

FATHERING THE FUTURE: MASCULINE SURVIVAL AND PATERNAL
RESTORATION IN 1990s HOLLYWOOD

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

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April 2013

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ABSTRACT

The 1990s in the United States saw a particular cultural anxiety manifested in the crisis of masculinity, in which American men were perceived to be suffering from a loss of power and diminished authority. As President Clinton heralded a final push towards the millennium and the creation of a better, brighter future for the nation, concerns emerged over the ability of straight, white, middle-class men to access this same future. In this pre-millennial period, fatherhood is presented as the solution to this state of masculine crisis. Hollywood in particular invests in this notion of masculine crisis and the need for rehabilitation through fatherhood, indulging in one of the key tenets of Lee Edelman's theory of reproductive futurism: that of the future being realised through an investment in the child.

This thesis examines a number of Hollywood films produced between 1989 and 2001, with the aim of demonstrating how fatherhood is persistently constructed as the key to masculine survival during a period of considerable anxiety over the future. Chapter 1 explores the perceived erosion of paternal authority by the law, focusing on representations of the family court in *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993), *Falling Down* (1993), *The Santa Clause* (1994), *Liar Liar* (1997) and *I Am Sam* (2001), and the way in which survival is reliant upon a transfer of power back to the disenfranchised father.

Chapter 2 examines the construction of gay fatherhood in *The Birdcage* (1996), *The Object of My Affection* (1998) and *The Next Best Thing* (2000), exploring the extent to which the promise of survival is predicated upon sacrifice, and how fatherhood becomes the reserve of 'good' gay men within the context of the AIDS epidemic. Binding together fatherhood and survival, while remaining beholden to a heteronormative model of the family, ensures that the future becomes accessible only to gay men who are willing to assimilate into, rather than challenge, the dominant model.

Chapter 3 focuses on the death of the child and the threat of ‘unparenthood’ in *Paradise* (1991), *Lorenzo’s Oil* (1992), *The Good Son* (1993), *The Ice Storm* (1997) and *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001). In these films, survival is threatened by the death of a son. Facing the erasure of their future, fathers must be restored, channelling their survival through the prospect of another child and the end of mourning as a state that only heightens their status as non-fathers.

Chapter 4 examines the reverse of this issue, the death of the father, as it occurs in *Field of Dreams* (1989), *The Lion King* (1994), *Twister* (1996), *Contact* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998) and *Jack Frost* (1998). This final chapter focuses on the figure of the ‘returning father’ and the importance of establishing a paternal legacy through the child, in order to survive beyond the self. Recognising that he will not be entirely erased at the point of death if he is able to establish a link with his child, the father’s return can be understood as a quest for a form of immortal survival.

By rehabilitating American men on-screen as fathers first and foremost, crisis can be averted and survival guaranteed. The reality of human mortality is obscured in favour of a vision of a promised future, one that becomes accessible through a turn towards fatherhood. The promise of survival, and the cultivation of a paternal legacy, defends against the apocalyptic notions of erasure that occupy Hollywood—and the U.S.—at the end of the millennium.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Michele Aaron, for all her guidance and support over the last four and a half years. The department of American and Canadian Studies at Birmingham has been my home since 2009 and I am grateful for the opportunities I have been given during my time here. I would also like to extend a huge thank you to the department of American Studies at the University of Hull, where I spent four excellent years. In particular I would like to thank Edward Abramson for inspiring me to go further.

Thank you to my friends for providing, at various points, advice, adventure, and perspective. In particular, Becca for being my partner in crime; Jenny for sharing in the madness; and Charlotte for the long emails and the even longer car journeys, and for never being too far away. Thanks also to Anna and Cerys for all the tea, cake, and disaster scenarios that made home such a good place to be.

Thank you to my family, without whom I would be a very different person in a very different place. My grandparents, Shirley and Albert Barnett, have given me an immense amount of support throughout my PhD and I am grateful for all their help. My late grandfather, Colin Peck, was also unfailing in his encouragement and though he didn't get to see the start of this, I hope he would be pleased that I reached the end.

Thanks to my brother, Thomas, who saw most of these films with me the first time round (and the second time, and the third...), and to Jayne for all her support over the last few years. Huge thanks to Jon, for climbing this mountain (and that one) with me, for always believing I could do it, and for filling the last few years with numerous adventures.

Finally, thanks to my parents, John Barnett and Jacqueline Lawrence, for all their love and support right from the beginning, and for making all this possible.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the construction of fatherhood as a saving mechanism for men in Hollywood during the 1990s. During this pre-millennial period Hollywood invests in a popular, if contentious, concept within contemporary American culture, that of the crisis of masculinity. In doing so, it channels the anxieties embedded in such a crisis towards a resolution in which fatherhood becomes the foundation on which masculine survival can be built. In the final decade of the 20th century, a century often envisaged as “the American century”, there is a concerted focus in the United States on not only imagining, but achieving, the future.¹ What follows is an examination of the ways in which the paternal role is used as a way of projecting men into this future, circumventing both the pitfalls of traditional, dominant masculinity and the inevitability of human mortality. It will question the extent to which fatherhood stabilises the crisis of masculinity that Hollywood posits, and examine the ways in which the role of the father provides a defence against the apocalyptic notions of erasure characteristic of Hollywood at the end of the millennium, and at the end of an “American century” built upon political, economic and cultural dominance.²

Steven Spielberg’s 1993 blockbuster, *Jurassic Park*, demonstrates this shift in masculine definition. The film is in many ways a quintessential product of 1990s Hollywood, in terms of both popularity and form. Within a narrative preoccupied with reversing extinction, the film reconstructs masculine survival through a shift towards the paternal. Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) undergoes a radical transformation that has little to do with the escaped dinosaurs rampaging all around him. At the beginning of the film, Dr. Grant is taciturn and aloof. Along with two other scientists, he is invited to Isla Nublar, the deserted

¹ Harold Evans, *The American Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), xiv.

² Martin Walker, *Makers of the American Century: A Narrative in Twenty-Six Lives* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 367–8.

island on which John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) has established a colony of cloned dinosaurs. Grant is on a purely scientific mission, and his annoyance at finding himself in the company of Hammond's two young grandchildren, Lex (Ariana Richards) and Tim (Joseph Mazzello), is established immediately. The children, thrilled to find themselves in the company of a real-life palaeontologist, are rebuffed by an irascible Grant when they clamour to sit in his car in the guests' tour of the island. However, after the dinosaurs escape from their secure compound, Grant is forced reluctantly into the role of protector. His mission becomes not one of discovery but of survival, not just for himself but for the children. After saving Lex from the prowling Tyrannosaurus Rex, he must save Tim from near-electrocution. The three must then evade bands of escaped dinosaurs as they attempt to navigate their way back to safety.

The film ends with the whole group reunited as they flee the island in a helicopter. As the camera pans across the group, it lingers on Dr. Sattler (Laura Dern), smiling as she gazes at a contented Grant, sitting with his arms around both sleeping children. In this moment, Grant's transformation appears to be complete. Earlier in the film, he protests that children are "noisy, messy, expensive [and] smelly", but these reservations have been lost in his fight to keep both the children and himself alive. Significantly, by the end of the film Grant has lost his Indiana Jones-style hat, a throwback to a previous Spielberg project that marked him from the beginning as a latter-day cowboy and heroic adventurer. This role abandoned, by the film's close Grant is on his way to being remodelled as benevolent father figure. Fleeing the unwelcome beasts of the past, Grant finds in fatherhood a tangible future.

