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No Genre for Old Men: Age and Masculinity in Michael Winner's 1978 *The Big Sleep*

The Expendables, *As Good as it Gets*, *The Bucket List*, *Gran Torino*, *Something's Gotta Give*, *Get Low*, *Space Cowboys*, *Red* – the list is just a sample of relatively recent films featuring old men, oftentimes played by actors once known for the macho characters they have created, who now rely on intertextual references to add complexity to the roles of elderly men they portray. Regardless of the genre, the sheer number of these films illustrates how the current film industry is invested in grappling with the aging of its male stars; more than with their female counterparts. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon, and ever since the Hollywood star system collapsed, previously type-casted actors have been resurfacing with any return of a cinematic formula. More often than not, even when they appeared in a familiar genre, they were represented through a more current lens, which often altered the significance of the roles they portrayed. An examination of the consequences of these shifts of representations of masculinities and their legitimizing ideologies may provide insights into both the way masculinity is understood presently and about current narratives of past masculinities, and specifically for this paper: elderly masculinities.

Though it is tempting to select a recent film featuring a former macho star, it is nevertheless interesting to examine movies that eluded both critical and popular attention, never rising to even the least iconic status. I suggest that the failures of some of these films may be attributed, in part, to the way in which the aged masculinity depicted countered the narratives of masculinity that the film, or an entire genre, wanted to present. On the basis of Michael Winner's 1978 adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*[1], I will examine how the aging of the

[1] R. Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (London: Penguin, 2005); *The Big Sleep*, dir. Michael Winner (1978, ITC Entertainment).

character has changed the film's dynamics and has ultimately rendered the film neither a tribute to its antecedent nor an innovation. What is more, the distance from 1970s re-envisioning of 1940s masculinity that the film contains will allow me to trace the constructions of these two distinct masculinities.

Released in 1978, a year that saw the premieres of three blockbusters, *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Saturday Night Fever*[2], incidentally all of which validate youthful characters at the expense of the older ones, Winner's *The Big Sleep* comes at the tail-end of the neo-noir cycle. This "remake noir," a term coined by Schwartz[3], signals the exhaustion with the genre which may be yet another reason for its failure.

According to Naremore, one of the few critics who did comment on the film, it was shot "in a cloyingly, arty, wide-angle fashion"[4] by John Alonzo, who coincidentally also worked on another "re-make," the 1975 *Farewell, My Lovely*, also starring Robert Mitchum as Philip Marlowe. The cast included Joan Collins and James Stewart, relying on Hollywood's classic premise of engaging known actors to attract viewers. Although set in Great Britain in the 1970s, the film was seen as "heavy with nostalgia, and [its] treatment of history was entirely superficial" and as exhibiting "shallowness and conservatism," using retro elements for marketable appeal, and eventually failing at the box-office[5].

In Winner's adaptation Philip Marlowe, the iconic noir detective of the 1930s and 40s, is portrayed by then a septuagenarian actor. As a result of the casting choice, the noir detective described by Megan Abbott as "a distinctive literary and cinematic figure... of the solitary white man, hard-bitten, street-savvy, but very much alone amid the chaotic din of the modern city. Generally lower-middle or working-class, heterosexual, and without family or close ties"[6] is transformed into an elderly affluent gentleman. The decision to have Mitchum play Marlowe was an attempt to connect the neo-noir film to its 1940s predecessors, including the 1946 adaptation of the very same text done by Howard Hawks with Humphrey Bogart as the detective[7]. As a failed attempt to outdo its iconic predecessor, Winner's movie offers interesting insights into the representation of aged white masculinity forced to respond to the changes in society and film industry.

Created in an era that followed the Civil Rights Movement, second wave

[2] C.J. Maland, 1978: *Movies and Changing Times*, in: *American Cinema of the 1970s: Themes and Variations*, edited by L.D. Friedman, New Brunswick 2007, p. 206.

[3] R. Schwartz, *Neo Noir: the New Film Noir Style from Psycho to Collateral*, Lanham 2005, p. XII.

[4] J. Naremore, *More than Night*, Berkeley 1998, p. 212.

[5] Ibidem, s. 258–61.

[6] M.E. Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in HardBoiled Fiction and Film Noir*, New York 2002, p.2; for the further account of the classic noir maculinity, see C. Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*, Minneapolis 2005; F. Krutnik, In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity, New York 1991.

[7] *The Big Sleep*, dir. Howard Hawks (1946, Warner Bros).

feminism, the Stonewall riots, Korean and Vietnam wars, the film had to re-envision the detective persona without losing the recognizable elements that made both the movie and its hero noir. Differently to Chandler's novel of 1939 and Hawks' film, Winner*'s The Big Sleep* had to address changes in cinema including the end of the Hays Code era (1966) and the introduction of the Rating System (1968), which better reflected audience's needs; the collapse of the Hollywood studio system, which resulted in chaos and later the emergence of popular, yet independent, cinema and the rise of the blockbuster paradigm[8]; Hollywood debuts of formerly unknown directors including Coppola, Scorsese, Altman, Spielberg, Lucas, Polański, and Cassavetes, crossing over from independent to mainstream film[9]; popularization of new points of view in cinema[10], including African American film illustrated by the economic success of Blaxploitation,[11] growth of importance of women's film; inclusion of pornography into the mainstream (*Deep Throat*, released in 1972); and, finally, technological advancements. In the end, the aging of the protagonist combined with a dated plot contributed to the failure of the film. By casting an elderly 1940s icon the film rather than neo became "dated noir," while its depiction of masculinity proved nothing more than a nostalgic cry for an imagined past of hegemonic masculinity conceived prior to the rise of second wave feminism. The failure of the character resulted from the incoherence inherent to the cultural significance of aged masculinity: the tension between the image of power gained with age and infirmity and loss of status also associated with the aging of men.

