what is significant, and what will be discussed further later on, is the extent to which michael shares, retains and loses control of his productions and consequently his actions. It is about the severity of the constraints put on him by others. At no point does michael have complete freedom or complete subservience in his actions or in the creation of his films.

The Family Dog

For his next video, *The Family Dog*, michael secretly records the Ragnarssons having sex on their porch. He zooms in and out on different body parts throughout the scene and creates a narrative by choosing what body parts to look at in what order. Perhaps this is why michael stipulates that *The Family Dog* is not a “found performance” after all. Rather it is subject to the same limits as *Cinéma Vérité* or Direct Cinema with their impossibility of objectivity. As French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin says, “there are two ways to conceive of the cinema of the Real: The first is to pretend that you can present reality to be seen; the second is to pose the problem of reality. In the same way, there were two ways to conceive Cinéma vérité. The first was to pretend that you brought truth. The second was to pose the problem of truth” (qtd. in Lee-Wright 93). In michael’s case, the elements of scopophilia bring visibility to the film’s distortion of the ‘real.’ In addition, michael re-contextualizes the footage in his introduction with several references to his home life. Thus he provides insight into his relationship with his family as well.

michael’s resentment for his father is most evident in the role michael casts for him; he introduces the film by saying, “this is the story of a man who does unspeakable things to his family, and then, when he goes to bed at night, dreams about what they might do to him” (212). In response, Nettie points out that the father remains in control of the punishment, because he is the one who dreams it up. It is interesting, then, that michael would situate the father in this dominant power role, with the father’s masochistic pleasure dominating the scene. michael pretends to present a ‘reality’ in which the father’s dominance is total. In the film, the expression of the dominant masculine desire supersedes the expression of the other

characters. This is unsurprising considering that all of the characters who encourage michael to express himself are either female or non-heteronormative, while the characters who ridicule michael are typically heteronormative males.

What is surprising then is the inclusion of perverse, non-heteronormative sexual acts in the film – the husband is penetrated by the wife who in turn is penetrated by the dog. Gayle Rubin's hierarchy of sexuality in *Thinking Sex* (1984) helps to explain michael's revision. Rubin argues that sexual acts that exist outside of a heterosexual, married, and procreative paradigm (outside of the 'charmed circle'), are judged to be immoral by our culture. Hence framing this perverse sexuality as a product of the father's control is curious. michael complicates the representation of normative masculine sexuality. Even though he does little to frame this pleasure beyond the father's control, he challenges the homogeneity of the heteronormative veneer.

The Family Dog is also telling about michael's relationship to his mother. In the introduction, michael claims that the clip is an outtake from an older film called *The Story of this Family – So Far*, which is a reference to the home movie michael watches with his mother after destroying her photos. This reference indicates that michael used his family history as an exemplary model in the formulation of the introduction. It also indicates the way in which michael perceives his parents' relationship; he sees his father as a man who abuses his family, while he sees his mother as a woman who does not impose on others. michael includes a piece of her advice in the introduction to his film: "I would also like to emphasize that just because you may see something you don't like doesn't mean you have the right to take away someone else's right to see it" (212). He frames the video within a non-judgemental imperative to distance himself from the oppressiveness of the masculine

influence. However, perhaps due to his reappropriation, michael hypocritically acts as if he has the right to record and distribute the film; he acts as if he owns the footage.

The distinction between what is private and what is public is arguably made problematic in this instance, since the Ragnarssons have sex on their balcony within view of their neighbors. He has no ethical dilemma about screening the film because he feels that he has repurposed the footage into something else. He tries to avoid responsibility by maintaining a non-judgemental imperative. This is, after all, not the first incident where the issue of privacy arises. Earlier in the novel, michael and Nettie take film rushes from Penny's class and remove the black marker which covers them. At the time, michael feels uncomfortable about encroaching on the Singletons' privacy, but Nettie partially allays his anxieties by positing the issue as a problem of judgement vs. interpretation. Hence, when michael decides to screen *The Family Dog*, he does so without restraint.

Thanks to Nettie's critique, Jo-Jo, and a number of heterogeneous audience receptions, michael comes to be more interested in audiences' interpretations of a text. Barthes would distinguish this difference as that between the writerly text and the readerly text. michael looks to create a writerly text – one that requires significant engagement on the part of the audience. This is why he eventually drops the speech and begins to study their diverse reactions instead. When discussing the screenings with the interrogators he says, "In many ways these screenings were the most useful to me in that I learned a lot about the male species" (215). The reactions of his audience help him learn about the way some masculinities operate. The case of Derrick Sweeney is particularly insightful because it demonstrates the contradictions or diverse performances of masculinity. Derrick has a commerce degree, is Catholic and is engaged to a woman, whom he says he may continue to

cheat on after marriage. During the course of the screening Derrick drinks an excessive amount of beer, is carried out after an impromptu strip-tease, returns naked with an erection and a paper bag over his head, and is escorted back out. Hence, it is ironic that Derrick claims he is a laid back person. He tells Michael that he thinks the film is sick, but will be good for enrolment. The juxtaposition of this self-perceived conservatism with his excessive partying and loss of control demonstrates the contradictions of masculine performances. In one instance, Derrick plays the wholesome family man, yet in another plays the role of the frat party animal. This, in parallel with Butler's theories about gender, shows the contextually dynamic shift of gender performance as well as the heterogeneity of masculine roles. By studying characters like Derrick, Michael is able to develop a more nuanced understanding of masculinity, as opposed to the one presented in his introduction.

So, Michael learns to use pornography as a window into the values and perceptions of his society. As he says to the interrogators, "I think it had more to do with something else [Angela Carter] said: how pornography, if it's used properly – and by that I mean in the larger context of the world – how it can call into question all the inequalities inherent in the way the world is organized" (218). What he is saying is that a complicated text can draw out the contradictions created by an imperfect system thereby giving visibility to its inequalities, and, while he attempts to embed his morals into his pornographies, the interpretation of his videos remains ultimately dependent on the reader.

CHAPTER 2

Teachers

In “Normative Development: The Ontogeny of Attachment,” Marvin and Britner point out that “[o]lder siblings, specific teachers, adult members of the extended family, older neighbors, and coaches all become important people in the lives of school-age children and adolescents” (288). Yet, Marvin and Britner are hesitant about whether these bonds are affectional, attachmental or other (288). While more research is needed on these particular relationships, it is my assumption that michael relies on these successive figures (in an attachmental way) since he does not receive enough attachment at home. Regardless of whether they are true attachment figures or not, these surrogates similarly “challenge [michael’s competency] for adaptation to new elements of [his] culture as well as to [his] individual masculine style” (Grossmann 310). Notably, the teachers that prove to be the strongest attachment figures are either female or non-heteronormative males.

Mr. Gingell

The first teacher that makes a lasting impression on michael is Mr. Gingell, though not much is known about him. Since michael craves explorative attachment, Gingell’s reputation of taking his classes on field trips appeals to michael. Even though he never gets to be in his class, michael assigns Gingell the role of the ideal teacher. This fantasy is sustained because michael never actually deals with the real man; his narrative only pertains to the time after Gingell “retires,” and the idealized image has a significant influence on his life. michael spends a significant portion of the novel trying to sort through rumours to figure out what really happened to Gingell. His persistence indicates that Gingell was important to

him. When the interrogators ask michael whether he thinks Gingell got fired because he was a homosexual, michael tells them, “probably” (56). michael is accepting of Gingell’s sexuality, despite the social and cultural stigma against homosexuality, and he is skeptical of the corresponding rumors like the one that said Gingell molested a special needs student. The school’s career-oriented thinking takes the place of providing emotional and mental support to michael. His experience of this change in institutional structure and priorities is illustrated by the following segment of michael’s testimony about Gingell’s termination:

- It was during our first week back and [Mrs. Leggie] had been assigned to meet with us individually to talk about our future plans. I think I spent my entire fifteen-minute visit rambling on about how I felt about Mr. Gingell and what had happened to him. And all I remember, the whole time, was her leaning back in her squeaky chair, tapping her pencil against her teeth, looking at me like I was out of my mind, like I was somehow complicit in all this. (18)

Mrs. Leggie’s reaction demonstrates disregard on behalf of the school. michael’s mental state in regard to the incident is ignored and no attempt is made to counsel him on the matter. The school’s position, it seems, is to cover up the incident and keep it quiet. No other appointments between Mrs. Leggie and michael are scheduled; rather, michael is left to deal with the situation on his own, and, consequently, he does not get the opportunity to explore his thoughts and feelings in a safe way. The extent to which the school has failed to provide him with sufficient screening or support becomes apparent on the second last day of elementary school when Mrs. Leggie tells michael that she is glad that he is over Gingell’s termination (90). She recalls how michael was more disturbed than others by the incident and simply assumes that he is not troubled by it anymore. They do not discuss the incident any

further. Instead, she proceeds to talk about his future plans and his aptitude test, in which his most successful careers are a florist, a mortician or a soldier, thus providing him with dichotomously gendered options (death being a neutral one). Thus, michael loses confidence in the school system and its employees since they do not provide him with a means to explore his feelings. At the same time, he also learns about the school's gender regime and its socially accepted forms of sexuality. michael continues to admire Gingell and uses him as an exemplar later on.

Penny Singleton

Penny is far more attentive to her students' needs than the school's guidance counsellor. She cares about michael and facilitates his adjustment to the school environment. This is especially important to michael, considering his arrested emotional development and his lack of explorative attachments at home. Penny's first order of business is to win the class over through open communication; she acknowledges how much they liked Mr. Gingell:

[...] our new teacher took a small step forward and told us, in a very soft voice, still smiling, that she knew how much we loved Mr. Gingell, and that if we worked hard this semester, she would tell us as much about what had happened to him as she possibly could; but that we had to work really really hard, and that we had to all really really trust each other, because what we were going to do in her class wasn't going to be easy, and that it was going to be far different from what last year's Grade Sevens did. (19)

By providing a coherent transition of the class, from Gingell to herself, Penny secures a strong base from which the class (and michael in particular) can safely learn/explore, and even though she changes the structure of the class, she really does not stray too far from the curriculum. Instead, she finds new ways to teach the same material. For example: she combines several class blocks into one film-making class. This unorthodoxy, however, garners disdain from the vice principal, who takes it upon himself to reprimand Penny and restore the class to its original structure. It is 1974 after all and Penny's methods are unlike anything ever used at the school. Still, the class continues its projects in a smaller capacity during Language Arts. The students perform hands-on exercises like writing a synopsis and treatment, shooting a film, and editing the footage.

Within this structure Penny teaches michael and the rest of the class a number of lessons. After michael's pitch for *Joe and Barbie*, Penny has little to say besides that it "had all the elements necessary for a good film: story, plot, character, conflict" (28). Sensing his disappointment, Penny acknowledges his enthusiasm when she introduces the next assignment – the treatment; however, michael loses his enthusiasm when Penny asks him to stay behind after class (28). Since staying after class typically signifies 'being in trouble', michael is anxious; however, he comes to realize that Penny is in fact just concerned about his well-being, when she asks him about the similarities between *Joe and Barbie* and his home life. Her choice to communicate with him further fosters trust which comes in useful when she has to be critical later on.