Constructing survival through fatherhood serves to shore up the man in a period of uncertainty, cementing his necessity and ensuring his continued relevance. This relevance is crucial to the realisation of a future, as it conveys a sense of meaning for the father implicit

in the life of the child. It is this future, with survival taking the shape of fatherhood, which this thesis aims to investigate.

In the past decade, the father in Hollywood has begun to gain critical attention within film studies; fatherhood in the U.S. has also been the subject of political and sociological debate, particularly since the 1990s. I intend to approach this thesis from an American Studies perspective, drawing on aspects of psychoanalysis, film studies, sociology and U.S. politics. In doing so, the aim is to explore and understand the themes of masculine survival and paternal redemption that emerge in 1990s Hollywood as coming out of a particular U.S. cultural framework. The sociocultural context of these 1990s Hollywood films is essential to an understanding of the Hollywood project of paternal rehabilitation, particularly with regard to the persistent anxieties surrounding fatherhood and the contemporary “crisis of masculinity”, as discussed in more detail below. This is not to suggest that these films simply replicate the conditions of fatherhood and masculinity during this period, but to propose that the desire for paternal redemption and masculine survival that underlies these films is influenced by cultural and political debates on-going in the U.S. at the time. As products of mainstream American culture, the films discussed in this thesis provide a lens, rather than a mirror, through which to examine contemporary social and political concerns as they emerge from the very culture they attempt to depict on-screen.

Within this framework, I will refer to contemporary sociological debates regarding the role of the father within American society, as well as discussion focusing on the construction of masculinity and the perception of American men as crisis figures during the decade. I will also examine how fatherhood is visualised within U.S. politics during the 1990s, both at a policy level and on a more symbolic level, taking into account the

relationship between Clinton's presidency in particular, and its reflection of contemporary desires for—and anxiety regarding—the father.

This thesis will consider how political, social and cultural conditions at the end of the millennium affect the representation and construction of the father, as well as the desire to promote fatherhood as the key to the American future. The figure of the father is not simply represented but interrogated in Hollywood during this period, whether along the lines of behaviour, definition, purpose, or his place in the family. Though Hollywood's audience and appeal extend well beyond the U.S. into Western culture more generally, the focus here will remain on the execution of this paternal saving mechanism specifically within the context of American masculinity and the perception of the father in American culture.

In addition to considering how the political and cultural landscape contributes to the construction of masculinity and fatherhood in the U.S. during the 1990s, I will also draw on psychoanalytic theory in order to illuminate further the themes of paternal survival that run through the films considered in this thesis. Government legislation and social campaigns aimed at restoring real fatherhood, and debates regarding the role and importance of fathers in the U.S., are significant in understanding the broader, cultural context of the films discussed. However, Hollywood has long been preoccupied with restoring the symbolic father, and in using psychoanalysis within the already established American Studies framework, this wider act of restoration can be better understood. Hollywood films, particularly those dealing with themes of fatherhood and paternity, routinely rely on Freudian psychoanalytic concepts; Freud consistently takes the father as a starting point, as does Hollywood, constructing the paternal figure as the root of human psychoanalytic

development.³ Many of the films here focus on the father-son relationship, whether literal or metaphorical (as in chapter 1, which focuses on the relationship between the father and the law). Freud's work on the Law of the Father is essential in illuminating the often complicated relationship between the two, working as it does on the concept of the son surviving—yet ultimately replicating—his father's authority.⁴ In addition, Freud's theories of narcissism, particularly as they relate to parenthood and immortality, are crucial to an understanding of the ways in which fatherhood can be envisaged as a form of immortal survival.⁵

A key influence on this thesis is the work done on “reproductive futurism” by Lee Edelman in his polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, which centres the concept of survival through the child within the context of the U.S. political order.⁶ While Freud's theory of parental narcissism offers a crucial starting point, Edelman's discussion of reproductive futurism embeds this narcissism in a socio-political context, examining this quest for “narcissistic solace” not only in terms of the self but in terms of the political impetus apparent—if largely obscured—within Western society.⁷ Robert L. Caserio suggests that “*No Future* rewrites Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*: American family and children, and the nation, have become substitutes for religion's promises”.⁸ In “The Future of an Illusion”, Freud discusses the human need for “consolation”, in which “life and the universe

³ Sigmund Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 4 and Vol. 5* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953).

⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Totem and Taboo”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 13* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955).

⁵ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957).

⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸ Robert L. Caserio et al., “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory”, *PMLA* 121:3 (May 2006), 820.

must be robbed of their terrors”.⁹ The allure of religion ensures that “[d]eath itself is not extinction”, and “[l]ife after death, which continues life on earth just as the invisible part of the spectrum joins on to the visible part, brings us all the perfection that we may perhaps have missed here”.¹⁰ This belief that something ‘better’ exists beyond the self and the present forms Freud’s rationale for parental narcissism; for Edelman, it is this same belief that maintains the dominance of reproductive futurism in the social order.

Edelman approaches the theme of narcissistic survival through reproduction and parenthood from a queer theoretical standpoint, identifying reproductive futurism and its insistence on channelling the self towards the future of the next generation as almost invisible tenets of the dominant political order. For Edelman, the space outside of this order is not an opposition, but a negative space in which queerness can be located.¹¹ Edelman’s theory is particularly useful as a way of examining how fatherhood is constructed as a form of survival. It also reveals the artificiality of this construction. Therefore, rather than considering these Hollywood films about fatherhood as emerging from a neutral place, they can be seen as the products of a particular political standpoint that remains fixated on replicating patriarchal heteronormativity. In choosing fatherhood—indeed, in choosing a future at all—these films reveal an agenda of stasis rather than change.

For Grant in *Jurassic Park*, in accepting fatherhood he becomes a part of the “genealogical fantasy that braces the social order”.¹² This fantasy centres on the narcissistic desire of humans to exist beyond themselves; the desire “to live longer than everyone else,

⁹ Sigmund Freud, “The Future of an Illusion”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 21* (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1961), 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹ Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 44.

and to *know* it”.¹³ To engage in this fantasy, whereby the framing apparatus of society is structured around the logic of the “perpetual horizon” of the child, is to enter a linear temporality that indicates perpetual movement towards a viable future.¹⁴ Within this paradigm of reproductive futurism, Grant’s previous existence as lone adventurer can be construed as a resistance of the future as long as he remains beholden only to himself. This is emphasised by his palaeontological endeavours, which focus not only on the past, but on that which is extinct. Conversely, his transformation into father figure is an acceptance of—and insertion into—something beyond: an extension of the self that unconsciously promises survival into the future. In the construction of the character of Grant, *Jurassic Park* engages with both the contemporary crisis of masculinity, and demonstrates a wider project of the survival of the masculine self through fatherhood, one that is repeated throughout Hollywood during the 1990s.

Approaching the millennium: the 1990s and the future of American men

The 1990s was not only a period characterised by fluctuating notions of masculinity, fatherhood and family, as discussed in more detail below, but one in which the concept of the ‘future’ loomed especially large. In the last decade of the 20th century, much of the United States’ national rhetoric focused on looking ahead to the new millennium. In his 1997 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton declared, “we don’t have a moment to waste. Tomorrow there will be just over 1,000 days until the year 2000; 1,000 days to prepare our people; 1,000 days to work together; 1,000 days to build a bridge to a land of new promise”.¹⁵ Clinton painted not only an image of building a bridge to the future, but of

¹³ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (London: Penguin, 1992), 265.