Mitchum's Marlowe is far removed from both its 1940s predecessor and early 1970s tough heroes. On paper, he remains the outsider, reluctantly helping the society he is not a part of, sometimes working for and sometimes against the system[12]. Mitchum's Marlowe is much closer to heroes of what Lester Friedman calls the post-*Jaws* era that anticipate the later 1980s action heroes known for their "retributive masculinities." Friedman observes that "the difference, then, is between individual characters with a personal sense of morality operating within a particular culture and those driven by the prevailing mores of their environment, despite their obvious social inadequacies"[13]. With his wisdom of years and polished manners, Mitchum's Marlowe appears to be fitting the society rather than opposing it.

[8] R. Sklar, *Movie Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, New York 1994, p. 292.

[9] Ibidem, 301-303.

[10] Ibidem, ~~s.~~ 335.

[11] W. Lyne, *No Accident: From Black Power to Black Box Office*, "African American Review", 34.1/2000, pp. 39-59. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/william_lyne/1; E. Quinn, *Super Fly, Black Politics, and Post Civil Rights Film Enterprise*, "Cinema Journal", 49.2/2010, pp. 86-105; M.A. Reid, *The Black Action Film: The End of the Patiently Enduring Black Hero*, "Film History", 2.1/1988, pp. 25-36. See also E. Lott, *The Whiteness of Film Noir, in: Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, edited by M. Hill, pp. 81-101, New York 1997.

[12] R. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Princeton 1985, p. 313.

[13] L. Friedman, *Introduction: Movies and the 1970s*, in: *American Cinema of the 1970s: Themes and Variations*, edited by idem, New Brunswick 2007, p. 22.

The fact that the values he upholds come from the society, rather than from a personalized moral code contradicts the noir hero's infamous inner-direction[14], which has consequences for his identity. While the 1940s hero was on a quest to find the ideal masculinity[15], the 1970s hero is looking for himself[16]. Yet, due to his advanced years, Mitchum's Marlowe is not looking for a self. In fact, he seems quite comfortable living the good life he created for himself in London. He needs to wear no masks nor prove his masculinity to anyone. The question remains, however, if his "safe" gender identity comes from the sedimentation of white heterosexual hegemonic masculinity of the patriarch that comes with age, or if it is only superficially fixed, while in fact it is being undone by aging and the feminization and genderlessness of old age.

In Winner's film Marlowe superficially represents the former patriarchal model, yet its impact is unraveled by the suggestion of infirmity and impotence also contained within masculine old age. My aim is to see in what way the easily identifiable building blocks of masculine performance of Mitchum's Marlowe, including his social position, setting, customs, use of violence and sexuality change when examined through the lens of the cultural constructions of old age and in the context of genre's transformation from noir of the two earlier versions of the story and neo-noir of the 1978 film. I argue that though the film attempts to present a very conservative masculinity in which the age of the character is meant as an asset, the complex meaning of aged masculinity in culture makes such a representation impossible, as each of the scenes intended to reaffirm hegemonic masculinity may get a subversive reading undermining that masculinity. I suspect that the coherent masculinity Mitchum's Marlowe establishes through the reiteration of conservative masculine tropes, which connect male old age with heterosexuality, wealth, status and power, yield him not as powerful mature masculinity, but an impotence masquerading as a conservative success.

Cultural interpretations of aging have been polarized into feminist inspired positions that age confers more power onto masculinity, while reducing the status of women even further, and those who note that the feminization of old age based on demographic data according to which men die younger than women, hurts men who depicted as never growing old fail to receive appropriate social recognition and medical care. According to the first perspective, women age, while men mature; within the second framework aged men are stripped of their gendered specificity and thus effeminized as they grow old, which contributes to their image as infirm, impotent and redundant. This tension is present within each representation of aged masculinity and becomes even more pronounced in masculinities that are meant to reinforce hegemo-

[14] See D. Riseman, *In a Lonely Crowd*, New Heaven 2001, pp. 56-86.

[15] See G. Plain, *When Violet Eyes Are Smiling: The Love Stories of Raymond Chandler*, in: *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*, Edinburgh 2001.

[16] J.J. Abrams, Space, *Time, and Subjectivity in Neo Noir Cinema*, in: *The Philosophy of Neo Noir*, edited by M.T. Conrad, Lexington 2007, p. 7.

nies, such as the tough hero of the 1930s and 40s, and albeit differently, in their 1970s revisions complicated by changes in social and cinematic codes.