When they hand in their treatments, Penny's reviews are scathing. She goes as far as to call michael's work a "pitiful male fantasy," since all of the characters act within in a narrow heteronormative paradigm. In the treatment, Joe and Ken fight over Barbie and then

her younger sister, Skipper. The men use aggressive violence to deal with their conflict, while Barbie and Skipper become passive objects in the fulfillment of the men's desire. It is no wonder then that Penny calls this a 'pitiful male fantasy;' the treatment normalizes the inequality of the gendered power relations. However, at this point michael still uses his texts to simply articulate his experience of these cultural stereotypes. It is due to Penny's criticism, and michael's trust for her, that michael begins to produce critical films that take radical departures from the normative paradigm. Since michael trusts Penny, he knows that she is being extra hard on the class because she wants to challenge them. Philip Riley highlights the importance of this sort of pedagogical approach within the typical view of hierarchical teacher-student relationships:

[In] the ideal situation the teacher provides firm support, and empathically fails each student, so they learn not only about the world around them, but also their self-efficacy within it. This is the common attachment model applied to education: teacher as care-giver and student as care-seeker. (626)

Since Penny has already provided open communication between herself and her students, she is able to be critical without alienating them. As evidenced by michael's final revisions of *Joe and Barbie*, her method works.

Penny also tries to convince the students that it is important to work with others and to consider others' perspectives, especially in a collaborative medium like film production. This is why she has the students pitch their film ideas to the class. Simultaneously, she attempts to dispel the idea of the author and tries to get her students to think of themselves more in terms of what Roland Barthes, in "The Death of the Author," would call scriptors. That is to say, in place of the sole pre-existing author/owner of the work, for whom the

meaning is dependent on, emerges the scriptor, who is born with the text, and does not exist outside of it. Penny wants the students to think beyond their own self-interests, which explains why she is so upset when none of the students help each other with their films. Still, michael and Nettie eventually take these lessons to heart, as evidenced by their creation of a film collective. This pedagogical mentorship is in stark contrast to Flynn's eventual claim that "collectives don't work" and to the interrogators' imposition on michael's narrative, both of which demonstrate a co-optive and hegemonic narrative process.

The next lesson takes place during the editing exercise, when Nettie steals some of Penny's film rushes. Together with michael, they remove the black marker to get a glimpse into her private life. I have briefly mentioned the problematic nature of this voyeuristic element in chapter one. Thus my focus here is the interrogative nature of Penny's response. When she confronts him, michael tries to cover for Nettie, but Penny already knows who took the rushes. She gives michael the opportunity to confess, but instead of coming clean, he lies to her. An interesting comparison can be made here between Penny and the interrogators. Both parties know that michael is lying, and both allow michael to reveal his hand by letting him lie his way into a contradiction (49). Penny does not allow him to deceive himself, which michael tends to do often (consciously or unconsciously). While self-deception can be seen as advantageous, according to Trivers' evolutionary-biology informed approach, it can be harmful for relationships as well. Trivers argues that the success of deceiving others increases with the success of deceiving one's self. Hence self-deception could allow michael to manipulate or lie to others more easily; however, this self-deception is dangerous because it allows him to rationalize destructive behaviours and lose touch with other characters' realities. Penny tries to get michael to come to this realization on his own

by letting him lie his way into a contradiction. When he does, she tells him that she is too tired to come up with an adequate punishment and that simply relating what he saw to her would suffice. michael tells the interrogators that he “couldn’t think of a worse punishment than having to describe to somebody a part of their life that they so obviously chose to forget” (48). This comment can be interpreted at the level of the interrogation as well; michael’s life is being probed and he is being made to relive memories that he would like to forget. The interrogators call michael out for fabricating parts of the scene, but regardless of its unreliability, michael says that Penny gave him something that day: an insight. “It all comes down to property” (50). Penny’s rushes, his mother’s photos, the judge’s evidence, Flynn’s mug shots, and even michael’s testimony: they are all about property.

Since both his mother and Penny try to teach him about property through incidents with photos and film rushes, we see the first signs of the transposition of attachment from michael’s mother onto Penny. A week before the Christmas holidays, michael notices Penny crying as he leaves the class and he asks her if everything is okay. The commonly conceived hierarchy between teachers and students is upset here when michael attempts to give care to Penny. His actions are reciprocal to Penny’s own caregiving, which in turn demonstrates the influence Penny has as a role model. The two begin to develop a strong bond, especially since Penny has lost a child and since michael continually seeks out a secure exploratory attachment figure. Thus, the traditional model for viewing teacher-student relationships must be expanded here. Recognizing the limitations of this unidirectional structure, Phillip Riley says:

if the teacher has attachment needs that only the students can fulfil, a dyadic rather than unidirectional attachment between teacher and students can and will develop. In

this situation the adult attachment model of reciprocal care-giving and care-seeking is a more appropriate lens through which to view the teacher–student relationship. (626)

Thus, a more reciprocal relationship begins to form here, in which michael takes on some responsibility for Penny's well-being. Their relationship begins to be transposed into a more familial one.

Penny gets fired in the parking lot on her last day before Christmas. And, just as there were several versions of Gingell's "retirement," there are three different versions to Penny's termination: Margie Scott's, Bobby's and the "official" version, which Stinson cites as health reasons. When Margie asks whether Penny had the same sickness as Mr. Gingell, Stinson says, "I'm afraid it's a bit more serious than that" (51). michael does not believe either of the versions, and the episode further undermines his ability to trust the school since the institutional removal of both teachers disrupts the vital attachment bonds he has formed. His disappointment over the loss of an attachment that he had long been craving for, manifests in distrust.

Even though this marks the end of Penny's influence as their teacher, michael and Nettie continue to secretly see her and her husband at their home, thereby furthering the transposition from an educational into a familial structure. The Singletons treat them like adults and encourage them to talk about whatever they would like, sex included. Eventually, michael and Nettie are invited over to Penny's place for a graduation party, but at this point michael is sufficiently confused about their relationship and does not want to go. Since Nettie showed him the child porn photos, he becomes suspicious of adults. He begins to question what John and Penny get out of the relationship and his insecurities over his adolescence come to the forefront of his mind. Ironically, it is at the mention of a graduation

ceremony, which serves as a coming of age ritual (and which Nettie so desperately wants), that these anxieties about adolescence surface. Having little insight into michael's mind frame here, Nettie is dismissive of his anxiety, and rather than coming clean with her, michael makes up a lie in order to try to get out of going to the party:

I told her the biggest lie I could think of. I said, "Well, I guess what's really bugging me is that I don't trust adults much since we looked at the stuff in your dad's study. And, I mean, it's been bothering me so much I'm beginning to wonder if Mr. Gingell's a child molester after all." (85)

Yet, there is a seed of truth in this 'lie'; michael really *is* anxious about attending the party, but he hides it from Nettie because the incident with the child porn photos has destabilized their relationship. Nettie 'freaks out' at him but michael says that he is unsure of whether the child porn photos are exploitive or not. Then he wonders whether Penny, John and Gingell could actually be involved in a porn ring. His anxieties get mixed up with his lie (self-deception) and he finds himself even more confused than before. There is no way that Nettie can help michael without his coming clean to her. After all, Nettie herself claims that she is uncertain of whether michael believes in his lies or not (160). However, their relationship is strained and the proceeding silence at least indicates that they both retain some uncertainty about these new experiences.

They end up attending the party, but michael's mistrust does not abate. When he and Nettie are presented with prizes for their videos, he again becomes suspicious because he believes it is unfair for their videos to be judged against the rest of the class's unedited ones:

I mean, in a way we were told we'd won these things. But they were presented to us like gifts, right? Or maybe they were bribes to keep us from bringing up the Gingell

affair. I honestly don't know. I mean, I was at a point in my life where I was desperate for certainty, if that makes any sense. And what John and Penny presented to us that day had more to do with confusion than anything else. (88)

With Nettie showing him the adolescent erotica and with all the secrecy behind the Gingell incident, michael does not know what to think, so he turns down the present, thus marking the end of his relationship with Penny and John and the failure of the coming of age ritual. He no longer trusts them and so there is no legitimate adult figure, in his mind, to convey this milestone upon him. He ends up ditching Nettie in order to distance himself from the confusing situation. He has no idea how to deal with the changes and there is no one to help him: he no longer trusts John and Penny, he cannot talk to his mother or sister (since they do not know about his secret visits), and he is upset about Nettie's reaction to his anxieties about the party. This is how he begins high school: by turning to Bobby and hegemonic masculinity for peer approval and camaraderie at a time when his life is getting increasingly complicated and when there is little certainty.

Mrs. Abbot

michael's relationship with his teachers in high school is significantly different than those with his teachers in elementary school, due in part to his loss of confidence in the system and in part to his decision to acquiesce to the status quo anyway. He looks for sanctuary in the high school code, which promotes a masculinity that disregards school work and enforces heteronormativity. However, there is one teacher who is able to reach michael, albeit in a limited capacity: his English teacher, Mrs. Abbot.

One day, Mrs. Abbot hands back the class's poetry essays. She leaves michael's assignment to last so she can read it out to the class, at which point his peers begin teasing him. Again, the idea of the class as a panopticon emerges; however this time, the effect is a negative one. Through ridicule, the class tries to get michael to conform to the dominant masculine performance, which includes the casual treatment of schoolwork. Thus, his adeptness (especially in English) garners ridicule from the class, because English and Language Arts are considered more feminine subjects in the gendered division of labour, as addressed by Connell ("Teaching the Boys" 217). Despite all of michael's attempts at aloofness, the incident affects him. "Then, just as she'd finished with the comments, the buzzer went. So I bolted. Left her standing there with the assignment in her hands. Didn't even look at her. That shut the class up. But I didn't care. I mean, it was nothing. It meant absolutely nothing to me" (190). michael's over-insistence on the fact that the incident meant nothing indicates that he is trying to convince himself. Yet, despite his supposed apathy, Abbot's encouragement is not simply dismissed. When michael's classmates nominate him for valedictorian as a gag, he lets Mrs. Abbot convince him to do it, perhaps out of some resonant fondness for English and its capacity for expression or perhaps since she showed him that she cares. "She said I was one of the few students in my class who had anything to say. She said it was a good opportunity for me to tell the school how I felt" (289).

For the speech michael shares his final version of the bullshit detector, which ends up taking the shape of crosshairs: this is an interesting symbol to choose, considering that michael thinks most of his class was expecting him to show up with an Uzi and kill some teachers. He tells everyone that the Bullshit Detector belongs to everyone (a collective product), and that they had some hand in creating it. Thus he puts Penny's earlier criticisms

to practice. He figuratively turns the crosshairs on his classmates, but as michael tells us, they do not understand. While it would be difficult to argue that michael finds any legitimate transformation into adulthood from the event in light of his disregard for his school's authority, the fact that he publicly expresses himself shows a maturation on his part.

Students

The institutional termination of his attachment figures and the inclusion of sexual elements into those hierarchical relationships make michael wary of teachers and the school system, and since michael's mother is increasingly absent in his life, michael transfers the significance of attachments to his peers. This is one of the predominant differences between his experience of high school and that of elementary school. In "Attachment in Middle Childhood," Kathryn Kerns discusses the possibility of forming attachment relationships to people other than parental figures: "Although peers may not function as full-fledged attachment figures, children may sometimes direct attachment behaviours to peers, particularly if parents are unavailable" (368). Yet michael is not necessarily an exception in this. After all, high school is typically a time when peer approval becomes more and more important. Hence, the performances of masculinity and femininity by his classmates provide a fruitful area for analysis.