¹⁴ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

¹⁵ William J. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union” (4 Feb. 1997), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=53358> (30 Nov. 2012)

crossing it: “The promise of our future is limitless,” he told the nation two years later, again quantifying the shortening gap between ‘now’ and ‘the future’ when he added, “barely more than 300 days from now, we will cross that bridge into the new millennium”.¹⁶

Such futuristic rhetoric was to be expected in a decade that marked not only the end of the century but the end of a millennium. Such a unique temporal occasion provides an unparalleled opportunity for presidents and citizens alike to stake a claim on their place in history as engineers of the future. The underlying conceit of *Jurassic Park* echoes this notion of engineering the future, not only in the scientists’ successful attempts to recreate life in an extinct species but in the very presentation of the film and its pioneering special effects, which used models, computer-generated images and innovative soundtrack methods to create a collection of realistic dinosaurs, placing the film within the context of New Hollywood, which will be discussed below.¹⁷

However, as this futuristic rhetoric became increasingly pronounced with the approach of the millennium, this promised future was deemed less than secure for one particular demographic: American men. This insecurity is the lynchpin of the contemporary “crisis of masculinity”, which became the subject of much critical attention in the 1990s.¹⁸ Though I dispute the legitimacy of referring to the decade’s on-going anxiety surrounding masculinity as a “crisis”, the term encapsulates the insecurity and anxiety experienced by many ordinary men during this period; that is, while the concept of masculine crisis seems unnecessarily hyperbolic, I accept that masculinity was placed under considerable scrutiny

¹⁶ William J. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union” (19 Jan. 1999), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=57577> (30 Nov. 2012)

¹⁷ Philip Taylor, *Steven Spielberg: The Man, His Movies and Their Meaning* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1999), 141–2.

¹⁸ See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999); Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

during the 1990s. My use of the term “crisis of masculinity” in subsequent chapters also reflects my contention that the concept underlies much of Hollywood’s output during the decade.

The crisis, as it emerged in popular and academic thought during this period, coalesced around straight, white American men who, it was suggested, were struggling to understand and adapt to changing conceptions of masculinity. In particular, the postfeminist context of the 1990s crisis of masculinity is important to recognise, as the gains of feminism continued to challenge the notion of male dominance. The advances of the gay rights movement must also be acknowledged within this context. If women and gay men were gaining power, the logic of the crisis followed that this power was being taken from others: in this case, straight, white, often middle-class men. It is through this lens that the redefinition of masculinity is filtered during this period. In short, the apparent crisis was formulated around the idea that “[t]he structural foundations of traditional manhood” were “eroding”, contributing to a contemporary perception of disenfranchisement and unease, in which life had failed to live up to expectations.¹⁹ These notions of disenfranchisement and insecurity are central to my understanding of the crisis of masculinity in this thesis, and how it can be viewed as a barrier to future survival.

As stated above, the extent to which masculinity was genuinely in “crisis” during this period is debatable. The notion of a crisis of masculinity presumes prior stability, a period during which masculine identity was both established and infallible; it also presumes an end point at which the crisis can be said to have passed. Though masculinity was the source of much debate and discussion during the 1990s, this does not in itself qualify it for crisis status. Furthermore, this “crisis” sits alongside numerous other claims to earlier masculine

¹⁹ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 216.

“crises” in the U.S., including during the post-war era and the 1970s, suggesting that the crisis of masculinity may be better understood as the ebb and flow of anxiety over men’s roles, rather than something that is ever decisively resolved.

Therefore, I do not wish to suggest that the crisis of masculinity is unique to the 1990s, or indeed that it passes at the turn of the millennium. Neither should it simply be accepted as a real phenomenon: rather, I argue that it is a recurrent reaction to perceived shifts in male power and definitions of masculinity. Similarly, although I would argue that the crisis did not pass at the end of the decade, I do suggest that it was exacerbated by the persistent spectre of the future in the build-up to the millennium. I accept Kimmel’s argument that the “crisis” is cyclical;²⁰ it reflects a perpetual state of insecurity, rather than a single event.²¹ Although the notion of crisis permeates discussions of 1990s masculinity, I suggest that it is less real than imagined, a reflection of anxiety rather than a portent of erasure.

However, I do not wish to dismiss the conditions that, in the 1990s, contributed to the perception of masculine crisis; neither do I take the stance that the anxiety underlying the supposed crisis should be dismissed along with the suggestion of crisis itself. Anxiety over U.S. men’s role in contemporary life concerned both economic and domestic shifts. Though the 1990s was a period of relative economic prosperity, jobs were often less secure and less skilled, and the downsizing of manufacturing and industry contributed to a sense of economic uncertainty. The gradual redefinitions of family life likewise impacted on the construction of the male role, whether as husband, father, or breadwinner. Rising divorce

²⁰ Ibid., 1.

²¹ John MacInnes, *The End of Masculinity: The Confusion of Sexual Genesis and Sexual Difference in Modern Society* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), 45.

rates placed an increasing number of men outside of the family home.²² In addition, conflict remained between an evolving masculinity based on the credentials of the new man, and the traditional breadwinner model of manhood, which was further undermined by the increase in two-wage households from the 1980s onwards.

It is also important to acknowledge Hollywood's own investment in the crisis of masculinity during this period. Though I would argue that the crisis was often exaggerated during the decade, it gained particular traction within U.S. popular culture, and this is reflected in subsequent chapters. The films that I will discuss internalise the crisis, reflecting a sense of anxiety around their male characters that is negotiated through the prism of fatherhood. Susan Faludi's suggestion that men were disillusioned and anxious in no small part because the promises made to them by their own fathers had evaporated, that "[t]he boy who had been told he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing", is particularly crucial in how the crisis of masculinity is understood within the context of this thesis.²³ As Clinton counted down the days until Americans could "cross the bridge" into the new millennium, the crisis threatened only disruption: for many men it was unclear just how this bridge could be crossed, and how this future, theoretically so full of promise, could be accessed.

In focusing on fatherhood, it remains important to acknowledge the presence of the mother in these films. The mother is rarely an absent figure. However, in venerating the salvation offered by fatherhood, the films discussed here tend to present motherhood as an already completed process. The women in these films do not suffer the same trauma of definition and threat of erasure. I will discuss the construction of mothers and the power conferred to them at the expense of the father in chapter 1, as well as examining the

²² National Center for Health Statistics, "Births, Marriages, Divorces and Deaths for 1992", *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 41:12 (1993), 2.

²³ Faludi, *Stiffed*, 30.

differences in paternal and maternal grief in chapter 3, which illuminates the concept that motherhood is somehow more permanent than fatherhood. However, I have chosen not to focus on motherhood in more detail primarily because, in the films I will discuss, 'father' is constructed not so much in opposition to 'mother', but in opposition to 'non-father'. The survival of the man is not dependent on the subjugation of the mother so much as it is on the suppression of the state of non-fatherhood. Though mothers remain a significant aspect of the narrative, their exclusion from this discussion is necessary in order to illuminate the alternative binary put in place: rather than mother/father, the focus here is on the father/non-father split, and the ways in which fatherhood is crucial to the survival of male crisis.

The Restoration of the Father: America's "fatherhood crisis"

The contemporary unease over the status and position of straight, white, middle class men has a critical influence on representations of fatherhood in Hollywood during the same period, feeding into what Robin Wood has called "the Restoration of the Father".²⁴ Wood identifies this "ideological project" within his study of 1980s Hollywood cinema.²⁵ I wish to suggest that it remains a facet of films produced in the following decade, revealing as it does the link between the crisis of masculinity and the amplification of fatherhood as a means of overcoming it. Kimmel's influential discussion of the crisis of masculinity often comes back to a feeling of "impotence" amongst American men, and the rooting of survival in fatherhood goes some way to refuting this.²⁶ Becoming a father suggests overcoming such impotence on a literal level, as well as instilling in the father a sense of meaning and renewed power.