In *The Double Standard of Aging*, Susan Sontag wrote that "Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a social pathology – intrinsic to which is the fact that it affects women much more than men. It is particularly women who experience growing older... with such distaste and even shame"[17]. She observed that due to the patriarchal structure of Western societies aging women lose the qualities for which femininity is praised. She noted that "Femininity is identified with incompetence, helplessness, passivity, noncompetitiveness, being nice. Age does not improve these qualities"[18], which is different from men whose masculinity relies on traits such as autonomy or self-control that maturity only elevates. Hence, according to Sontag, men enjoy an aging privilege that also translates into their sexual attractiveness, which for women she described as "a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification"[19]. She concludes that in the Western culture women's task is to present as desirable, thus failing as an acceptable object of desire must be penalized. Since old age renders a woman more unacceptable than it would a man[20], women are disproportionately discriminated against when they age. Sontag adds that men are allowed much more in aging than women, and with the exception of sports, their competences and status only improve with time[21]. Though there is no doubt that Sontag and other feminist thinkers are correct in claiming that age-based oppression is gendered, and that in a patriarchal society women face much harsher treatment, examining the gendered specificity of masculine inflected ageism is crucial in understanding the intersected oppressions and dividends of masculinity, old age and whiteness.

Theoretically, Sontag's observations fit the masculinity represented by Mitchum's 1978 Marlowe, albeit without the criticism inherent in her analysis. He relies on the masculinity dividend[22] in his presentation of masculinity as stateliness, affluence, implicit heterosexuality and maturity far removed from the anxious masculinities of Chandler's novel and Hawks' film. Yet, the film encompasses also the other side of aged masculinity associated with infirmity, reduced sexuality and powerlessness. In his work on aged masculinity, Edward H. Thompson calls attention to the homogenization and feminization of old age that according to him hurts the way both elderly women and men are perceived and interacted with. He derives his critique of contemporary approaches

[17] S. Sontag, *The Double Standard of Aging, in: On the Contrary: Essays by Men and Women*, edited by M. Reinbolt, J. Fletwood, Albany 1984, pp. 99-112.

[18] Ibidem, p. 101.

[19] Ibidem, p. 102.

[20] Ibidem, p. 108-9.

[21] Ibidem, p. 101.

[22] A term coined by Raewyn Connell to describe the benefits of masculinity in a patriarchal society regardless or other classist or racial oppressions, quoted in: M.S. Kimmel, *Introduction: Toward a Pedagogy of the Oppressor*, in: *Privilege: A Reader*, edited by M.S. Kimmel, L. Ferber, Boulder 2003, p. 6

to old age from the assumption that privileging femininity in age studies and cultural, political and economic practices feeds into the medical industrial complex and hurts both genders by not providing adequate types of care, emotional support and medical treatment[23]. On the basis of Thompson's diagnosis, it may be argued that when it comes to old age, paradoxically the masculinity dividend hurts men more than it helps them, as for example retired men who need to struggle with the loss of importance conferred by breadwinning, may lash out on family members. In a broader context cultural analyses of age suffer from a serious underrepresentation of masculinity-focused examinations, which furthers the academic invisibility of aged men contrary to their presence in popular culture.

As mentioned earlier, one of the factors contributing to the incoherence of masculinity presented by Mitchum's Marlowe is the fact that the template for the 1940s noir masculinity had to be adapted to the progressive realities of the 1970s neo-noir, and its diverse ideological, cultural and economic tensions, as well as the history of the United States prior to and during the 1970s cycle. The shape of the cycle was affected by the emergence of a new audience, well-versed in Classic Hollywood cinema, for whom 1946's *The Big Sleep* was an iconic film and who recognized generic elements when they saw them. At the same time, towards the end of the cycle, noir suffered from an "exhaustion"[24], exemplified by the 1978 *The Big Sleep*'s political and cultural void. Although Jerold J. Abrams observed that neo-noirs introduced social issues as the core rather than background element of films' content, depicted social mobility and the decline of the big city, as well as made the self the main issue of neo-noir[25], post-*Jaws* noirs failed to address these issues other than cursorily. Winner's film failed to address them at all. Lester Friedman argues that while the first half of the decade saw the emergence of a radical, new American author cinema, the second half witnessed a complete shift in the way Hollywood films were made, recalling the earlier studio systems, where riskless blockbusters ensured large profits, yet provided less artistic innovation[26].

[23] E.H. Thompson, *Older Men as Invisible Men in Contemporary Society*, in: *Old Men's Lives*, edited by E.H. Thompson, Thousand Oaks 1994, pp. 1-22. See also idem, *Gender Matters: Aging Men's Health*, "Generations 32", 1/2008, pp. 5-8.

[24] R. Arnett, *Eighties Noir: The Dissenting Voice in Regan's America*, "Journal of Popular Film and Television", 2007, p. 124.

[25] J. J. Abrams, op. cit., pp. 8-9.