While michael's childhood takes place during the 1970s, *The Pornographer's Poem* was published in 1999. As such, the gender roles exhibited within the novel are undoubtedly filtered through those prevalent at the time of publication. In "Men, Masculinities, and Sexualities in Education and Society: A Call for Evolution!" Douglas Gosse, citing William

Pollack, describes what appropriate performances of masculinity looked like for boys in the 1990s:

boys are encouraged to be stoic, stable, independent, and never show weakness; boys are pressured to achieve status, dominance, and power, to avoid shame at all costs; perhaps most damaging of all, boys are taught to inhibit expression of feelings or urges erroneously seen as “feminine”, such as warmth, dependence, and empathy; and finally, boys are destructively led to believe that they should act macho, even to the point of violence, and engage in risky behaviours that could injure themselves or others – like their role models in popular culture from wrestling, hockey, and football, to action movies and video games. (n.pag.)

Similarly, literature from the 1970s, like Michael Lewis and Marsha Weinraub’s “Origins of Early Sex Development,” tends to posit comparable gender roles for boys within North America. Yet, it is important to note that the rigidity of these gender norms had already begun to dissipate in the 90s, and in its place arose what some have deemed a ‘crisis’ in masculinity. In, *Young Masculinities: Understanding Boys in Contemporary Society*, Stephen Frosh interviewed a number of boys about their relationship to topics like family, masculinity, sports and ethnicity. He argues that recent changes in gender relations have created a situation in which a lack of obvious choices exists. The changes to the social order, which have come from feminist criticism or queer studies, for example, have left boys uncertain about their social roles (professional and personal), identities and sexualities, which, in the past, were clearer and more strictly defined. While these old gender paradigms still exist, they are by no means as socially ingrained nor normalized as they used to be. Thus, the availability of different performative masculine styles has increased:

If there is such a crisis, it presumably has roots in a range of social phenomena... It also both reflects and contributes to the production of a parallel developmental 'crisis' for boys, engaged in the process of identity construction in a context in which there are few clear models and in which the surrounding images of masculinity are complex and confused. (1)

Thus, the tension between these sanctioned performances of masculinity and this apparent 'crisis,' leaves michael uncertain about how to act. The absence of a central masculine role model situates him further into a context where there are numerous conflicting models of masculinity with varying statuses. Still there are several grand narratives about masculinity, which michael identifies:

Grade eight. You are on the bottom. Like every boot-camp movie I've ever seen. The bottom. You are green, you are small, you are hairless from the lashes down. Your metabolism, childlike. I am speaking, of course, of the boys. Of which I was one. The contrast is greatest for boys. Most of the girls, by then, are young women. And if they're not yet young women, they're protected by a young woman's indifference. (90)

This is how michael perceives his school's culture. Star athletes, like Bobby and him, are protected by older boys and are saved from the harassment and teasing experienced by non-athletes – provided, of course, that they followed the code: the right clothes, the right way of speaking and the right associations. Popular kids did not hang out with the "losers" and "you made it clear that your affections were towards the very best-looking [girls], if only to let those protecting you know that you were just like them" (81).

Masculine Exemplars - Bobby

michael's childhood friend and fellow teammate, Bobby Galt, embodies the dominant masculine archetype that michael defines himself against. While they are friends growing up, michael often finds Bobby's actions disreputable. When asked to describe Bobby, michael replies:

Galt's most prominent feature was his jaw. It jutted. When I first met him, back in kindergarten, I assumed it was a birth defect. Only later did I realize it was an affectation, a point of departure for whatever bullshit he was laying on you at the time. So yeah, you could say that everything about Galt centered around that jaw of his. The guy had an opinion on everything – of which he was always misinformed. But he was convincing, [...] He was a good athlete, but he didn't play well without the ball. "Useless when not in possession," I believe, was the scouting report on Robert "Redford" Galt. It bothered me that people thought of him as my best friend.

(38)

michael's allusion to Robert Redford and his stereotypically manly Hollywood jaw, positions Bobby, in opposition to michael, as a consumer and purveyor of a particular type of masculine beauty: one associated both with the rugged sportsman and with the handsome movie actor.

This section will resolve itself to only a brief mention of sports since Chapter 3 will deal with the topic in more detail, but it seems pertinent at least mention athletics and competition here because of its large impact on the school's social structure. Bobby and michael compete against each other often in the novel. They fight over Cindy Carruthers, Randy Cobb and the Male Athlete of the Year Award. Even though they are not quite

friends, they often get associated with each other due to being proficient athletes and teammates. When michael eventually quits, Bobby demands to know what happened to him: “you used to be such a *guy*!” “You used to come out for sports and stuff. Parties. Go in on bags of dope. And, well, you just don’t do those things any more do you?” (8). Defensively, michael attempts to emasculate Bobby by calling him gushy and sentimental. As we have already discussed, this behaviour is learned from Longley and later used on Carl as well. Bobby does not know how to respond, so he changes the subject to something that reinforces his masculinity saying, “You know, if you put a bag on Kowalchuk’s head, I’d fuck her in a second” (8).

Another thing that distinguishes Bobby from michael is his relationship with girls. Cindy Carruthers is a legend in Grade Five even before michael or Bobby meet her. While we are told that both sexes had a vested interest in her, because of her cheerleading career, Bobby lets rumours about her obsess him (93). The gossip about her wealth, beauty, cheerleading skills and all-around desirability feed into Bobby’s fantasy. He becomes so obsessed with getting a picture of her from the Jewish students who know her, that he eventually throws a piece of salted pork through Hyman Goldie’s window when they do not deliver. This results in the school hosting a Holocaust assembly and in Bobby making a public apology to the Jewish kids. While michael is also interested in Cindy, he does not let the rumors consume him. Once he gets to know Cindy, in the flesh, his affections dissipate and he returns to thoughts of Nettie. He recognizes that the femininity which Cindy perpetuates is inherently tied into the masculinity that he rejects and that Bobby champions. In other words, both the hegemonic masculinity and the hegemonic femininity work together to subordinate other non-normative performances of gender.

Masculine Exemplars - Randy

In contrast, michael finds many similarities with Randy. He possesses a sense of humour and is used to people coming and going in his life. Randy's father is hands off and he leaves Randy to his own devices as evident from the Wreck Beach trip. Ray drops them off and drives away, warning them about some dude who has been "laying bad trips on kids" (97). Yet, he differs from michael's father because he is still part of Randy's life and openly expresses his love for him.

At the nude beach, Randy brings the conversation around to Cindy, telling the boys that he had had a sexual encounter with her. At first, Randy spins a tall tale, making Bobby more and more restless until he freaks out and tells Randy to go fuck himself. Once Bobby leaves, Randy tells michael the "real" story which I will discuss later in the pornography section of this chapter. What is important is that michael is still enticed by Cindy at this point. Thus, Randy becomes associated with michael's feelings toward Cindy. When michael goes to take a piss, he recollects Randy's body in vivid detail and fantasizes about being Randy with girls (especially Nettie) and about being with Randy himself. For michael, the idea of being Randy is more exciting than thinking about girls, which he has been doing most of his life. This homosexual fantasy is a new direction for him to exert his libidinal energy; however, when he returns, he sees Randy with Penny and John. Seeing them makes michael's dormant feelings of uncertainty and confusion resurface, since they ended their relationship without michael resolving his confused feelings. He ends up finding Bobby and sneaking away – demonstrating the tension pulling michael between a safe though rigid

hegemonic masculinity and an uncertain and socially 'perverse' masculinity with liberating potential.

Feminine Exemplars - Cindy

We had been aware of Cindy Carruthers since Grade Five. Word had trickled in from Churchill Elementary – the feeder school to Hamber – that there was this beautiful girl named Cindy Carruthers who was so impossibly hot it was unlikely she could even exist. Descriptions varied, which only added to her value. Adding to our intrigue however, was the rumor that Cindy would be attending our soon-to-be high school – Point Grey – because of its winning tradition in basketball and, most importantly, its number-one ranking as the cheerleading capital of B.C. (92)

Even before they meet her in high school, Cindy Carruthers is popular and sought after. She is a rich, tall and thin cheerleader with long blonde hair and blue eyes. The boys spend a long time fantasizing about her and trying to catch a glimpse of her. Since michael's high school, Point Grey, is predominantly middle-class, Cindy's upper-class status endows her with significant social standing and influence (149).

In light of the hegemony of a dichotomous gendered division in michael's school, one could characterize the hegemonic femininity of michael's school through contrast with the dominant and hegemonic masculinity; however, there are several relevant aspects of femininity which should be outlined here. Discussing the entire school's participation in furthering the hegemonic gender performances, Connell argues that "[t]he cheerleaders become models of desirability among the girls, and their desirability further defines the hierarchy of masculinities among the boys, since only the most securely positioned boys will

risk ridicule by asking them for a date” (“Teaching the Boys” 217). Thus, the hegemonic femininity is school oriented, beauty-oriented and intrinsically related to sports, and Cindy becomes an important figure at the top of this feminine hierarchy. In one episode michael says that Cheryl Parks, the new transfer student, was on the fast track to becoming part of Cindy’s inner circle; however, after Cheryl had a seizure in Cindy’s basement, due to the flickering of lights, Cindy’s group ostracized her. “I’ll never forget the look on Cindy’s face when she saw the Parks. It was total judgement. Pure disgust. The same face she made when Cheryl seized” (122). Instead of feeling concern, Cindy looked down on Cheryl for ruining her party. Cindy’s concern for her own image and social standing is more important to her than Cheryl’s wellbeing, so she casts her out of her group. Cindy’s popularity affords her the influence to pass social judgment on her peers and thus she occupies the top of the school’s social hierarchy. michael recognizes that these actions complement the hegemonic masculinity, and this contributes to his self-exile.

Feminine Exemplars - Nettie

Nettie acts as a foil to Cindy. She takes up a complex position by challenging gender participation in sports while adhering to the gender-segregated pattern of school subjects. Like michael, Nettie engages in a number of actions that are contradictory to the performance of the hegemonic gender expectations, and she is often ostracized because of it. As we have already discussed, gender relations at this time were such that boys and girls had to maintain their difference (Gosse, n.d.). Hence, Nettie’s athleticism positions her outside of the normative gender dichotomy. This divergence is also illustrated in the scene after Nettie

shows michael the erotic photos of children. Nettie asks michael whether he likes her, but when michael tells her that he only likes her as a friend, she gets angry and chastises him. She says; "You're just like the Bobby Galts! You think I'm a lez. You guys think that ditz Cindy Carruthers is the girl-friend type, don't you?," to which michael replies, "I don't think you're a lez. And Cindy Carruthers – she's just a rumour" (76). Nettie's anxieties about being seen as a lesbian stem from similar hegemonic and heteronormative gender roles that michael faces from Longley. The perception here is that those who do not acquiesce to the normative and attractive gender roles must be perverse in their sexuality as well. The conflation between gender and sexual orientation is evident here. Thus social perceptions of homosexuality position individuals of other sexual orientations as less than male/female.

Keep in mind that no one has met Cindy at this point: Nettie is in-the-flesh, so to speak, while Cindy is an ethereal fantasy. Nettie's reaction is one of jealousy, to which michael acts in a typically avoidant manner. In fact, michael's early relationship to Nettie can be characterized by what Žižek calls "courtly love" in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*. That is to say that michael constantly finds or creates excuses or barriers to prevent him from developing a healthy relationship with Nettie. Due to his idealization of femininity, as evident in the case of Cindy, Nettie often fails to measure up to his expectations. Her divergence from the hegemonic femininity is one such excuse or barrier. It is not until michael experiences the excesses of Bobby's infatuation and the cruelty of Cindy's actions that michael comes to recognize his complacency in the hegemonic and oppressive gender regime. Cindy's position as "woman as thing" disintegrates at the same time as michael's idealization of her. From there on out, michael comes to define himself largely by contrasting himself with characters like Bobby and Cindy, yet he is not exactly sure what that difference

is. Still, michael dumps Nettie when they start high school because he has not yet reached this realization. The incidents at the graduation party prove to be too much for michael to handle, and he abandons Nettie, even though he has feelings for her.