²⁴ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 152–5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁶ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 211.

As an historical period, the 1990s in the U.S. was largely peaceful and relatively economically prosperous, following a brief involvement in the First Gulf War in 1991 and a recession under George H. W. Bush. However, the decade was also witness to significant domestic upheaval in other areas. Political wrangling ensued as the Democrats won the 1992 election, only to lose the House of Representatives and the Senate to the Republicans in 1994, with Clinton's impeachment case in his second term further dividing the dominant political parties. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was belatedly acknowledged at federal, medical and media levels. The country witnessed a number of high-profile incidences of domestic terrorism, from the FBI siege at Waco in 1993 to the Oklahoma City bombings in 1995 and the Columbine school shootings in 1999. Throughout the decade, there remained on-going debates over the changing definitions and permutations of family. As economic and foreign policy issues became less prominent, domestic issues were thrown into relief. One such issue that became pronounced in the 1990s was a particular cultural anxiety over fatherhood, leading to suggestions of yet another crisis, this time the "fatherhood crisis" facing the U.S.

This anxiety manifested itself in a variety of ways. The government instigated the Deadbeat Parents Punishment Act (1998), which suggested a fine and/or prison sentence of up to two years for parents who avoided obligatory payments to dependants, the centrepiece of a determined policy towards chasing and shaming so-called "deadbeat dads". On the ground there was a rise in the number of fathers' rights groups, whose aims centred broadly on the need for better representation and support in legal cases concerning custody, divorce and visitation. High profile incidents during the decade, such as the Baby Richard (Illinois, 1995) and Baby Jessica (Michigan, 1993) cases, in which children were adopted without the consent of the biological father, further compounded such anxiety by focusing on the

problems of defining fatherhood along social or biological lines.²⁷ Underlying all of these concerns lay a persistent focus on the absence of the father, whether this absence was physical or metaphorical.

Federal anxiety over fatherhood was perhaps most prominent in the context of non-payment of child support, leading to the popularisation of the term “deadbeat dad”.²⁸ Such an approach reveals a lingering attachment to the idea of the father as the primary provider, even in the 1990s, when the single breadwinner model was less common. On Father’s Day 1994, President Clinton called on fathers to “reinvest” in their children, stating that, “it is never too late to assume the responsibility for meeting a child’s needs”.²⁹ The financial connotation of “reinvestment” reveals that the government’s major concern was with chasing non-custodial fathers who owed money, not least because non-payment of child support could lead to a greater dependence on government assistance and welfare. Though Clinton was often maligned by Republicans and conservatives for being too liberal and neglecting the prominent family values agenda of the previous two administrations, his stance on child support enforcement in particular was vehement. He pointed the finger routinely at absent fathers, telling them “take responsibility for your children or we will force you to do so”.³⁰

In addition, the government developed various programmes and funding to promote responsible fatherhood, from aid with finding work to resources for more effective parenting.³¹ In 1995, David Blankenhorn, the conservative sociologist and head of the Institute for American Values, suggested that absent fathers were causing America’s “most

²⁷ Joanna L. Grossman and Lawrence M. Friedman, *Inside The Castle: Law and the Family in 20th Century America* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 294–5.

²⁸ David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 124–5.

²⁹ William J. Clinton, “Presidential Proclamation 6701: Father’s Day 1994” (14 Jun. 1994), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=50336> (30 Nov. 2012)

³⁰ William J. Clinton, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York” (16 Jul. 1992), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25958> (30 Nov. 2012)

³¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Promoting Responsible Fatherhood”, <http://www.fatherhood.hhs.gov> (24 Aug. 2012)

urgent social problems”.³² Echoing this sentiment, Clinton pinpointed such paternal failures as a barrier not only to the family but to the greater project of American renewal when he said:

We cannot renew our country when within a decade more than half of the children will be born into families where there has been no marriage. [...] We cannot renew our country when children are having children and the fathers walk away as if the kids don't amount to anything.³³

Alongside federal efforts to bolster paternal responsibility, fathers' rights organisations such as the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) and the American Coalition for Fathers and Children (ACFC) were founded in the 1990s. Stephen Baskerville, mounting a sceptical analysis of the government's increased involvement in the family, suggests that the “fatherhood crisis” is in fact “an optical illusion”, designed to legitimise greater state interference.³⁴ Baskerville's argument recasts the father as victim, rather than perpetrator, and it is this approach advanced by fathers' rights groups such as the ACFC and Fathers for Equal Rights (FER). A number of these groups campaigned against maternal preference in divorce and custody arrangements, and committed to offering legal aid to men facing limited visitation and paternity suits. In tandem, many worked to promote responsible fatherhood, with a view to reinforcing the necessity of paternal input in the child's life. The NFI states its mission as being to “improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers”.³⁵ This sentiment

³² Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, 1.

³³ William J. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union”, (25 Jan. 1994), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=50409> (30 Nov. 2012)

³⁴ Stephen Baskerville, “Is There Really A Fatherhood Crisis?”, *The Independent Review* 8:4 (Spring 2004), 486.

³⁵ National Fatherhood Initiative, “NFI Mission and Strategy”, <http://www.fatherhood.org/about/mission-and-vision> (Jan. 5, 2012)

was echoed in high-profile publicity campaigns such as a 1997 public service announcement featuring the Chicago Cubs baseball team, which compared being a good father to being a good baseball player, emphasising teamwork and commitment. The campaign stated that “we want all children to see their fathers as star players who will guide them to strong, healthy futures”.³⁶ Fathers’ rights groups remain far from being unproblematic, particularly with regard to their negative maternal bias. Yet their existence reveals a growing grassroots effort to reinstate fatherhood, in confluence with efforts higher up the political ladder, despite the differences in approach.

Anxiety over the place of fathers and the growing “politicized” nature of fatherhood coincided with growing debates over legal and biological definitions of paternity, as “its terms [were] contested, its significance fragmented, its meaning unstable”.³⁷ The availability of alternative insemination methods led to debates over the necessity of fathers beyond the donation of sperm and the social construction of the paternal role.³⁸ A rise in gestational surrogacy meant that procreation was no longer strictly between two people, and could involve up to five people, all of whom may be considered parents of the child.³⁹ Theoretically, such changes also paved the way for more individuals or gay couples to become parents; the 2000 Census reported that a quarter of same-sex households were raising children, although legal recognition and wider options regarding reproductive technology did not advance at the same rate.⁴⁰

The spectre of the absent or malfunctioning father lay behind a wide variety of well-reported social problems, from drug and alcohol abuse to teenage pregnancy, suicide, violent

³⁶ Administration for Children and Families, *Child Support Report, January 1997* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997), 5.

³⁷ Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood In America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 9.

³⁸ Grossman and Friedman, *Inside the Castle*, 296–7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 322.

crime and truancy.⁴¹ The statistical reporting of the state of the American family during the decade further reveals this absence by inference, routinely suggesting a fractured image of American family life. Marriage rates fell, while the divorce rate remained steady.⁴² 32% of children were born to unmarried mothers in 1997 (up from 22% in 1985).⁴³ The 1997 U.S. Population Profile Report showed that 28% of children lived with only one parent; of this number, only 14% lived with their father.⁴⁴ Half of the children that lived with their mothers would see their non-resident father less than once a year, or not at all.⁴⁵ A demonstrable link was drawn between a father's absence and economic hardship, with 45% of children who resided with only their mothers living near, or below, the poverty line.⁴⁶

Such figures are illuminating as much for their bias as for their actual content, as in reports of the number of “unmarried mothers” within the context of the disintegrating family, which castigates both single mothers (through choice or circumstance) and unmarried couples. However, what is implied in the reporting of these figures is an empty space: one where it is implied the father *should* be, but too frequently is not. While the invisibility of the father in the reportage of figures may reveal elements of truth, it also reflects a sense of panic, a conviction that the father was disappearing from the family. The diminished presence of the father was frequently—and often hysterically—reported during the 1990s, with headlines proclaiming “Father’s Vanishing Act Called Common Drama”, “Single-parent

⁴¹ Stephen Baskerville, “The Politics of Fatherhood”, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35:4 (2002), 695.