[26] L. Friedman, op. cit., pp. 20-21. The critic lists the following features of the pre-Jaws films: "driven by character rather than plot (*Five Easy Pieces,* 1970), critical of American society (*The Godfather*, 1972), revisionist rather than derivative genre constructions (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, 1971), dominated by anti-heroes and social outcasts (*Klute*, 1971), exploring the dark side of human nature (*Chinatown*, 1974), distrustful of political institutions (*The Parallax View*, 1974), hostile toward authority figures (*M*A*S*H*, 1970), more sexually explicit (*Last Tango in Paris*, 1972), showcasing palpable violence (*A Clockwork Orange*, 1971), dealing overtly with race (*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, 1971) and ethnicity (*Hester Street*, 1975), aesthetically innovative (*Husbands*, 1970), engaged with popular music (*American Graffiti*, 1973), cynical in their worldview (*Carnal Knowledge*, 1971), challenging traditional narrative expectations (*Shampoo*, 1975)."

Despite the retro obsession, the 1970s neo-noir cycle films differed in many aspects from their predecessors visually and ideologically. Jason Holt mentions introduction of color, scarcity of voice-over narration, more explicit sexuality and violence[27]. Robert Arnett adds that neo-noirs revealed the film to be a film[28], which, the critic suggests, is a feature of progressive cinema and recalls Barbara Klinger's claim that progressive films expose the juxtapositions inherent to ideology: tensions that the dominant ideology tries so hard to hide[29]. Yet, with all this subversive potential, neo-noirs (as well as all progressive films) run the risk of unraveling their own subversive constructs rendering the film ideologically void. Hence Naremore's comment that "most examples of neo-noir are less artistically sophisticated and politically interesting than the films they emulate"[30]. Yet, Steve Macek, who agrees that the 1940s and 1950s noir lost its political potential as it progressively became more mainstream, still argues that even the most self-conscious of the films may and are used to convey political meanings, both conservative and progressive[31]. With all its drawbacks, this theory seems the most applicable in the current discussion as it explains the presence of ideology in movies, but refrains from evaluating its political impact. It also accounts for the incoherence of Winner's film, in which the progressive form is challenged by a retrograde content.

In a way, the waning relevance of neo-noir parallels the waning relevance of the hard-boiled masculinity resurrected in Winner's film and embodied by Mitchum's Marlowe. Rather than capturing the zeitgeist of the 1970s perturbed masculinities as exemplified by Altman's *The Long Goodbye*[32], Winner's film wanted to capitalize on a mythology of masculinity that relied on very traditional and patriarchal formulations of whiteness, heterosexuality, social status, dominance and austerity. As a result, the film alienated audiences for whom youth, and not maturity, became the leading quality with the rise of the youth culture in the 1980s and 1990s. Inadvertently, the attempt to rehash the older version of hegemonic masculinity with the use of an older actor subverted that very model drawing attention to its datedness and irrelevance. The collusion of contradictory meanings of the masculinity depicted with a nostalgic formula rendered the film made in all sincerity into

[27] J. Holt, *A Darker Shade: Realism in Neo Noir, in: The Philosophy of Film Noir*, edited by M.T. Conrad, Lexington 2006, p. 37.

[28] J. Naremore, op. cit., p. 262.

[29] See B. Klinger, *Cinema/Ideology/Criticism Revisited: The Progressive Genre, in: Film Genre Reader III*, edited by B.K. Grant, pp. 75-91, Austin 2003.

[30] J. Naremore, op. cit., p. 262. It is also worth recalling Klinger's observation about mass camp readings of 1940s classic films, which neo-noirs/progressives either capitalized on by spoofing or avoided by introducing more explicit brutality (quoted in Naremore).

[31] S. Macek, *The Political Uses of the Neo Noir City: Ideology, Genre, and the Urban Landscape in: 8 mm and Strange Days*, "Journal of American & Comparative Cultures", vol. 25, 3-4/2002, p. 377.

[32] *The Long Goodbye*, dir. Robert Altman (1973, United Artists) features Elliott Gould as Marlowe in another adaptation of Chandler's story. He is much more anxious and removed from hegemonic masculinity of Mitchum's Marlowe, and offers the detective as a pastiche of the character rather than its sincere resurrection to a greater critical acclaim.

a parody of itself, one that failed to receive the cult status the "so bad that it is so good" films sometimes receive.

The film inherits from its literary source a complicated plot, which it tries to simplify by providing more exposition, retaining classical noir's voice-over narration and deciding on some plot points that remained ambiguous in the novel and the 1946 adaptation, such as who killed the Sternwoods' driver. In brief, the story follows Philip Marlowe, an American detective living in London since the end of the war, who is hired by an another American expat, General Sternwood, to trace his younger daughter's, Camilla's, blackmailer. On his way out of the Sternwood residence, Marlowe is invited to see Charlotte, the General's elder daughter. She is sure that the detective was hired to find her husband, Rusty Regan, who is said to have eloped with the wife of a notorious criminal, Eddie Mars. While following the blackmail angle, the detective gets himself involved in various affairs, including the death of a pornographic bookstore owner and the film's homosexual character, Arthur Gwynn Geiger; consorting with Eddie Mars; pretending to take part in the blackmailing business with Joe Brody and Agnes Lozelle, Geiger's accomplices; and finally chasing and killing Mars gun for hire, Canino. In the end, Marlowe discovers that Regan's disappearance was caused by Camilla, who shot him in a fit of jealous rage, while her elder sister asked Mars to help her cover it up.