Nettie's health deteriorates when she and michael part ways. The next time he sees her (two years later), Nettie is coming back from the hospital. Here, the interrogators coerce michael into saying that he did not visit her because he felt guilty. Notably, the interrogators interfere, thereby making visible michael's tenuous control over his own testimony. michael gets angry when he sees Nettie, presumably because of his guilt or his inability to help her. When the two make eye contact, he knows that she is going to confront him about abandoning her, but the look she also lets him know that they will reconcile. It is Nettie's precarious health that provides the impetus for their reunion.

They renegotiate their friendship at the Big Scoop and stop at the train tracks on the way home. Both locations are emotionally endowed landmarks for michael and Nettie and they return to them over and over during their relationship. Like michael's old room above the garage, these locations resonate as fixed points in a loop around which the changes in michael's personality are made visible. Here, the most apparent difference is michael's sexual growth. They have sex by the tracks and michael formulates the first prototype of the Bullshit Detector. Notably, his visual representation of the detector resembles Nettie's scar, on which he ejaculates during the act. This cumshot is significant because it diverges from a heteronormative sexuality. It fetishizes a part of the body that has been deformed (teratophilia) and is similar to the fetishization of amputations (acrotomophilia) in some niche pornography. Again we see michael diverge from normative sexual practices, which tend to focus on whole, unblemished, and photoshopped bodies.

Shortly after their reunion, michael has the Kits party dream in which he blanks out and wakes up due to not being able to cope with the content. His inability to react is indicative of his insecure behaviour strategies. Furthermore, when michael wakes up he decides that he will exile himself (158). Obviously, this method of coping does not resolve his problems. He does not take responsibility and ownership over his decisions like he thinks; instead, he avoids criticism through seclusion and inaction. This insecurity explains why he needs Nettie to be the one exception. He does not want to be entirely alone. "And as if to perhaps get her support —I repeatedly pointed out that she was the exception when it came to my withdrawal strategy, that she was someone I was counting on as an ally in my quest for a new life" (158). After all, Nettie is michael's most important attachment figure, especially as he grows more and more distant from his immediate family.

In addition to their shared exploratory experiences, michael knows Nettie for most of his life and she remains his most secure attachment despite their periodic separation. The increasingly sexual nature of their relationship also points to the increasing importance of their attachment. Nettie, who recognizes michael's need for other attachments as well, warns michael against exiling himself: "She told me that withdrawing into myself was not the answer, that I had to deal with my childhood before I could get any sense of who I was and where I was going" (158). This upsets michael, who hoped that she would support his decision. As it turns out, Nettie leaves to go to school in the UK and michael loses his main exploratory attachment and secure base figure. Bitter at her departure, he decides to exile himself despite her warning. However, before she leaves, Nettie does help michael by giving him a present of the camera she received from John and Penny and by telling him to go see a

porno and learn about himself. Thus she provides him with a means of expression and with an exploratory challenge.

michael maintains correspondence with Nettie while she is overseas, and she provides what support she can. His reading list that is catalogued in the letters documents his development during this time. Of the titles that we are privy to, Nettie suggests them all (186-8). At first she tells michael to read Herman Hesse, but eventually tells him that he is starting to sound like a hippy. Next she urges michael to look at Plato's *Republic*, specifically where the poets get banished. This can be taken as a hint from Nettie to take what michael needs from transcendentalism, but then to proceed to more critical avenues of thought about the world. When he turns to philosophy, she criticizes Descartes and 'Rational Science,' and tells michael to not to get too existential on her. michael eventually takes to the modern and post-modern poets like Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, Gertrude Stein and Angela Carter. Hence michael's intellectual development is still largely dependent on Nettie as an attachment figure. We see how she tries to push michael to think more and more critically about the world; however, the limited capacity and proximity of her attachment is not sufficient to permanently keep michael from succumbing to Flynn's influence.

The last note to make about Nettie is in regard to her "Love Light," as michael calls it. In contrast to michael's Bullshit Detector, Nettie's "Love Light" disarms others' hostility. While michael's Bullshit Detector identifies insincerity, it does not provide him with a map for moving forward. He does not know how to interact with people who are "full of shit". Thus, michael often resorts to avoidance in order to cope. Nettie calls the tool static and reminiscent of a tattoo: not at all like a poem. It is just a manifestation/articulation of michael's critical abilities, and even though he sublimates his experiences and lessons into

several versions of the diagram his complete reliance on it and belief in it leads to his downfall.

Alternatives

Robin

Once Nettie leaves, michael's drug dealer Robin takes her place as michael's best friend. Initially, he is just michael's drug dealer, but they slowly become friends. Robin is an alternative to the rich high school crowd, since he is a dropout and is positioned outside of the school's social sphere. He deals drugs, often through obscure trades, and gives michael a number of the items as gifts. Robin introduces michael to an alternative masculine lifestyle. One of the most notable influences is the Lou Reed album he sells him. Lou Reed, of course, emblemizes the avant garde and alternative lifestyle of sex, drugs and rock and roll. Robin introduces michael into this underground masculinity and even gives michael a makeover. He tells michael that he could not afford to look too normal in the pornography business.

Their relationship also has a sexual component for some time, but michael's participation is one of intrigue more than attraction. The sexual fantasies that he has with Randy materialize with Robin. Unfortunately, Robin does not measure up to the fantasies michael has created. As a result, he thinks of Nettie or Randy when having sex with him. When michael eventually ends the sexual aspect of the relationship, Robin tells him that he is denying his homosexuality, though michael is just simply not attracted to him. However, they continue to be friends and it is Robin who sets michael up with screenings of *The Family Dog* and by extension Flynn. Their relationship is exploratory, at least for a while,

but Robin's lack of control and Flynn's interference eventually leads to Robin's disappearance.

Films

Poolside Attraction

The stories that Randy tells michael at Wreck Beach become the stimuli for *Poolside Attraction*. Randy's first version angers Bobby, who thinks that Randy is making fun of him, while the second version arouses michael, who believes that the second one is the real one, although he has no way to be sure. After all, Randy lies to him about why he got kicked out of his previous school; it is possible, then, that Randy lies about his sexual prowess in order to impress michael. The story serves to enforce Randy's masculinity, especially since he is able to 'hook up' with two girls simultaneously. Because michael adapts the story into a screenplay, there is likely to be a number of differences between his version and Randy's. The interrogators notably bring this to his attention:

- Your memory of Randy's story is very cinematic.
- Yeah. When he told us the story I kept picturing it as a movie. So I guess that had some bearing on the way I remembered it. (101)

Thus the process at work here is interpretative. Since michael transposes the story through his own lens and into a different form (screenplay), the version which he gives the interrogators is undeniably filtered through the formal limitations of the genre and through his experiences. michael clashes with the interrogators over the sexual nature of the film. michael centres the action on Randy as the sexual object of desire, but the interrogators try to reframe his sexual fantasy within a heterosexual paradigm. First they ask why michael didn't fantasize about the girls, then they suggest that michael simply wanted to role play as Randy

while being with the girls. When michael reinforces that he wanted to be with Randy as himself, the interrogator asks if michael ever imagined being Randy with Nettie. He says yes. Thus, there are several versions of the story: the one Randy tells Bobby, the one Randy tells michael when Bobby leaves, the one michael turns into a script and the one interpreted by the interrogators.

One of the common themes that arise from the many versions of this story is mentorship/apprenticeship. We are told that the girls perform the acts for each other rather than for Randy. He just happens to be walking by their place, when he gets hijacked. He is picked more on the qualification of having a penis and being in the right place at the right time than anything else. After all, Jenny is fingering Cindy while she blows Randy, so her attention is at least divided (111). Randy becomes an object for the fulfillment of sexual desire. The story predominantly revolves around the older Jenny teaching the younger Cindy about sex, and this thematic concern shows up in michael's version of *Rich Kid Gang Bang* as well.

Rich Kid Gang Bang

After Nettie suggests going to see a porno, michael takes a trip to the Venus theatre. The experience completely changes michael. He becomes unable to differentiate between what is happening on screen and what is happening in the theatre, as evidenced by the fragmentation and amalgamation of narrative levels. This is after all one of the purposes of pornography: to titillate and evoke a physical response. Yet, the effect on michael is overwhelming. He half hides and half watches the man sitting next to him. As the man masturbates, the jiggling of the seats breaks the physical barrier between them, and they ends

up climaxing at the same time as the actor on the screen (4). The convergence of the nested representations and the synchronization of ejaculations point to the active role of the viewer in the playing out of the text. Needless to say, this incident marks a change in michael's perception of the world.

At school the next day, michael begins to imagine the girls' muffs and the guys' penises. These daydreams are important because they mark the first instance in which michael radically inverts the established hierarchies of his school, thereby giving sexual power to the marginalized kids. It also lays the groundwork for his later film *Rich Kid Gang Bang* (RKGB), in which michael parodies the culture of one of Vancouver's more wealthy residential neighborhoods, Shaughnessy.

One of the best movies I ever wrote was a parody of Shaughnessy. I called it *Rich Kid Gang Bang* and it was really mean-spirited. I even used people's real names. All of the people that pissed me off: classmates, teachers, neighbors, whatever. Our distributor hated it. Too much dialogue, they said. (10)

The development of RKGB can, consequently, be traced through several 'versions', beginning with *Poolside Attraction*, his day dream, his synopsis, a rewrite by Nettie, and finally a coopted version by Flynn. michael's treatment can therefore be interpreted through the reformulation of a number of experiences/ideas/productions. Since it builds on his previous films, *RKGB* marks another stage in the cyclical production of the text.

In the original synopsis, a group of wealthy teenagers go camping in the mountains. The guys are drunk and pester the girls into having sex, during which the narrative follows the fantasies of the unsatisfied girls. Eventually, some loggers (male and female) come along and decide to join in and "educate" them. An orgy ensues and the film ends with the loggers

and the teenagers planting trees on the mountaintop (10). Yet, the film gets shot nothing like the original synopsis. michael tells us, “Yeah, well, the idea was basically the same. That’s the main thing – the idea” (12). And for the most part, the idea remains consistent throughout the versions. The critique of social status, gender roles and age restrictions is retained within the mentorship theme. In fact, the only reason that the environmental theme is dropped is because of the logistics of shooting in the mountains.

Before addressing Nettie’s rewrite, it is pertinent to touch on the demographer’s letter, which states that *RKGB* is popular “in small college towns that draw on large populations of upper middle-class students and are supported by equally large working-class populations” (11). Thus the separation between blue-collar and white-collar workers is crucial here. For one, class hierarchies are upset since it is the lower class that mentors and gives sexual satisfaction to the upper class. Simultaneously, this enforces social perceptions that see the lower classes as less refined or closer to base natural instincts. michael utilizes some of the basic scenarios of the pornographic genre like the common use of working-class men and women as stock fetishized figures in pornography. Men often appear as plumbers, construction workers, pizza delivery men, woodsmen or other blue-collar workers. Women similarly appear as maids, secretaries, librarians, nannies, etc. A more literary example would be D.H. Lawrence’s character Oliver Mellors in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*. Mellors, who is a lower-class gamekeeper, serves as a sexual masculine foil to the wealthy and good looking Clifford Chatterly, who is paralyzed, impotent and emotionally neglectful. michael introduces yet another aspect of ready-made plots by inverting their power structures. He attributes sexual knowledge to the lower class, thereby giving them power over the prudish

upper class. Ultimately, this pattern is retained and refined during the next stage of production.