⁴² National Center for Health Statistics, “Births, Marriages, Divorces and Death for 1997”, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 46:12 (1998), 2–3; National Center for Health Statistics, “Births, Marriages, Divorces and Death for 1993”, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 42:13 (1994), 3–4.

⁴³ Grossman and Friedman, *Inside the Castle*, 20.

⁴⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Profile of the United States, 1997* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), 27.

⁴⁵ Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. and Christine Winquist Nord, “Parenting Apart: Patterns of Childrearing after Marital Disruption”, *Journal of Marriage & Family* 47:4 (November 1985), 902.

⁴⁶ Grossman and Friedman, *Inside the Castle*, 214.

Families' Father Deficit" and "Dads Found To Matter Less Than Moms", and others simply questioning, "Where Are The Fathers?"⁴⁷

As such, the restoration of the father is not only a Hollywood convention as identified by Wood, but a wider social project that emphasises fatherhood as the key to future American success, not least with regards to the cultivation of stable, responsible American sons. In his 1990 publication *Iron John: A Book About Men*, author and men's movement leader Robert Bly poses the question, "How does [the son] imagine his own life as a man?"⁴⁸ This question comes as a result of Bly's belief, articulated throughout *Iron John*, that American men were suffering a psychic assault within a culture lacking any viable images of masculinity.⁴⁹ Bly's contention that "[t]here is not enough father" reinforced this notion that America's sons were unsure of the direction of their own future, and as a result floundering.⁵⁰

Bly's view of the crisis of masculinity suggests that such a condition did not simply arise from economic or cultural shifts, but from a deeper sense of neurosis rooted in the failure of the father to oversee the development of the son's masculine identity. Bly suggests that "a substance almost like food" passes from father to son, enacting a kind of "healing".⁵¹ This recalls Freud's discussion in "On Narcissism", in which he suggests that the individual ("he") "is an appendage to his germplasm", "the mortal vehicle of a (possibly) immortal substance—like the inheritor of an entailed property, who is only the temporary holder of an

⁴⁷ Tamar Lewin, "Father's Vanishing Act Called Common Drama", *New York Times*, 4 Jun. 1990; Anon., "Single-parent Families' Father Deficit", *Chicago Tribune*, 15 Jan. 1995; Ron Kotulak and Jon Van, "Dads Found to Matter Less Than Moms", *Chicago Tribune*, 13 Sep. 1992; Colbert I. King, "Where Are The Fathers?", *Washington Post*, 10 Jul. 1999.

⁴⁸ Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1992), p.99.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

estate which survives him”.⁵² Here both Bly and Freud reveal a primary concern with legacy and generational survival.

This lack of strong, effective fatherhood is also highlighted by Faludi. Like Bly, she suggests that the father is crucial to the formation of a stable and fulfilling masculine identity, and his absence, whether physical or emotional, leaves a lasting psychological scar: “they [the sons] could have weathered the disappointment of a broken patrimony. What undid them was their fathers’ *silence*”.⁵³ It is this paternal aspect of the crisis of masculinity that I will pursue. The son’s quest for the father involves an element of finding the father *within*, and using this as a means of transcending the masculine crisis. The loss of the father haunts the perceived fragmentation of masculinity, while the reclamation of fatherhood by these grown-up sons of the 1990s allows for reconciliation with the future as well as with the past. Fatherhood takes much of its meaning from the notion of being responsible for the next generation and, as discussed above in relation to Edelman, this in turn connotes a form of survival for the man who, through the child, is reassured of his own place in the future.

Clinton in crisis: From ‘son’ to ‘father’

Employing fatherhood as a means of survival is a prevalent theme in the decade’s cinema. It was also a key theme of the Clinton presidency (1993-2001), demonstrating the depths of the crisis—both masculine and paternal—across the strata of American life. As the president (an office Michael Kimmel likens to “national father”⁵⁴), Clinton brought to the fore persistent concerns regarding the need for—and the lack of—“enough father”. In addition, though scarcely representative of the ordinary American man, his public persona went a long way to

⁵² Freud, “On Narcissism”, 78. Freud offers an extended discussion the “potentially immortal” germ-cells in chapter 6 of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 18* (London: Vintage, 2001), 44–61.

⁵³ Faludi, *Stiffed*, 597. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 215.

embodying the competing notions of masculinity that contributed to the decade's perception of crisis and uncertainty. Clinton was routinely depicted in terms of contradiction: part Arkansas "redneck", part slick politician, or else part family man to part "hypersexual womanizer".⁵⁵ Brenton Malin makes an explicit link between the crisis of masculinity and the Clinton presidency, suggesting that, "[b]roken yet strong, sensitive but tough, Clinton was the model of a conflicted masculinity characteristic of the '90s".⁵⁶ Faludi further emphasises this perception of conflict and dysfunction, acknowledging the public unease with Clinton's masculine identity:

by century's end political pundits seemed incapable of discussing anything *but* the president's supposedly dysfunctional masculinity; they contemplated Bill Clinton's testosterone level and manly credentials (Too much or not enough? Office lech or military virgin?) as if his Y chromosome was the nation's greatest blight.⁵⁷

Further linking the president to a contemporary shift in masculine ideals, Kimmel suggests that the election of Clinton heralded "our first new man as president".⁵⁸ Here Kimmel engages with one of the more enduring and popular images of masculinity in the 1990s. Though debate centred on whether he was more of a fallacy than a reality, the new man, "[a] potent symbol for men and women searching for new images and visions of masculinity in the wake of feminism and the men's movement", wielded a great deal of cultural import during this period.⁵⁹ The two major elements of the new man centred on consumerism, encapsulated in the image of the 'yuppie', and sensitivity, in which emotional

⁵⁵ Brenton J. Malin, *American Masculinity under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties "Crisis of Masculinity"* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 16–17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁷ Faludi, *Stiffed*, 6. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 216.

⁵⁹ Rowena Chapman, "The Great Pretender: Variations on the New Man Theme", in Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (eds.), *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 226.

engagement was central: in Rowena Chapman's terms, part sexualised narcissist, part nurturer.⁶⁰ Often perceived as an advertising godsend, the new man in popular visual culture more often translated into a more domestic image of masculinity.⁶¹ Marking Clinton out as a new man emphasised his youth and suggested a more innovative, everyman approach to the presidency, in direct contrast to his more traditional, authoritative predecessors.