In the novel Marlowe was thirty-three, in Hawks' film he was fortyish, around Bogart's real age, and in 1978 Marlowe is well over seventy, just like Mitchum. The most obvious and immediate consequence of this is that his old age requires everyone else to be older too. The shift in age brings about a confusion around the masculinity Mitchum's Marlowe is embodying. It seems that the film intends to make the mature Marlowe the symbol of hegemonic masculinity, yet the ambiguity of old age undermines this effect. In the textual analysis that follows, I will show how various elements of Mitchum's Marlowe construction either contribute to the creation of a coherent powerful masculinity, or forfeit it.

The 1930s and 40s Marlowe was already a nostalgic figure attempting to recuperate a hegemonic masculinity lost due to the postwar emancipation of various minorities, including women and people of color. His attempts to find the perfect hegemonic masculinity described by Gill Plain rendered him gender-wise unstable[33]. It seems that Winner's film wanted to prevent any such ambiguity by presenting a supposedly unsubvertable model of masculinity, but in that attempt, the character also lost the qualities that identified his type of masculinity and enabled his patriarchal crusade.

Firstly, the aging of Marlowe minimizes the opposition the novel wanted to create between the detective and General Sternwood. Stewart and Mitchum share a glorious Hollywood macho past, and though they index different Hollywood periods, they do not sufficiently differ in age to maintain the oppo-

[33] See G. Plain, op. cit.

sition between the able-bodied Marlowe and incapacitated Sternwood[34]. As a result their similarity rather than conferring ability onto Sternwood, questions Marlowe's strength. In the novel the age and financial gap between the men is bridged by their shared war veteran status, which levels them in terms of experience and a moral code. In the movie rather than representing the two poles of the normative soldiery continuum created in the book, the two men seem a pair of redundant veterans, whose age difference is homogenized into one-dimensional old age.

On the other hand, the narrowing of the age gap, according to Sontag's claims of sexist aging, narrows the wealth and class gaps. Both in Chandler's novel and in Hawks' film, Marlowe's poverty is a crucial element that safeguards his honesty and immunity to corruption. He illustrates this sentiment when he admits to Mrs. Regan: "You can't make much money in this trade, if you're *honest."* The statement rings false when spoken by Mitchum's Marlowe, since he seems much more affluent than any of his predecessors because of his stately deportment associated with age. His higher social position is the effect of the masculinity dividend experienced by aging men. Marlowe is not an outcast, but an expat with all the positive stigmatization this shift has.

If wealth and status are one aspect of hegemonic masculinity acquired with age, than the loss of sexual functions could be its downside. Intertextually, Marlowe's sophistication acquired in the 1978's version is probably a reflection of the gentleman spy formula concurrent with the neo-noir cycle. In the spy formula the highly dandified masculinity is returned to its heterosexuality by having the spy hetero-hyper-sexual. This is not the case with Mitchum's Marlowe, who continues along the celibate path set out by the novel. As I will discuss below, in Winner's film Marlowe's disinterest in sexual activities and austerity are intended to make him impenetrable, yet bearing in mind Thompson's comments about elderly masculinity, it is hard not to question Marlowe's sexual potency.

The detective's affluence is also reflected in the way Mitchum's Marlowe dresses and lives. Gone are the traditional props, trench coats and fedoras. In his navy suit he seems a more literal representation of the Marlowe of the novel, but only to the point when he pushes up his sleeve to reveal a Rolex. He also drives a Mercedes convertible. His flat is very modern, but has some elegant, understated antiques, which is probably how an audience would imagine an upper middle class European apartment. His office is well-furnished and bright, signaling respectability from the doorstep. It is full of books, and he is shown reading newspapers not to check what is going on, but as a leisurely activity of a person with the luxury of time and the cultural capital to enjoy it. With the new money and status, comes a new veneer of education, which is another dividend of aging masculinity.

[34] See C. Rzepka's analysis of the original book scene in: *I'm in the Business too: Gothic Chivarly Private Eyes, and Proxy Sex and Violence in Chandler's The Big Sleep*, "Modern Fiction Studies", vol. 46/2000, pp. 696-720.

His domestic habits also contain a mixture of hegemonic and effeminizing elements. Mitchum's Marlowe cooks and eats breakfast, which sets him apart from the 1930s version in which he eats mostly to feed others – a sign of care associated with femininity. On the other hand, he sleeps naked, which may be a sign of the times he lives in. Paradoxically, these social innovations date the character and turn him into an embodiment of all things retrograde.