In Nettie's treatment, a teenage boy and girl are making out on the couch in Cindy Carruther's house (thus reinforcing Nettie's dislike of Cindy); however, the boy's caresses are rough and tactless so she pushes him off. She stumbles in on the plumber in the bathroom and seduces him instead. Meanwhile, the maid comforts the boy and provides him with her own hands-on mentoring. Eventually, they all end up on the couch and the scene ends with the girl giving oral pleasure to the maid and the boy giving a blowjob to the plumber (225). The main themes that we have identified are still present in the scene, and the dominance of heteronormative sexuality is also upset. However, the new version differs because it is set in an upper middle-class living room. The change in setting removes the eco-critical focus but maintains the blue-collar/white-collar economic discrepancy. It also provides michael and Nettie with a way to symbolically challenge the hegemonic femininity which Cindy embodies. Lastly, since the film is made under the film collective, the production is collaborative; Nettie's edits are welcomed by michael and Robin.

Flynn's Rich Kid Gang Bang

It is not until Robin brings Tanya and Flynn on board that the collective begins to fall apart and that control over production begins to be consolidated by Flynn. As michael says earlier in the novel, "It all comes down to property" (50). Rather than losing control over meaning once the film is released (as a product), michael loses control over the meaning before the film is even finished (during production), and, with Flynn, this loss of control is not voluntary. The first indication of his interference arises when Flynn tells michael that

“collectives don’t work.” Flynn takes over his operation and diverts michael’s time and energy away from critical texts and toward numerous profitable kitsch films. Interestingly, the cooption of michael’s work also marks the disintegration of his ability to express himself. When Nettie leaves, michael slowly loses more and more control over the production of his texts, thereby capitulating to the systems of power he was critiquing in the first place. His avoidant behaviour pattern, combined with the illicit and secretive nature of his films, allows him to be easily manipulated.

Once Flynn gets involved, the critical aspects of RKGB are lost and the movie is made quite differently; michael refers to this as “studio interference” (249). Notably, Flynn’s interference is far different than Penny’s or Nettie’s criticism; Flynn takes over and changes the ending as if he owns the film. He glamorizes physical violence and tells michael that the alternate “revenge porn” ending is big in the market. This drastically undermines the critical aspects of michael’s idea, and michael believes that it was used for the “final cut” without his agreement. Again, concerns surrounding the authorship, originality and legitimacy surface, much like with the rumors surrounding Penny’s and Gingell’s termination. Yet, michael chooses to believe that his ending is still out there somewhere. While he has little control over the interpretation of a text once it is the hands of the reader, he does enjoy a significant amount of control over its production, that is, until Flynn interferes. Ultimately, though, even Flynn’s alternate ending is subject to diverse interpretations. This is why michael is able to accept Flynn’s interference. He recognizes that Flynn cannot control how viewers interpret the text once it is in their hands.

Another interesting aspect of the text is the name *Rich Kid Gang Bang*, which barely even fits with the content of the film, unless one considers orgy and gangbang to be

synonymous. I would however like to maintain that an orgy has multiple nodes, while gangbangs typically have a central one. This discrepancy is connected to the protagonist's anonymity, since names are underpinned by some level of narrative continuity. Despite the development and change in content, michael's films do not change their title. What, then, does this say about the fact that michael changes throughout the course of the novel, but remains unnamed?⁵ For one, it corroborates the idea that the interrogation cannot end until the interrogators pin him down (until they name him). For another, it highlights the insecurity of his self-image when juxtaposed to his disjointed narrative. michael fears being judged by the authority; hence, his anonymity is a means of avoidance. He lies and hides in order to protect himself from "whatever's coming next" (66). For example, michael and Nettie do not use their names in the credits for RKGB (they go by Henry Z. Miller and Betsy Dick instead). michael's choice of pseudonym signals an identification with the famous author, whose books were once deemed pornographic and obscene. While contemporary scholarship primarily regards Miller as a literary and innovative social critic, especially after the *Grove Press, Inc. V. Gerstein* obscenity ruling, he was once simply dismissed as a purveyor of the vulgar and obscene.⁶ For its time, his writing was incredibly innovative and experimental, and this break with convention contributed largely to the publication ban on works like *Tropic of Cancer*, *Tropic of Capricorn* and *Quiet Days in Clichy* to name a few. His blurring of autobiography and fiction resonates with michael's own project throughout *The Pornographer's Poem*. Nettie's pseudonym, on the other hand, is more similar to the eroticized names often chosen by porn actresses with its identification of the male anatomy;

⁵ The irony of using michael as a placeholder here is not lost on me.

⁶ In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Grove Press, Inc. v. Gerstein*, overruled state court findings that *Tropic of Cancer* was obscene. *GROVE PRESS v. GERSTEIN*, 378 U.S. 577 (1964).

and, as it turns out, Nettie's pseudonym is much more fitting to the kitschy product which *RKGB* eventually turns out to be. This indicates that she is more conscious of Flynn's influence than is Michael, who still envisions himself as a critical artist. Ultimately, however, the reason for their pseudonyms is not their own; their loss of control over the film, to a violent and underground masculinity, is also made evident in their loss of credit.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter will discuss the relationship between michael's disillusionment with hegemonic masculinity and his self-exile from sports, before it focuses on the implications of this exile outside of the athletic regime. As Michael Messner points out in *Power at Play*, the influence of sports is ubiquitous in other cultural domains:

- As sociologists began to argue in the 1970s, the perception that sport is separate from the rest of society masks the fact that the values and structure of sport have always
- been closely intertwined with dominant social values, power relations, and conflicts between groups and between nations. (9)

Unsurprisingly, gender is also tied into dominant social values, power relations and conflicts; hence, the need for an intersectional analysis. In "Teaching the Boys," Connell outlines this intersectionality in terms of gender regimes: "As with corporations, workplaces and the state, gender is embedded in the institutional arrangements through which a school functions: divisions of labour, authority patterns, and so on. The totality of these arrangements is a school's *gender regime*" (Connell 213). This interconnectivity becomes increasingly important when analyzing michael's escapist behaviour patterns.

Since michael runs from these power structures, rather than challenging them, he becomes indirectly complacent in the state of the panoptic gender regime. As Messner points out, "[h]istorical analyses of sport reveal that ruling groups have shaped and utilized sport to maintain control. But subordinate groups at times have also used sport to contest that control" (10). Thus michael's inaction allows the dominance of the hegemonic masculinity to continue. In addition to taking this position of escapism, michael misses out on some of sport's developmental promises – like health, fitness, stress management, teamwork, work

ethic, endurance and problem solving, to name a few – which arise from their analogous relationships to the broader world. He repeatedly shuns the responsibilities and benefits offered to him by institutions of power (like his family, his school and athletics), which, although flawed, nevertheless offer him some measure of maturity, growth and participation. michael quits them all and instead looks to learn, explore and develop these skills through his films. Unfortunately, few positive role models exist for him to build off, especially in the porn industry. In addition, the films are not seen by the community, his family, his school nor his peers because of their illicit and perverse nature. Thus, the connotation of pornography as something “hidden” becomes central. If michael’s films were to have any broad social impact or significance, they would first have to have been seen; they would have had to be visible to the broader world including his peers in order to engage in any significant criticism or discourse. This is why michael says that some of his most fruitful screenings, were the ones where he was able to examine the audience’s reaction. The pornographic text is, as Ferguson argues, a panopticon, and the audience’s reactions help michael gauge how the broader world values the representations of certain performances of masculinity and sexuality.

Before I address michael’s texts though, I would like to discuss michael’s initiation into sports. According to Messner, family members (typically older brothers or uncles) are usually the first to introduce children to athletic experiences (26). Since, however, there is no relationship of this sort in his life, michael relies more on his coach and teammates for this guidance. This is important, because, as Messner argues, sports serve a role beyond a purely entertaining one: “modern societies lack the masculine initiation rituals which so often characterize tribal societies. As a result [...] today’s men are confused about what it means to

be a man, and they find in athletics an inadequate, but nevertheless extremely salient, substitute for such initiation rituals” (7-8). Hence, Michael relies heavily on these figures not just for athletic mentorship but also for masculine mentorship. It is important to note that Messner criticizes assumptions of biological necessity and male essence. Thus, while they may not necessarily do so (for a multitude of reasons), sports *can* serve as coming of age rituals for women as well (consider the age/skill levels common of sports). The point is not to gloss over gender disparity in sports, but rather to acknowledge that the current landscape of gender regimes has changed dramatically since Messner’s *Power at Play* was published. This systemic change, not to mention the change in social perception, is largely enforced by legislation like Title IX in the US.⁷ In Canada, Section Fifteen of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is predominantly responsible for gender equity in Canada, though some critics like the national organization Canadian Association for Advancement of Women and Sports (CAAWS) argue that more legislation like Title IX is needed specifically to address issues in sports and athletics. With fundamental cases like *Blainey v Ontario Hockey Association* (1986), it has become and is becoming more common/normalized for women to participate in sports; and, as a result, it is becoming increasingly important to recognize the role of sports in women’s development as well. This emphasizes the need to consider sports in more nuanced ways, and it highlights the importance of not universalizing certain aspects by claiming that sports create violent or aggressive masculinity in general. In “Teaching the Boys,” Connell points out that not everyone fits into the prefabricated patterns created by sports:

⁷ “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Title IX, U.S. Department of Education).

Sociological research on sport has shown how an aggressive masculinity is created organizationally by the structure of organized sport, by its pattern of competition, its system of training, and its steep hierarchy of levels and rewards. Images of this masculinity are circulated on an enormous scale by sports media, though most individuals fit very imperfectly into the slots thus created. (209)

Thus, while sport systems can undoubtedly foster this sort of masculinity, it is important not to universalize this pattern. Several nuances arise in the differences between particular sports, particular levels (e.g., amateur vs. professional), particular individuals and particular media. Current trends in scholarship on sports media reflect poststructural trends in the study of masculinity. In *Media Sport Stars*, Gary Whannel points to the decentralization of sports media control:

It is noteworthy that one major issue triggered by the growth of the internet is that it enables exchanges between users that are hard for any power to monitor or control. Just as the issue of the power of the media is usually connected to the threat it poses to other possessors of power, it is also the case that the media offers an easy scapegoat that can be blamed for problems whose real causes are more deep-rooted, pervasive and harder to address. (3)

Whannel maintains that it is imperative to consider how the structures and patterns of sports are symptomatic of broader socio-cultural practices. Thus, my view of sports takes into account its inherently competitive nature. It also necessitates the consideration of the differences between hostile and instrumental aggression. Thus I proceed with a situational approach here as well.

Coaches

In order to understand the organizational structure of sports, as experienced by michael, it is important to analyze the particular contributions of his coach. Connell notes the importance of discussing the influence of coaches on high-profile boys' sports:

The coaches of boys' representative teams can be important figures in a high school. Physical education teachers have an occupational culture that [...] centers on a conventional masculinity that is "not only dominant, but neutralized as natural and good, part of the expected and unquestioned nature of things." ("Teaching the Boys" 218)

However, it is important to note that not all coaches or occupational cultures are complicit in perpetuating the exact same sort of masculinity. Individual styles can differ, within certain limits, and these differences are crucial to a contextual understanding of these cultures. Connell, though indirectly, acknowledges this: "Gender regimes differ between schools, though within limits set by the broader culture and the constraints of the local education system" (213). Proceeding from this idea, an analysis of michael's experience of athletics and its gender conditioning is dependent on an analysis of his relationship with his school, his coaches and his peers.