Yet there remained a tension between this image of “softer” manhood and the more traditional, authoritarian model of masculinity, particularly with regard to the leader of the nation. In a statement that emphasises the relationship between the cinematic father and the presidency, Faludi notes that with the election of Clinton, a young lawyer with no war record,

the male electorate was having [a hard time] reconstructing the public father [...]. If Ronald Reagan was the fantasy elder come to lead the sons in triumphal battle against the Evil Empire, when the credits rolled and the sons awoke from that stardusted dream, most felt farther away from the promised land of adult manhood—less triumphal, less powerful, less confident of making a living or providing for a family or contributing productively to society. And no new elder statesman, celluloid or otherwise, loomed on the horizon.⁶²

Clinton’s “conflicted” masculinity contrasted, often unfavourably, with the men that had gone before. During the 1992 presidential campaign, for example, he was portrayed as a rich, privileged member of the “tassel-loafed lawyer crowd” by his opponent George H. W. Bush.⁶³ There persisted a conviction that “Slick Willie”, as he was dubbed by some sections

⁶⁰ Ibid., 225–6.

⁶¹ John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 102.

⁶² Faludi, *Stiffed*, 407. Faludi’s “public father” appears analogous with Kimmel’s “national father”.

⁶³ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 215.

of the press, could not be trusted fully.⁶⁴ In the wake of the Kenneth Starr investigation, in which Clinton admitted perjury, Campbell and Rockman claim that Clinton demonstrated that “his word was worthless, that lying came easy to him, and that his behavior and lack of self-control toward women left him a perpetual adolescent”.⁶⁵ Clinton’s perceived juvenility cast aspersions on his ability to sacrifice, to not only know the difference between right and wrong but to adhere to it for the good of the family and the nation. In a period of struggle regarding a perceived loss of paternal reverence within American society, “fatherhood” at the highest level left much to be desired in the eyes of the American public.

Clinton’s rehabilitation in the American imagination, particularly following the high-profile impeachment case in 1998 and the president’s alleged affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, relied on the conscious establishment of Clinton as a father figure. As Kimmel and Faludi’s respective references to “national father” and “public father” suggest, the image of the president as father of the populace is a persistent one. Much of the mythology surrounding the construction of the U.S. is built upon the image of the all-knowing father, not only as “one nation under God” (the ultimate ‘Father’), as the Pledge of Allegiance has it, but in the imagining of numerous historical and presidential figures as substitute fathers of the nation: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, the Founding Fathers. The continued dominance of the older, male presidential candidate into the 21st century further speaks to this desired paternal authority in the office of president, as Robin Lakoff suggests: “underneath, we [Americans] want a daddy, a king, a god, a hero.”⁶⁶ At the age of 46, Clinton was the second youngest elected president to ever take office, casting doubt on

⁶⁴ Stephen J. Wayne, “Presidential Personality: The Clinton Legacy”, in Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 220.

⁶⁵ Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, *The Clinton Legacy* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), p.xii.

⁶⁶ Robin Lakoff, quoted in Margaret Dowd, “Of Knights and Presidents: Race of Mythic Proportions”, *New York Times*, 10 Oct. 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/10/us/1992-campaign-political-memo-knights-presidents-race-mythic-proportions> (30 Nov. 2012)

his ability to continue the mantle of “national father” even as he entered the White House with his young daughter by his side.⁶⁷

There was a particular ambiguity surrounding Clinton’s status as “father” during his tenure as president. Characterised as one of a “new generation of Democrats” during the 1992 campaign, this positive representation of his youth contrasted with the opposing image of him as untested and incapable of leading the country.⁶⁸ Allegations regarding draft-dodging and drug use added to the unflattering image of Clinton as juvenile and irresponsible, a son who had not yet earned the mantle of “father”. Yet this perception was forced to balance with Clinton’s actual status as father to his daughter Chelsea, aged 12 at the time of her father’s inauguration. Chelsea appeared alongside her father at the Democratic National Convention in 1992, where Clinton was pictured holding his daughter’s hand. Chelsea also appeared at the inauguration ceremony, again featured prominently in media coverage alongside her father. On becoming president, Clinton made a public appeal to the media to refrain from reporting on his daughter’s life, a protective move that reinforced his commitment to fatherhood and the Clintons’ reputation, “even [amongst] their loudest detractors”, as “careful, loving parents”.⁶⁹ Clinton’s status as hands-on dad was emphasised by photo opportunities showing him playing mini golf and white-water rafting with his daughter. Perhaps inadvertently, it was further augmented by a news story regarding Chelsea’s visit to the school nurse and her request that they “call my dad; my mom’s too busy”.⁷⁰ Though a misquotation often used to point to Hillary Clinton’s dominant role within the White House, this story emphasised Bill Clinton’s involved relationship with his

⁶⁷ The Clintons’ daughter, Chelsea, was 12 at the age her father became president; she was the first presidential child to reside in the White House since Jimmy Carter’s daughter (1976-80).

⁶⁸ Clinton/Gore 1992 Committee, “Leaders 2”, 1992 campaign election video, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1992/leaders-2> (5 Aug. 2013)

⁶⁹ Roxanne Roberts, “16 Candles for Chelsea”, *Washington Post*, 27 Feb. 1997.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

daughter. The image of Clinton as father sat alongside his youth and rumours of “adolescent” behaviour throughout his presidency.

The image of Clinton as “father”, beyond his relationship with his daughter, was crucial to his success in gaining a second term and outlasting the threat of impeachment. Dick Morris, advisor to Clinton during the 1996 re-election campaign, traces the evolution of Clinton from “son” (of Arkansas, where he was governor), to “buddy” (an image of a down-to-earth, “regular guy” created in the 1992 campaign), and finally to “father” (post-re-election): “I told the president, ‘it’s time to be almost the nation’s father, to speak as the father of the country, not as a peer and certainly not as its child’”.⁷¹ For Morris, part of this strategy involved resisting the urge to show weakness or uncertainty: ““You explain yourself too much. Fathers don’t. You seem to care too much about what others think of you; that’s not a father’s way. Don’t have conversations with your audiences; speak to them’”.⁷² Here Morris indicates a shift from Clinton as father of Chelsea, to Clinton as symbolic father of the nation. Clinton himself never knew his own father, something that became part of his own personal myth. He acknowledged the loss of his father when accepting his presidential nomination in 1992, and in the same speech he addressed those children “trying to grow up without a father or a mother”, invoking the spirit of surrogate paternal interest in telling them, “You’re special too. You matter to America”.⁷³ Peter Rubin theorises that it was through the successful cultivation of this image of “national Dad” that Clinton managed to improve his approval ratings following the revelations regarding his relationship with

⁷¹ Dick Morris, *Behind The Oval Office: Winning the Presidency in the Nineties* (New York: Random House, 1997), 181.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ William J. Clinton, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York”. Clinton told the audience, “I never knew my father”, recounting his father’s death in a car accident three months before he was born.

Lewinsky.⁷⁴ Facing impeachment and widespread denigration, through utilising fatherhood as a way of appealing to the American citizenry Clinton was able to cultivate a future in which his influence remained assured. Demonstrating this lasting legacy, as of 2012 60% of Americans rated Clinton as an “Outstanding” or “Above average” president.⁷⁵

Clinton’s presidency, and his often simultaneous construction as ‘son’ and ‘father’, reflects wider uncertainty in the United States over masculinity and fatherhood; it also demonstrates the power of fatherhood as a tool for survival and redemption. Clinton’s presidency sits between those of George H. W. Bush and his son George W. Bush, revealing a further instance of restoration through fatherhood. During his one-term presidency, as referenced above, Bush Sr. oversaw a recession, the First Gulf War, and the disastrous reversal of his “no new taxes” pledge. As a somewhat unsatisfactory president, Bush Sr. functions as the disappointing father, one who can nevertheless be redeemed through his son. Bush Jr.’s election, eight years after his father’s re-election campaign failed against Clinton, functions as an instance of real-life paternal rehabilitation, an attempt to impose a narrative of renewal and survival on a father who has previously failed to live up to expectations. If Clinton demonstrates the power of fatherhood to redeem the man, the Bushes demonstrate the potency of father-son succession and the survival that becomes available through the figure of the child.