He is never in a rush; nothing he does is underlined with anxiety or impatience. He has the pose of cool detachment that the novel Marlowe could never have. All these new qualities contribute to an impression of intellectualism that this character is meant to convey: with age come money and wisdom. Yet, this new quality may threaten with a resurfacing of a sexual ambiguity, since oftentimes in American culture intellectualism is aligned with effeminacy or even homosexuality. This reading is present in the character of Geiger, who is both the story's homosexual character and the owner of a bookstore. Winner's film spares no effort to eradicate any queer reading of Marlowe, making sure that the effect produced by Mitchum's Marlowe is of an educated heterosexual upper middle class gentleman.

At the same time, within the logic of noir masculinity affluence renders a character suspicious. It is as if Mitchum's Marlowe belonged to two masculine orders that cancel each other out: the outsider status crucial for the noir detective design requires youth as its component. Nowhere in this paradigm is there space for elderly respectability that would not be a parody. In a final twist, the very casting of 1940s icons Mitchum and Stewart, which were supposed to transport viewers back into the noir world of anxieties and uncertainties, paradoxically destroys the retro masculinity's ability to be anything other than a representation of the good life[35].

In congruence with the above rise in respectability, Marlowe is also much less violent. Albeit his use of violence has always been limited, the 1978 version is even more restrained, despite the possibilities that post-code cinema offered[36]. Again, respectability clashes with infirmity. It seems that brutality, which involves strenuous physical activity is inappropriate for a man his age, as in fact many chase scenes involve Marlowe pursuing the fugitive in a car rather than on foot. Thus in the film's two violent scenes, the fight with Alice at Joe Brody's apartment, and the fight with Geiger's boyfriend, Carol Lundgren, reduce Marlowe's exertion.

The one with Alice is choreographed comically and could as easily bring to mind a mildly violent sexual foreplay of the soft porn variety. The impression of a sexual rather than aggressive encounter is enhanced when once Marlowe collects all the guns from the assailants, the camera shows Alice, in a semi-postcoital pose, panting heavily in her ripped shirt and stockings. This fight scene is not the

[35] For more about the changes in pre and postwar noir masculinities, see S. Orr, *Veterans of Noir: Rewriting the Good War with Chester Himes, Dorothy B. Hughes, and John Okada, in: idem, Darkly Perfect World: Colonial Adventure, Postmodernism, and American Noir*, Columbus 2010, pp. 106-132.

[36] See note 11 about Blaxploitation cinema.

only example of Marlowe's sex by proxy, since this character had been always read as the most celibate of the noir detectives[37]. The positioning of Alice and its implications aim to confirm Mitchum's Marlowe's heterosexuality and restraint. This confirmation is necessary, since celibacy to some extent threatens male heterosexuality constructed as always pro-sex. The need to establish this heterosexuality is needed also in the context of the other fight scene and its intertextual sexual connotations.

The second scene of violence is very short and the detective outwits rather than beats his opponent. Marlowe drops his gun and when Lundgren bends over to get it, the detective disarms him quickly. This scene seems to self-consciously prevent any homoerotic readings, which did appear with regards to the novel and Hawks' film, by reducing the scenes length and significance. This is yet another instance where the filmmakers take great pains to prevent any homoerotic readings of Marlowe, potentially enabled by his shedding of the working class attire and assuming a sophistication more associated with dandyism.

The peak of the film's "homosexual panic"[38] comes with the remake of the Geiger bookstore scene in which (in the novel and in Hawks' film) Marlowe disguises himself as a homosexual man to visit the premises of the store without raising suspicion. According to Sedgwick, in an effort to prevent any homoerotic readings, male bonding necessary for the perpetuation of patriarchy is desexualized in order to reduce the risk of a homosexual interpretation. This leads to what Sedgwick calls "sexual anesthesia," of which the 1978 film is a good illustration. Winner's *The Big Sleep* prevents any camp reading of the novel or the 1946 film suggested by Klinger, by having Mitchum's Marlowe put on reading glasses rather than sun glasses. As a result he poses for an elderly professor and not a "fairy."

Yet Marlowe's sexual anesthetization could also be a function of his age. Thompson notes that older men are associated with inability to procreate, which he sees as instrumental in their effeminization. The ability to re(produce), physically and in terms of capital are considered the two crucial elements on which masculinity hinges; by reducing the former, the man loses his position in general[39]. Mitchum's Marlowe is meant to function as a constant re-assertion of straightness achieved, paradoxically, via his celibacy, yet his age connotes also the inability to have sex, which undermines male heterosexuality.

Another problem for Marlowe's heterosexuality is his attitude towards women. Mitchum's Marlowe inherits a noir mistrust of women that prevents

[37] See C. Rzepka, op. cit., pp. 700-720.

[38] E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley 2008, p. 185. This obsession with making the 1970s Marlowe the "straightest of them all" might be the after-effect of the growing homosexual visibility following the Stonewall Riots and other political and cultural events that to an extent reduced the association of homosexuality with a taboo.