Longley

When michael starts high school, he initially looks up to Longley. He is content to acquiesce to the status quo and Longley serves as a role model for him. Yet, even then, michael notices the first few traces of Longley's cruelty. For example, michael recalls a particular physical hygiene class in which Longley is lecturing about acne. "Halfway through

Longley's ramble, Bobby Galt raised his hand and asked – in that fake earnest way of his – if what Shawna Kowalchuk had all over her face was *acne vulgaris*. The idiot Longley, who was lecturing without the use of visual aids, lit up" (121).⁸ Mr. Longley praises Bobby and Shawna becomes known as the "living example". At this point in his life, michael finds security in sports so he is not as critical of Longley as he is later on when he refers to him as an idiot. Sports still offer him security and praise in the face of the insecurity created by moving to a new school and interacting with a new cohort at the same time that his relationship with Nettie, the Singletons and his family is deteriorating.

Eventually, michael starts to see through Longley's actions and begins to withdraw from organized sports altogether. michael's dissatisfaction comes to a head after he quits the sports teams. During lunch one day, Longley catches michael on his way home. Longley begins to insult michael in front of the other students by challenging his masculinity and sexuality. Longley tells them that michael would rather write poems than play sports. This reflects Connell's observation of the gendered division of disciplines, in which adeptness in English is situated as a feminine performance (217). As we have already established, this incident teaches michael this emasculating behaviour, which he then uses on Bobby and Carl later on. In addition to this emotional abuse, Longley prevents michael from getting away. He brings his fists together and boxes him in the ears.⁹ He then winks at michael, calls him a "faggot" and walks away (180). michael turns around and calmly walks home despite the stares and murmurs of his peers. The incident demonstrates the hegemonic nature of Longley's masculinity, which cannot tolerate deviation. In Longley's eyes, real men do not

⁸ This is the same girl that Bobby says he would fuck with a paper bag on her head.

⁹ Notice the similarity to Flynn boxing him in the ears when michael tries to quit Flynnskyn (273).

quit sports; hence he uses homophobic and derogatory terms like “faggot” to emasculate michael.

When michael arrives home after the incident, he goes to his room above the garage and cries. It is interesting that he self-sentences himself to this space after he is reproached by Longley, a once admired figure of authority, because this is where michael would also go to wait for punishment from his father as a child. After getting baked and trying unsuccessfully to masturbate to Hustler, he finds his mother’s Playgirl magazine and orgasms to a picture of a blonde guy in his twenties who is posing with his motorcycle. He has tan lines and resembles the California type of male, about whom michael repeatedly fantasizes. Significantly, Randy, Kai and Flynn all share similar physical characteristics; michael even refers to Flynn as a full-grown Randy Cobb. By masturbating to his mother’s Playgirl, he sexually and symbolically resists the heteronormative sexuality that Longley attempts to enforce and naturalize. Since Longley makes this sort of masculinity unappealing and since michael’s perception of homosexuality is still generally positive, as evidenced by his loyalty to Mr. Gingell, he is able to find sexual gratification this way. michael repeatedly turns to relationships with these characters after periods of significant alienation. He turns to Kai when he is alienated by his family, he turns to Randy out of contrast with his other classmates, and he turns to Flynn when he quits sports and when Nettie leaves.

Considering the attitudes prevalent in michael’s previous experiences of school, including the racial attitudes toward Penny and the homophobic attitudes toward Gingell, it is not entirely surprising that Longley’s harassment of michael goes unaddressed. Neither michael nor any of the students complain. Thus, the school culture and michael’s avoidance allow Longley’s actions to become part of the “unquestioned nature of things.”

Peers

As discussed before, Connell argues that sports replicate consumer culture's hegemony through the use of power, symbolization and emotion. Furthermore, this hegemony manifests itself in the broader social spheres of schools as well:

...not only the football team but the school population as a whole use the game for celebration and reproduction of the dominant codes of gender. The game directly defines a pattern of aggressive and dominating performance as the most admired form of masculinity, and indirectly marginalizes others. The cheerleaders become models of desirability among the girls, and their desirability further defines the hierarchy of masculinities among the boys, since only the most securely positioned boys will risk ridicule by asking them for a date. (218)

While Connell does not specify who in particular admires this form of masculinity, my analysis will predominantly follow Connell's approach by paying due attention to how the larger school population contributes to the hegemonic masculinity encountered by michael.

Bobby and Cindy

As a child, michael is a budding athlete; he and Bobby are star teammates, and their association fosters a public perception of them as friends – one which michael eventually disdains yet reluctantly maintains for several reasons: both michael and Bobby fit into the dominant performance of the gender regime (jock) and, as noted in the previous chapter, both would be 'protected' by the older boys if they performed the hegemonic form of masculinity (91). So, their "friendship," which is characterized by what David Riesman calls "antagonistic cooperation" (qtd. in Messner 88), continues despite their growing personal

differences. The competitiveness between the two keeps them from forming a lasting bond – similarly to the competitiveness with his sister over his mother's attention. One of the main reasons for this is Bobby's Lombardian ethic – named after Vince Lombardi and defined by a "win at all costs" attitude. This sort of ethic places winning over everything else in importance. Self-preservation, camaraderie and sportsmanship all fall victim to the pursuit of the win. Thus, the possibility of developing a friendship is undermined by Bobby's competitiveness; a key example of this centers around the predominant status symbol of their high school: the Male Athlete of the Year Award. This reward encourages Bobby's competitive performance, which leads michael to grow disillusioned. He starts to refer to basketball as biddy ball in relation to Bobby as he thinks his attitude is juvenile (7). Thus michael becomes disillusioned with sports and retreats into his self-imposed exile at which point the two lose regular contact. It is this unfettered competition (a win at all costs attitude) and not competition in general that is particularly problematic here.

As a complement to Bobby, within a male-female dichotomy, Cindy embodies the hegemonic female gender role in the school. She is the star cheerleader and aspires to be desired by the boys. Although 'popular' girls do not play sports, cheerleading is intrinsically related to supporting and preserving the sports system in place. Unsurprisingly, Bobby is drawn toward her and fantasizes about her to the point of obsession. As mentioned before, michael also chases after Cindy, but stops when he starts to recognize the complicity of her actions within the gender regime.

Counter – Randy and Nettie

Similarly to Bobby, Randy is an adept athlete, but he brings a completely different attitude to sports and competition:

Although reluctant to play sports, Randy was a natural. This made him very cool. I liked his attitude. I liked the way he would casually remind us – right in the middle of a game – of the competitive nature of sport, how the emphasis on sport and young people was no coincidence, how it was meant to condition us, turn us into greedy businessmen when we got older. (95)

Randy serves as a strong foil to Bobby and embodies a unique masculinity that is not simply antithetical. He occupies a complex position between athleticism and cynicism, which neither completely undermines power structures nor celebrates them. While he personally removes importance from the game and expresses this to his team mates, they do not necessarily share his mindset. Randy maintains the same attitude toward girls as he does toward sports and family. When Bobby purportedly starts a rumour to quell Randy's popularity with the girls, Randy does nothing to disprove it. He floats by without really getting too attached to anything or anyone. The downside to this, as covered in the previous chapter, is that lots of people come and go in his life. Yet, Randy is not a nihilist; he takes pleasure in what is in front of him. That is why Michael and Bobby are both attracted to Randy, and there is a good deal of competition for his friendship. However, like Michael's other relationships, this one does not last. Since Randy is habituated to people passing through his life, he does not make any attempts to keep in touch. Yet, for Michael, Randy occupies the major alternative to the hegemonic masculine sports role model.

Similarly, Nettie occupies a complex position outside of the hegemonic femininity. Unlike Cindy, she does not cheerlead; rather, she is a skilled athlete. She still follows the pattern of feminine adeptness in school subjects like English and other arts, but distances herself from the popular girls. In fact, it is largely through Nettie's support that michael comes to excel in these subjects and reject the hegemonic masculinity as well. Nettie pushes michael's boundaries and challenges him; she takes charge of developing their relationship, perhaps faster than michael is ready for. Thus she upsets her role as his one of his secure bases and he distances himself from her out of fear. Instead, he seeks security in the hegemonic masculinity supplied by his school's gender regime, sports included.

When michael eventually rejects the security of this masculinity and realizes that he loves her, it is too late: Nettie leaves for England and michael withdraws into his self-exile. Nettie continues to support michael in letters from abroad. She tells michael that she is proud of him for turning down the Grade Ten Male Athlete of the Year Award (135), which shows that she values his rejection of the hegemonic gender regime. However, Nettie does not support his withdrawal. She knows that this retreat is stifling his development.

Alternatives: Competition Outside of Sports

Flynn

Flynn is a local drug dealer, pimp and criminal. He is a prime specimen of a criminal and violent masculinity. According to michael, "Everything that happened on Davie Street he had a piece of. Drugs, hooking, loans, protection – you name it. Flynn was huge" (237). At first, michael and Nettie both admire him because of his charisma and the danger that surrounds him. However, they fail to see through his act and even michael's Bullshit

Detector is fooled. By the time michael sees Flynn for what he is, it is too late. Flynn knows where michael lives and keeps him under his thumb through physical violence and threats. michael knows that he cannot escape anymore. Without his main coping mechanism, and without any strong attachment figures left, michael capitulates. Hence, his tendency for avoidance makes him susceptible to competition from others. First, michael's attraction to and idolization of Flynn in addition to michael's uncertainty about his feelings toward Nettie prevent him from reacting when Flynn interjects in their relationship. Next, Robin, who is indicative of a non-competitive attitude, goes missing, and while michael suspects that Flynn is behind it, he continues to work for him anyway.¹⁰ michael develops a dependency on Flynn because he has no one else to turn to. Thus, michael's eventual cooption by Flynn is foreshadowed by each of these points. To be clear, though, michael is not without agency. He makes decisions at every step that enable Flynn to seize more and more control. He continues on his pattern of avoidance, and eventually reaches a point where he can no longer run away. Due to Flynn's connection to Kai, michael knows that he cannot run away; Kai knows where he and his family live. Thus, michael runs out of options.

michael first meets Flynn when he unexpectedly interrupts the casting of *RKGB*. The narrative mode transforms into a screenplay during the casting but returns to prose when Flynn arrives, thereby signifying not just Flynn's interruption of the scene but also of the form of michael's testimony. The event foreshadows the eventual interference of michael's productions and demonstrates michael's recognition of Flynn's dominance. When he enters, Flynn's greeting replicates a conventional classroom scene: "The sofa laughed. 'Hello

¹⁰ Robin often takes trades instead of payments for drugs. He is not in the drug business to get rich, and neither is michael. After all, michael confesses that he buries the money he makes near the train tracks (205), and he values the lessons he learns more than the money he earns. He says, "In many ways these screenings were the most useful to me in that I learned a lot about the male species" (215).

Flynn,' they said in unison. And Flynn's response? Out of nowhere. Like a shy old lady, he creaked, 'Why – hello children'" (237). The jovial nature of the introduction triggers michael's nostalgia for the first days in Penny's class, since Flynn has all the charisma of John and Penny. michael tells us that he'd never met a cooler guy. After all, Flynn's physical type is similar to the Playgirl model that michael masturbates to. So, it is not surprising that michael develops a false sense of security even though, according to his own testimony, there was much uncertainty and danger surrounding Flynn:

If I was to hazard a guess at Flynn's age, I would say he was probably late-twenties. But like so many things about Flynn, it was impossible to say. You just didn't know what was going on with this guy. And any time you thought you knew, he would totally prove you wrong, as if he saw it all coming, as if he were setting you up just for the fun, just for something to do. I mean – I could give you examples. But there were just too many. Suffice it to say, you could never underestimate this Flynn.