⁷⁴ Peter Rubin, “Family man: Bill Clinton, national dad”, *New Republic*, 27 Apr. 1998, 12–14. Clinton’s approval ratings averaged 49.6% in his first term (1993–1997), and 60.6% in his second term (1997–2001). See Anon., “Presidential Approval Ratings—Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends: Gallup Historical Presidential Job Approval Statistics”, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx> (10 Aug. 2012)

⁷⁵ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Americans Judge Reagan, Clinton Best of Recent Presidents”, Gallup, 17 Feb. 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/152771/Americans-Judge-Reagan-Clinton-Best-Recent-Presidents.aspx> (10 Aug. 2012)

“The Saviors and the Saved”: reproductive futurism and fatherhood as a saving mechanism

Morris highlights a key element of Clinton’s rehabilitation in the national imagination: the re-casting of Clinton from “son” to “father”. It is this same transformation that Grant undergoes in *Jurassic Park*, from self-sufficient, selfish adventurer to rescuer and protector of the children. In both cases, fatherhood—whether real or metaphorical—promises survival and a projection of the self into the future, in keeping with Edelman’s theory of reproductive futurism. By choosing to invest in the next generation (rather than the short-term present), personal fulfilment is sacrificed, but the promise of a legacy to be passed on is established. It is this notion of passing on that underlies the Bush/Bush relationship and the promise of the father’s redemption through the son. Such a legacy, to be extended forwards through history, brings with it the prospect of immortality for the self, if not the body. Furthermore, in a period when masculinity was being continually contested, fatherhood—as an undeniably male role, however it may be performed—offers a concrete role to men who may otherwise be struggling to achieve a sense of definition and purpose.

This concept of men being “saved” by fatherhood is the central focus of this thesis. In “The Saviors and the Saved”, Amy Aronson and Michael Kimmel suggest that in the past men have been the ones cast as saviours within Hollywood cinema, yet in more recent times men have been the ones in need of saving.⁷⁶ Furthermore, while this role was once fulfilled by a woman—usually a romantic interest—increasingly it has passed to a child. While women once possessed the correct tools to “save” Hollywood’s men, chief amongst which is “[t]he transformative power of women’s pure love”, feminism has tainted this ability.⁷⁷ Women are no longer “pure” enough to act as saviour, and so it is the child who must now

⁷⁶ Amy Aronson and Michael Kimmel, “The Saviors and the Saved: Masculine Redemption in Contemporary Films”, in Peter Lehman (ed.), *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), 43–50.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

provide deliverance; the child who has yet to be besmirched by the adult world and so is innocent enough to save the man from destruction.⁷⁸

Ingrained in “The Saviors and the Saved” is the idea that the 1990s man *needs* saving; furthermore, that he is incapable of doing it alone. However, while the authors mark out the child as the saviour, I argue that this threatens to obscure the true survival mechanism being advanced. The real saviour is the father, or more accurately the act of being a father. While the child is a prerequisite for fathering to be realised, it is merely the catalyst; it is the *fathering* that ensures the man's survival, thus allowing him to envisage a future in which he survives intact. In a period characterised by masculine crisis, rooting the male self within the role of father promises a stake in the very future that the president’s millennial rhetoric conjured up in the American imagination.

Aronson and Kimmel's essay anticipates Edelman's suggestion of futurity as a “saving fantasy”.⁷⁹ At the heart of such a claim lies an inherent contradiction, in that what lies in the future is eventually death, yet this same future has the power to save. It is through reproduction that this future is realised, subsuming the present in favour of securing what is yet to come: “our present [...] always [...] mortgaged to a *fantasmatic* future”.⁸⁰ Inherent in this desire to secure the future whilst being unable to experience it for oneself is an enduring narcissism, identified as such by Freud:

At the most touchy point in the narcissistic system, the immortality of the ego, which is so hard pressed by reality, security is achieved by taking refuge in the child. Parental love [...] is nothing but the parents’ narcissism born again.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ibid., 44–45.

⁷⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, p.33.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁸¹ Freud, “On Narcissism”, 91.

This future does not negate death, or attempt to deny its reality. Rather, it acknowledges the human desire to exist beyond both itself and everyone else, and attempts to achieve immortality through an investment of the self in the next generation.

The future, therefore, holds both death and “narcissistic solace” simultaneously, and thus relies on fantasy to uphold both: the fantasy that, after death, the world we have left behind continues indefinitely.⁸² To return briefly to *Jurassic Park*, the film is built on this desire to see life advancing into the future, most clearly identified in the film’s final shot, in which the camera moves away from Grant and the children to a flock of birds outside the helicopter window. The living descendants of dinosaurs, the birds are shown flying to freedom as the dinosaurs languish on the island below. Bringing back the dinosaurs artificially has disrupted life, introducing the past (an extinct species) to the future (scientific advancement) with disastrous results. The focus on the birds in the final scene re-establishes the linearity of genetic progression and emphasises the importance of focusing on the promise of the future rather than the recreation of the past.

Similarly, Grant’s own transformation suggests a move from the obsolete to the relevant, marking out new potential for him in which he is able to find meaning. While his own freedom to roam the world alone may be curtailed, a new significance is derived from the safeguarding of the freedom of the children by his side. While this protective role benefits the child, it also benefits the father. While the parent is able to “renew on [the child’s] behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves”, they retain a privilege of their own, that is, the promise of “[fulfilling] those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out”, while staking a claim in the future through the existence and survival of the child.⁸³

⁸² Edelman, *No Future*, 33.

⁸³ Freud, “On Narcissism”, 91.

This striving towards a future is of particular pertinence during the 1990s, a period in which masculinity was continually framed as being at an “end”, on the verge of crisis.⁸⁴ That is not to suggest that the turn towards fatherhood somehow negates this end point. Indeed, in accepting a place within the linear temporality that underlies such generational family relations, fatherhood only highlights the end to come, as the father sees the next generation in front of him. Nevertheless, Elias Canetti’s insistence that “[t]he most wholesome embodiment of longevity is the *Patriarch*” reveals a variation of immortality associated with the father.⁸⁵ This survival becomes an “elemental triumph” beyond the self, one that, given the exclusively male domain of fatherhood, is a wholly masculine triumph.⁸⁶ Fatherhood thus retains potent appeal, holding within it the promise of a future at a time in which the parameters of contemporary masculinity were perceived to be threatened with obliteration.

The “saving” of the man not by the child but by fatherhood is indicative of the cultural prevalence of reproductive futurism. Political rhetoric continually frames politics in terms of improving the world not for the current generation but for “our children's children” and even “our grandchildren's grandchildren”.⁸⁷ Clinton’s first inaugural address, delivered in 1993, urged the nation to “[see] themselves in the light of posterity”, just as the “Founders” did:

Anyone who has ever watched a child’s eyes wander into sleep knows what posterity is. Posterity is the world to come: the world for whom we hold our ideals, from whom we have

⁸⁴ See MacInnes; Constance Penley and Sharon Willis (eds.), *Male Trouble* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994).