[39] E. Thompson, op. cit., p. 13.

him from becoming romantically or sexually involved, and hence avoids such relations. Yet, the queer readings of his predecessors require him to adopt a different strategy safeguarding his sexual normativity, and it seems that respectability associated with old age is it. Unfortunately, the work of this strategy is undone due to the cultural connotations of old age and lack of sexuality. Thompson disagrees with Sontag's formulations about the sexism present in discussions and depictions of aged sexuality, and observes that popular representation of aged masculinity rely on both effeminization and emasculation of older men. He says: "To many people, aging is a negative of masculinity, and thus older men become effeminate over time"[40]. Though the critic conflates effeminization with emasculation, by which he reveals how steeped in patriarchal ideology his argument is, he does make a point about the extent to which old age strips away some of the positive qualities connected to masculinity. Again, an attempt to fortify a certain white, heterosexual masculinity is both helped and destroyed by an aging protagonist.

The film's obsession with unrealized or stifled sexuality resurfaces also when the geographical shift is considered. Done probably for the sake of credibility, the film does move from 1930s Los Angeles of the novel, to 1970s London. The pornographic plotline might seem rather insubstantial in the post-sexual revolution 1970s America, but to an American audience, it may be argued, a London setting legitimizes porn as crime because due to its geographical and purportedly cultural distance, it may be read as conservative. Thus a crime story organized around pornographic pictures would still ring true in that distant setting associated with tradition. The shift in location enables also a change in season from the summer of classic noirs to autumn easily associated with the British Isles. The season seems as yet another, unintentional, way of emphasizing Mitchum's Marlowe's age and the terminal quality of the film project.

The conservative intentions of the film and masculinity it attempts to depict is even stronger when the sheer incongruity of the film's opening sequences is analyzed. Marlowe arrives at the Sternwood's mansion, which is not a Los Angeles villa of the novel, but an actual castle. In the novel the affluence of the location is juxtaposed to Marlowe's famous hate for the rich. However, by making the family inhabit an actual historical structure dissolves some of the tension because the elderly Marlowe symbolically rather fits the castle to the extent any American does. Entering a rich man's house was a problem for 1930s Marlowe, who comments on that in the voice-over narration. When spoken by Mitchum's Marlowe the transgression rings fake. He is a retro figure representing a retro set of values and investments who is entering a symbolic and real structure representing precisely the same set of values and investments: a castle[41].

[40] Ibidem.

[41] See C. Rzepka, op. cit., for an analysis of Marlowe's chivalric heritage, p. 706.

The conservative values represented are supposedly countered with the level of sexual titillation enabled by the post-sexual revolution cinema. Onscreen female nudity is presented throughout the film in a typically misogynistic setting of having fully clothed men next to completely naked women. The film's most common naked body is that of Camilla, who later reveals to be the killer and the madwoman drug-addict all in one immature body. The film does not lose the opportunity to provide more nudity by zooming in on the contents of one of Geiger's books, entitled *School Girls*[42]. This in another retro move: the film confirms the Classical Hollywood's male gaze logic of the 1940s and 50s reappearance in the neo-noir cycle. Though misogyny is an element of the hegemonic model of heterosexual masculinity, the fact that the novel uses pornography as one of its visual aids renders that heterosexuality suspect.

It is telling that the particular type of pornographic fantasy reproduced in the film is one associated with pedophilia as opposed to at the time more acceptable mainstream heterosexual pornography. Choosing "school girls" as the porn album's motif emphasizes Mitchum's Marlowe's age. His revulsion at the images makes certain that he would not stoop to this apparent low, which he calls "elaborate smut." The repulsion towards immature femininity is repeated when Marlowe rejects Camilla Sternwood's numerous advances. Within the logic of the film she connotes both youth (immaturity) and criminal madness, which the detective condemns.

Charles J. Maland observes that neither the rating system nor the growing feminist movement, affected the objectification of women in post-1960s Hollywood cinema[43], and Winner's *The Big Sleep* is no exception. The film portrays three types of women, providing three "suitable" compartments for the different femininities of the 1970s, all of which recall previous patriarchal views of femininity.

First there is the mad woman, embodied by Camilla Sternwood. She is much more unstable than in the previous renditions: after a failed attempt to shoot Marlowe there is foam coming out of her mouth. She functions as the perverted Lolita, recalling the *School Girls* porno album from Geiger's bookstore, she represents murder, madness, unrestrained sexuality and immature disregard for responsibility, all encompassed in her youthful body[44]. No wonder that after throwing her out of his apartment, where she was waiting for him in his bed, naked, Marlowe violently throws away the sheets: eradicating

[42] Christopher observes that neo-noirs in general were more openly presenting nudity and sexuality, and as a result it became much less of a topic in them, in: *Somewhere in the Night*, pp. 242-243.

[43] C.J. Maland, op. cit., p. 216.

[44] Interestingly, this image of a crazy woman has functioned almost unchanged from the times of Victorian literature. See S. M. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Heaven 2000.

the evil and rejecting youth[45]. This may be seen as another instance of Marlowe's sex by proxy, but it is more likely that reaction is motivated with disgust Marlowe feels towards Camilla and her rampant sexuality. This interpretation fits well with the patriarchal frame of women becoming crazy over their sexual frustrations, as is the case with Camilla, who kills Rusty Regan because he rejected her advances.