Everywhere he went he demanded respect. And he got it. (237)

michael aligns himself with Flynn, as he misperceives him to be a good alternative to the hegemonic masculinities he has encountered so far. The danger that Flynn represents is initially attractive to michael; it is a rebellious infatuation. Flynn admits to his dangerous activities; however, he tries to gain michael's acceptance by justifying his actions. He continually tells michael to cut what he hears about him in half. He tells michael that people exaggerate his crimes to make him seem worse than he is, and michael believes him. Though sceptical at first, michael's and Nettie's attraction to him allays their suspicions. This marks the failure of michael's bullshit detector, which Nettie had in fact predicted earlier in the novel. As mentioned earlier, the problem with the tool lies in michael's complete reliance on

it, because it prevents him from thinking critically about Flynn and the answers he gives. Thus Flynn's rationalization of his actions fall through the cracks of michael's tool. He does not really know where Flynn is coming from or what his past is like. michael begins imitating aspects of Flynn's persona (like his chopping gesture) and he even goes so far as to fantasize about becoming Flynn when he has sex with Nettie. A pattern is thus created since he similarly roleplays Randy earlier in the novel. By 'performing' other characters like Flynn or Randy, michael finds the confidence to take control over overwhelming situations. With Flynn, he finally finds enough confidence to have anal sex with Nettie without hurting her. Unfortunately, this psychosexual roleplay shows michael's deference to Flynn's superiority, and Flynn's cooption of michael slowly takes over thereafter.

During the shooting of *RKGB*, michael thinks he sees Flynn beating Tanya from across the street, but, by the time he gets back to the apartment, Tanya is in the bathroom reapplying makeup. michael claims that he is unsure if he actually saw him beating her and since there is no tape in his camera, he cannot prove anything. Once at home, Nettie tells michael about a 'dream' she had at the apartment. In it, Flynn sexually abuses Nettie and even though she tells michael it was a dream, she is not entirely certain about what happened. Like all other dreams in the novel, which condense and displace trauma or anxiety, this episode serves as a point of interpretive contention, wherein multiple interpretations arise. Both michael and Nettie remain uncertain about what happened and the possibility that she was abused remains. In addition, there is little proof of Flynn's actions besides michael's claim that he smells Flynn's cologne coming from Nettie's ass crack when she leans over (hardly admissible evidence). This incident changes Nettie's mind about Flynn: she warns michael to stay away from him (258). But the next morning Nettie leaves the country again,

and michael is left only with Flynn. In her final letter to michael, Nettie (who does not mention that she is dying) says that she is glad michael has dropped Flynn and Tanya; though we know this is untrue. At this point michael believes that Nettie has lost interest in him (303).

Before michael meets Flynn at Robin's to discuss their business, he has a dream in which he gets drugged by Dottie (as discussed in Chapter 1). Then, at Robin's apartment, Robin tells michael about his cocaine problem and about how Flynn beats him. Robin says that he wants out and that he wants to go back to just selling hash and making movies, but when Flynn shows up, Robin cowers and retreats to his bedroom (268). michael also wants to tell Flynn that he is quitting, but Flynn has other plans. He tells michael that collectives do not work and that he wants michael to become his in-house director. Flynn pulls out a binder with his business plan and a photo album with head shots of 'the talent'. Each small photo has about a one hundred word biography on the back.

It frightened me that Flynn knew so much about these people. Still, it was nowhere near as frightening as his tiny writing. I remember seeing a blow-up of the Lord's Prayer once on a postage stamp. I think it was in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. Why would anybody do that? I thought. I was haunted by that for a long, long time. (272)

Perhaps it is the reduction of individuals to a small bio and a picture that disturbs michael. It is as if Flynn has each of these people 'in his pocket' or as if he owns them. When the interrogators asks michael if he recognizes the boy with the moustache from the Judge's study, michael says yes; but he also says that when he asked Flynn about the boy, Flynn grabbed the picture and hid it away. The next time michael looked at the album, it had been replaced with a new picture. Photographs serve as a static referent within a cyclical loop.

Other examples include the lesson michael's mother teaches him about destroying photos, or Penny's lesson about ownership and privacy regarding her film rushes. michael's development and understanding of ownership can be compared with each time the novel returns to the topic of photographs. The head shots, then, highlight the relationship between Flynn and his "staff." By keeping them from michael's view, Flynn controls their visibility and claims exclusive ownership of them. In "Photography and Electoral Appeal" Roland Barthes claims that electoral photography advances a "manner of being" (*Mythologies* 91). While Barthes' focus is particularly on electoral photography, the ability of photography to seemingly capture or embody a set of daily choices in a morphology is applicable here as well. This is also not so different from cultures which believe that a photo captures or traps the soul. Finally, michael's reference to *Ripley's Believe it or Not* (another example of intertextuality), in relation to the tiny writing on the back of the photos, succinctly sums up michael's relationship with Flynn. The show after all presented viewers with items and events that are so bizarre that viewers might doubt the events' validity. michael is of course forced to believe or dismiss Flynn's unbelievable background. There are also several situations in which michael becomes suspicious of Flynn, including Nettie's possible abuse, Tanya's possible assault, and Robin's disappearance. In each situation michael is forced to "believe it or not," and each time michael's Bullshit Detector fails to work. michael struggles to find evidence of all of these situations and unfortunately, continues to associate with Flynn.

Flynn eventually tells michael that he wants the two of them to start making porno loops, but michael begins to criticize the idea. In his head, michael has already decided that he is done with Flynn; however, when michael brings up Angela Carter's theories about

social awareness and pornography, Flynn beats him up. Thus, similar to Longley, Flynn uses violence in an attempt to manipulate michael's behaviour. He does this while telling michael that he needs him, and, since there is no one around, he cannot escape from Flynn like he does from Longley. When michael tries to leave, Flynn slams his hand down on michael's shoulder just like Longley does. Even though michael keeps saying that he does not want to work with Flynn anymore, he is uncertain of what he does want, and Flynn's response is a smirk that reminds michael of his father. Flynn tells him that his boss is Kai, at which point michael effectively resigns himself to the belief that he will never be able to escape, and even though he does try to quit several times, he never manages to completely part company with Flynn. The fact that the interrogation is structured like a porno loop suggests both that Flynn makes a lasting impression, but also that michael continues to resist cooption through the constant revision of his story. Meanwhile, in his testimony, michael refrains from telling Nettie anything about Flynn or their film business. Yet, Nettie can feel that something is missing in his letters (284). At one point, michael even has the opportunity to turn Flynn in: two detectives show up on the day of his prom. They are looking for Robin's killer, but michael does not tell them anything because he is worried that his connection to Flynn will implicate him in illicit activities and because he again does not have any incriminating evidence.

Films

Electric Koolaid Acid Porn

In the larger context of the acid porn, michael comes face to face with all of the fears and anxieties he has been running from throughout his whole life. Instead of confronting

them, he habitually runs away. This allows all of these unaddressed issues to come back to haunt him later on in the climax of the novel. It is as if michael's anxieties are being scripted together in increasing intensity until they converge during the acid trip. The unsettling impression is that michael is being watched throughout the novel and that there are forces at play beyond his control. Examples of this include the presence of ghost cars throughout the novel or the unsettling extent of the interrogators' knowledge about michael. Hence the interrogators' interference is made visible. After all, the reader takes part in scripting michael's actions, since the reader is simultaneously viewing, constructing and interpreting the story. Thus the writerly nature of the text, as Barthes would call it, becomes apparent here. There are many similarities between this narrative structure and that of Srdjan Spasojević's *A Serbian Film*, in which the protagonist is cast for an art film which turns into a snuff film. The plot of the film is carefully controlled and even the protagonist's seemingly resistant actions to the production crew near the end of the movie are in fact just another carefully orchestrated part of the larger narrative of the film.

Yet, michael does not succumb to despair even when Nettie returns home looking deathly ill after his prom. While michael first plans to run out and see her, he stops himself when he sees the condition she is in. He is crushed by his inability to intervene and he knows that she is dying; however, he does not entirely give up. He gets angry, grabs his bike, and races downtown, intending to do something, though the only thing he can think of is to find some resolution for Robin's murder.

At this point, michael has not seen Flynn or had contact with him for a while, and he decides to start his life over. This statement sounds vaguely reminiscent of michael's declaration of self-exile earlier in the novel, though it has a more responsible sentiment

behind it. Halfway downtown, michael runs into a cleaned up and reformed Tanya. He runs away from Tanya only to run into Flynn, who is apparently expecting him and who is also 'reformed'. They enter a restaurant and, while michael is in the bathroom, Flynn slips some acid into his drink. Interestingly, the acid was sent to michael from Nettie. She hides it behind the stamp and presumably intends it to be a mind expanding experience for michael; however, Flynn finds the acid and uses it for his own purposes. He leads michael, who is slowly starting to feel the drug's effects, back to his apartment.

Once in the apartment, michael passes out and reawakens in what has become Max's warehouse. The walls turn blood red and the description of the setting resembles the one given by Nettie earlier in the novel, when she tells michael about the 'dream' in which Flynn assaults her. She refers to the place as Flynn's heart, undoubtedly affecting michael's experience of the trip. In the same room that michael screened *The Family Dog*, *Circle Jerk* '76 begins to play.

At the beginning of the novel, michael tells us that he saw his first porno, *Circle Jerk* '76, at the age of thirteen, but no other mention is made of it until it shows up again as part of the acid trip. In the film, five boys and their dogs walk into a field with a bag of *Hustler* magazines. They stand masturbating in a circle and race to finish first. The scene ends with a black screen and a voice over of one of the boys saying: "I win! I win!" (312). Peter Murphy compares the circle jerk to sports "because it transforms jerking off or masturbation into a sporting event that has winners and losers" (66). In addition, michael makes a point of insisting that the circle jerk should not be equated with homosexual desire (7). In the same way that the presence of dogs does not make the scene bestial, the proximity of the boys does not make the scene homosexual. Instead, *Circle Jerk* '76 should be seen as the demonstration

of a highly competitive heterosexuality, where virility and speed are key factors in the assessment of masculine superiority (Mechling 292). The libidinal energy in the scene is directed toward a competitive show of power and not toward each other. After all, there is no touching allowed during the circle jerk. Thus, the symbolic order of heteronormative masculinity is maintained. The hegemonic masculinity that michael has been running from by quitting sports and exiling himself returns and sets the tone for the rest of the trip.

When *Circle Jerk* '76 finishes, it is replaced by footage of michael attending the Venus Theatre. At this point the boundary between narrative levels begins to disintegrate. The distorting effects of the drug on his cognition are reflected therein, and his experience becomes focalized from within the Venus theatre, where the feature playing is *The Story of this Family – So Far*. Someone taps michael on the shoulder and it turns out to be Flynn. They return to the lobby which turns into a dimly lit, deep red room with a single candle. Next, the lights turn on and michael sees the words CHECK YOUR BULLSHIT DETECTOR AT THE DOOR on the wall (313). The room is occupied by a film crew and a bed on which a sick Nettie is lying, hooked up to an IV and several machines. Again, michael's anxieties about Nettie's condition, and his corresponding feelings of guilt surface here. michael is told to fuck Nettie, while a nurse shoots her with a needle to perk her up. michael's dick gets soft at this point, so they call for a fluffer. Mr. Billington walks in with a couple of crew members who are carrying a fence similar to the one in the dream in which michael is abused by Billington. The fluffing works and, once hard again, michael is told to start fucking Nettie in the ass, at which point he perceives the starburst of her asshole to be the Bullshit Detector. He proceeds to fuck it, while a deteriorating Nettie gets another shot from the nurse. michael finally outright tells Nettie that he loves her. At this point michael's

perception of himself is that of an object. He is simply playing out the roles dictated to him from off camera, which is michael's biggest fear: the loss of control over his own actions. As michael climaxes he feels a cold metallic object on the back of his head. Everything goes "white on white" and he hears the echo of a backfire behind him. This evocation of white on white can be interpreted in a number of ways like michael's idea of heaven or like the last page of a novel. Ultimately, it signals the end of something and the beginning of something else.

The sex scene is the climax of the story, despite the novel's cyclical narrative. It is the point of highest intensity. Furthermore, the whole narrative of michael's life can be seen as a pornography, not just the individual films. There are pornographies within the larger pornography, and the interview reflects the relationship between reader and the text and/or between the writer and the text. In this view, michael is an actor being pulled by his own interests, the writer's and the reader's. And his "death" is representative not of the end, but of a transition since the novel does not end and since michael continues to resist the interrogators' questions.

CONCLUSION

Following the blackout, the interrogators tell michael that Nettie died on the other side of town at the same time as he got snuffed. They tell michael that if he wants to know where Nettie is, he will have to cooperate with them. Curiously, no physical descriptions of the interrogation are provided, and it is unclear whether michael is dead or alive; after all, the sound of a gun backfiring during the acid trip is not exactly a “smoking gun.”¹¹ While the interrogation could take place after michael’s death – precedence for this sort of narration can be seen in Flann O’Brian’s *The Third Policeman* – michael may just as plausibly be in police custody. One could even argue that the interrogation is just another manifestation of michael’s acid trip. This uncertainty is further supported by the representational strategies of the nested narrative structure. The inner narratives – those about michael’s life and films – are rooted in concrete details of body and place, while the interrogation is purposefully ambiguous and detached. The lack of physical and concrete details makes michael, and the reader, skeptical about what is happening.

It is here, in the abstract, that the interrogation loop takes place. On the part of the interrogators, the repeated testing of evidence and records is reminiscent of the scientific method’s cyclical process (hypothesize, test, analyze, repeat). They try to make meaning of his testimony via an objective organization of facts and events in a setting that has been removed of nearly all textual clues. In stark contrast, michael’s testimony, which is pointedly subjective, is presented within a number of highly descriptive narrative blocks. His testimony, like his films, embraces literary techniques, and he treats his testimony as if it

¹¹ A common suspense/irony trope in movies involves a character being held at gun point about to be shot. When the gun shot goes off, the audience thinks the character has been shot, but off screen, another character has entered and shot the character holding the gun.

were just another film. His manipulation of his testimony thus conflicts with the interrogators' desire to pin him down, and so both parties are forced through round after round of questioning.

This cyclical structure also makes visible the process of the reader's interpretation. As readers, we are made aware of our active involvement in the construction of the text's meaning. Consider the novel's acknowledgements, which encourage the reader to insert the reader's name into the blank space: "If there is anybody reading this who feels they had an unacknowledged hand in the book's production [and you most certainly should, being the reader], then please add your name in the space provided below" (acknowledgements). The novel attempts to highlight this role so that the reader cannot feign passivity in the interpretive process. This is not to say that the reader has free rein to interpret the novel any way the reader would like; rather, the interpretation is constrained by a number of factors. One such constraint is the subtle inclusion of a supplemental analytic guide.

In Nettie's last letter to michael, she includes the name of three fictional, critical essays that can serve as possible approaches to *The Pornographer's Poem*. They are: "Cinematic Pornography as Burlesque of Mainstream Hollywood: Poring In on the Biblical Epic"; "Pornography vs. The Construction of Bourgeois Taste: The Al Goldstein Story"; and "The Relationship Between the Hard-core Porno Loop and the Modernist Poem: A Structural Analysis" (296). The first approach analyzes the novel as a satire of mainstream cultural tropes and clichés, the second compares and contrasts predominantly middle-class morals with the representations found in pornography, and the third uses literary forms (i.e. the modernist poem) to deconstruct pornographic ones. Each approach juxtaposes the high level of regulation that is common of high art with the less regulated forms of low art. These three

approaches pose a triumvirate structure not unlike the one in which violence operates according to Slavoj Žižek. Thus the conflict between high art and low art is similarly represented within the conflict between the competing performances of masculinity – the highly regulated performance of hegemonic masculinity is paralleled with the more radical performances of off-scene masculinities. The triumvirate structure of violence helps us understand how hegemonic masculinity operates beyond simply a subjective level. This is all further problematized, of course, by the book's narrative ambiguities and inconsistencies. The paralleled disintegration of narrative continuity makes the inconsistencies and contradictions of masculinity visible, or, at least, this disintegration serves to show how much effort and oppression/violence is required to maintain the perceived stability of hegemonic masculinity.

This triumvirate structure of hegemonic masculinity also helps explain why michael's performances come to be predominantly characterized through escapist behaviours. Prompted by the decentralization of masculine models within the family unit, the school system and the athletic regime, michael experiences a crisis of masculinity. As the number of available masculinities increases, michael's ability to confidently navigate them and articulate them effectively decreases, particularly because he does not possess a strong masculine role model/exploratory attachment figure to help guide him. The masculinities that michael comes up against are so diverse and problematic that he is not sure which to emulate; he is thus subject to a burden of choice and experiments with a variety of them. The scope of these masculinities range from the alternative rock star masculinity of Lou Reid, to the California hippie type, to the *avant garde* writer/pornographer embodied by Henry Miller. Conversely, michael defines himself against a number of hegemonic and outright

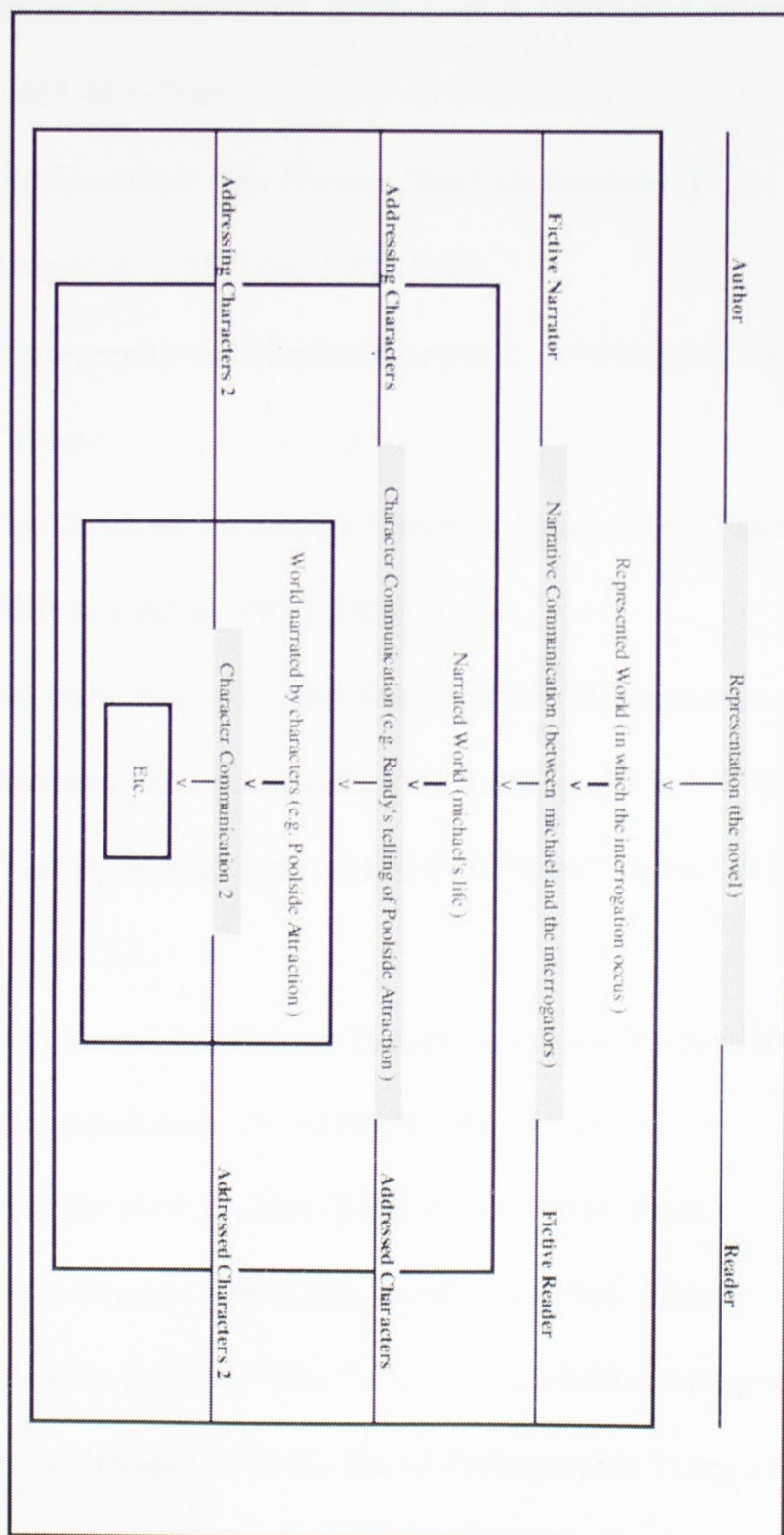
violent masculinities like Bobby's, which evokes antagonistic cooperation; Longley's, which promotes a Lombardian work ethic – and eventually violent persuasion; and Flynn's, which operates through violent coercion. With few positive role models to guide him, Michael eventually succumbs to Flynn's violent influence. He is forced to create texts that perpetuate the social norms because those sorts of texts are more marketable than his critical, artistic ones. Within this structure masculinity is made into a commodity that can be easily marketed.

Thus, the prevalent images of masculinity are, by nature, not representative of all of the different masculinities that exist. The predominant social perception of these images is that masculinity is stable and secure. Conversely, the instability and fragility of masculinity are often eschewed in the popular perception. This is why the novel stresses self-awareness on the part of readers. It asks a lot of them. It asks that they be critical of the images that are cycled through the media, and it asks that readers check their own complacency in the interpretation and thus perpetuation of these images. The reader is left to question whether or not the reader is simply perpetuating a prefabricated hermeneutics on a number of images that are in fact more complex than their interpretations. This leads to a number of questions about how, as receivers, we take responsibility for our own interpretation of images. Do we accept the predominant images of masculinity? Do we participate in perpetuating the hegemony of the images? Ultimately, we are responsible for the interpretation and thus perception of gendered images. The novel attempts to show the importance of critical thinking through its cyclical structure. It asks us to continually reconceptualise our perceptions of these images.

This continual, discursive participation is far more productive than any moral condemnation or censorship of images. Within pornography, with its hidden elements, the need for discussion is perhaps most apparent. Our society's current tendency – to limit the ways in which we can talk about sexuality – creates a stigma around which little discussion and thereby little development and change can take place. Thus, we need to promote more inclusive discussions of sexuality and gender. That is why I have utilized an intersectional approach within my work. The different perspectives have helped illuminate different ways of understanding the varied performances of masculinity, which cannot be condensed into a single static image without losing all of their complexity. As such, the reader must continually participate in a continual dialogue with masculinity if the reader hopes to accommodate its nature as a highly dynamic and shifting performative practice.

APPENDIX A

Model of Communication levels in *The Pornographer's Poem*.



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