The second type is the liberated woman. In the film she is illustrated by Alice Lozelle and Mrs. Regan. Women's independence is equaled with ruthlessness. To reinforce the undesirability of this type, Mrs. Regan is likened to a lizard, constantly smacking and licking her lips, which is meant to provoke revulsion rather than erotic response. The kiss between Marlowe and Mrs. Regan is only a ploy on his part to get information from her. By remaining completely unaffected, Marlowe only strengthens his position of superiority and detachment. Agnes Lozelle, who is the closest the film has in the shape of a femme fatale[46], is very businesslike, which again fosters a reading of an independent woman having to always be sexually frigid. These women compliment the respectable elderly Marlowe apart from the fact that they do not help to confirm his heterosexual status at all. Not surprisingly, the only woman who actually does intrigue Marlowe is the only woman embodying traditionally patriarchal conceptions of femininity, Mona Mars. She is the only woman performing during the film, in a very much Classic Hollywood vein, lending herself to objectification by the male gaze. The film deals with the evils of the feminist movement by compartmentalizing and labeling the female experience, a misogynistic move befitting the values of hegemonic masculinity unsuccessfully revived in Mitchum's Marlowe.

As far as the models of other masculinities are concerned, the film does not add much novelty, apart from the gentleman detective poached from another genre, to the set already exhibited in the 1940s. However, there is an attempt to simplify some of the relationships between male protagonists. For example, Canino is incapacitated because his leg is in a cast, which makes it less likely that he will be read as Marlowe's putative evil doppelgänger, as was the case in the 1940s film[47]. Eddie Mars remains the detective's only possible double. Yet his Britishness is used in a traditional American way to vilify and effeminize him thus rendering the doubling impossible. Joe Brody, the only other character who is defined by the spaces he inhabits, is for some reason consistently shown in a nautical context. The nautical props signify leisure, as only a wealthy city man can afford to sail and may be a sign of his class aspirations. It has been a practice of the detective genre to have the detective matched with

[45] Note Chandler's own description of that scene: Marlowe "savagely" tearing away the sheets. Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, p. 173.

[46] Holt argues that neo noirs rarely featured femmes fatales, idem, op. cit., p. 26.

[47] However, one could argue that the leg in cast is a symbolic reflection of Marlowe's impotence, asexuality or celibacy.

a masculine archenemy similar to the protagonist. This strategy helped to establish the hero as somebody who could have been evil and decided not to. The doppelgänger's death or imprisonment signaled a rite of passage for the sleuth. Mitchum's Marlowe experiences no such ritual of maturation because it seems redundant for this aged persona: again, the logic of the genre is nullified by the consequences of the protagonist's age.

Rather than a revival of the 1940s and 50s misogynistic ideology, or a revision of it performed in the 1970s progressive cinema, this film is an anticipation of the 1980s anti-feminist backlash, revealing a true hatred of women and a new fear of homosexuality in the post Stonewall era. Winner's adaptation also signals the coming of a Reganesque period, based on a promise to revive masculinity itself. This promise translated into the cinematic context via protagonists such as Rambo, the vigilante seeking justice in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and via communal values in films such as *Star Wars* and *Jaws*. These two strategies reinforce the tension at the core of American identity between the masculinity/Americanness coded in individualism and the value of the community, and family especially.

Finally, it is the aging of the character and the cultural signification of aged masculinity that render Mitchum's Marlowe a failed anticipation of the retributive masculinity of later characters' such as Rambo or Rocky, to name just those featuring Sylvester Stallone. The aging of the hero intended as way of fixing his dominant heterosexual masculinity contributed to the undoing of the logic of a genre reliant on a certain degree of voluntary outcasting and anxiety over masculinity. As a result, the film failed ideologically, but also commercially and critically.

Today's attempts to revive the action hero movies of the 1980s and 1990s rely on pastiche rather than the sincerity deployed in Winner's film. Whatever the strategy, however, it seems that a resurgence of cultural representations of aged men and a generic revival signal a new preoccupation of popular culture with the question of aging masculinity. It seems that contemporary resurrections of former starts of retributive masculinity include a level of self-mockery, which were not present in Winner's film. This could suggest that contemporary mainstream cinema has managed to subsume the subversive potential of minoritarian readings into its profit-producing machine.

No Genre for Old Men: Age and Masculinity in Winner's 1978 *The Big Sleep*

In the 1978 adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, Philip Marlowe, the iconic noir detective, was portrayed by then seventy years old Robert Mitchum. As a result, the detective figure known for his tough working-class masculinity was transformed into an elderly affluent gentleman. The casting choice was an attempt to connect the neo-noir film to its 1940s predecessors, but even despite famous cast members Winner's movie met with little popular, critical or academic interest. Yet the film serves as a valuable illustration of the challenges of reviving hegemonic masculinity models within genre revivals. My analysis will show how the tension in representations of aged masculinity unravels the logic of neo-noir and masculinity inscribed in the neo-noir hero. Though both noir and neo-noir share an investment in patriarchy, Winner's film renders the attempts to revive its void. By casting an elderly 1940s icon the film rather than neo became "dated noir," while its depiction of masculinity proved nothing more than a nostalgic cry for an imagined past of hegemonic masculinity.