⁸⁵ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 291. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁸⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address” (20 Jan. 1981), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=43130> (30 Nov. 2012); William J. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on Administration Goals” (17 Feb. 1993), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=47232> (30 Nov. 2012).

borrowed our planet, and to whom we bear sacred responsibility.⁸⁸

The social and political structure of American life is constructed around this battle to secure the future for these as-yet-unborn descendants.⁸⁹ Though the individual plays a central role in the American myth, the collective of the family is still the most politically desirable.⁹⁰ If the father is ousted from this structure and placed outside the family home, he is excluded from this future, his input stifled. The future does not just benefit those that expect to live it (i.e. the children), but those who anticipate it, and in actively assuming the role of father, the man takes his place in the linear trajectory of history. As a result, he is guaranteed survival even as, conversely, his place in this linearity is a reminder of his eventual demise. Successful fatherhood connotes the idea that the self is being channelled into something somehow *better*, something more worthwhile than one man's singular existence.

Fatherhood in Hollywood cinema: An overview

As noted above, the crisis of masculinity has been well-documented by a number of scholars. The masculine crisis in relation to popular cinema has also garnered much critical attention, particularly in the work of Susan Jeffords, who relates the crisis of masculinity to the prevalence of the “hard-bodied” male figure in Hollywood cinema, as well as the construction of the new man on-screen.⁹¹

Numerous sociological discussions of fatherhood emerged during the 1990s, chief among them Robert Griswold's *Fatherhood in America: A History* (1993). While Griswold's

⁸⁸ William J. Clinton, “Inaugural Address”, (20 Jan. 1993), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=46366> (30 Nov. 2012)

⁸⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

⁹⁰ Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (London: Virago, 1980), 282.

⁹¹ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 24–63. See also Penley and Willis, *Male Trouble*; Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993); Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim, *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993).

work mounts an attempt to trace the evolution of American fatherhood from the 19th century onwards, other publications took as their focus a perceived lack of paternal influence, recalling Bly's declaration of "there is not enough father". David Blankenhorn's *Fatherless America* (1995), David Popenoe's *Life Without Father* (1996), and Cynthia Daniels' anthology *Lost Fathers* (1998) all examine the dearth of fatherhood in the U.S., resulting in a definite theoretical presence created out of absence, in the process cementing the 1990s as a decade of particular anxiety over fatherhood.⁹²

However, this preoccupation with fatherhood does not extend to film studies, despite the father's prevalence on-screen. Though there is a great deal of scholarship regarding masculinity in cinema, there is a limited amount discussing the figure of the father specifically. Stella Bruzzi notes this peculiar lack of scholarship, despite a number of authors tackling both motherhood and the family more broadly.⁹³ Bruzzi's own exploration of representations of the father in post-war Hollywood, discussed below, remains the only significant attempt to document a history of modern cinematic fatherhood, covering the period between the 1940s to the 2000s.⁹⁴

Though some attention has been paid to the construction of fatherhood in late 20th century cinema, this has most often concentrated on the domestication of the father and his

⁹² Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*; David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Cynthia Daniels (ed.), *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998).

⁹³ For discussions of representations of motherhood in cinema, see E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Lucy Fischer, *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Elizabeth Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), Sarah Harwood, *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) and Murray Pomerance (ed.), *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home* (London: Wallflower, 2008) all discuss the family in Hollywood from the 1980s onward.

⁹⁴ Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-War Hollywood* (London: BFI, 2005).

relationship to the notion of the new man.⁹⁵ In particular, feminist criticism of this figure has focused on his appropriative function, revealing “men’s desire to usurp women’s procreative function”, as Tania Modleski observes.⁹⁶ The marginalisation of the maternal figure in favour of the father demonstrates a desire to prove the father’s worth, revealing his necessity whilst undermining the mother. A focus on the “fathered-only child” speaks to a desire for relevance and dominance within the family.⁹⁷ However, examining the father only as a tool for male appropriation of the maternal role is only one facet of his representation in Hollywood, albeit the element that has attracted the most critical attention. As discussed above, I wish to examine the father beyond this binary relationship with the mother.

The image of the domestic father became popular in the 1980s, with films such as *Look Who’s Talking* (Amy Heckerling, 1989), *Parenthood* (Ron Howard, 1989), *Mr. Mom* (Stan Dragoti, 1983), and *Three Men and a Baby* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987), the latter two of which envisaged stay-at-home-dads in the wake of maternal abandonment. With specific regard to the 1990s, Jeffords draws attention to the continuation of this sensitive father model, in which films such as *Kindergarten Cop* (Ivan Reitman, 1990) and *Hook* (Steven Spielberg, 1991) advance the transformation of Hollywood fathers from dissatisfied, isolated patriarch to family man. Such a focus attempted to “[redirect] masculine characterizations from spectacular achievement to domestic triumph”.⁹⁸ However, Jeffords goes on to claim that “the warm-hearted fathers of 1991 will not be the models of masculinity for the 1990s”.⁹⁹ Similarly labelling 1991 as “The Year of Living Sensitive”, Fred Pfeil mounts a

⁹⁵ Yvonne Tasker, “Practically Perfect People: Postfeminism, Masculinity and Male Parenting in Contemporary Cinema”, in Murray Pomerance (ed.), *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home* (London: Wallflower, 2008), 175–87; Susan Jeffords, “Can Masculinity Be Terminated?”, in Cohan and Hark (eds.), 245–62.

⁹⁶ Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (London: Routledge, 1991), 77.

⁹⁷ Lynne Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception: Television, Gender and Postmodern Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 106.

⁹⁸ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 166.

⁹⁹ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 180.

discussion of 1990s fatherhood based on a group of 1991 releases—amongst them *Hook*, *Regarding Henry* (Mike Nichols), *The Fisher King* (Terry Gilliam) and *City Slickers* (Ron Underwood)—drawing comparisons between the “conversion” plots familiar to all these films that end in the redemption of the maligned father.¹⁰⁰ However, in restricting their consideration of the domestic father to films released before the end of 1991 Jeffords and Pfeil prematurely claim his demise. Writing at the midpoint of the 1990s, they ultimately fail to acknowledge the continued popularity of this character, and more importantly his redemptive purpose, throughout the decade.

This focus on sensitivity and domesticity does not necessarily negate a father’s flaws. Nicole Matthews observes a trend of “infantilisation” of fathers through comedy, whereby adult responsibility is lost beneath a veneer of general incompetence.¹⁰¹ *Honey I Shrunk The Kids* (1989) and its sequel *Honey I Blew Up The Kid* (1992), for example, rely on the notion that the dad (Rick Moranis) is so inept as to endanger his children's lives by exposing them to his dubious science experiments. Yet while a focus on the domestication of the father figure in cinema reveals one element of a contemporary fixation with the father, it falls short of acknowledging the broader picture.

Susan Mackey-Kallis specifically isolates the “father quest” as a particular Hollywood trope that elevates the father, from *Star Wars* to *The Lion King*, demonstrating the ways in which paternal themes have crossed both time and gender in Hollywood.¹⁰² Bruzzi traces the wider evolution of paternal representation in post-war Hollywood, taking into account broad decadal themes alongside the influence of war, politics, feminism and fluctuating images of dominant masculinity. With regard specifically to the 1990s and 2000s,

¹⁰⁰ Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London: Verso, 1995), 37–8.

¹⁰¹ Nicole Matthews, *Comic Politics: Gender in Hollywood Comedy After the New Right* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 112.

¹⁰² Susan Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 91–124.

Bruzzi suggests that this particular period may be characterised broadly by the “pluralisation” of fatherhood, as Hollywood began to devote attention to numerous and diverse images of the father, including, but not limited to, the domestic father.¹⁰³ This pluralisation is viewed positively by Bruzzi as a “fragmentation... of the traditional paternal role model that has hitherto underpinned Hollywood's preoccupation with the father”.¹⁰⁴ Certainly, the pluralisation of fatherhood that Bruzzi identifies allows for the inclusion on-screen of fathers who deviate from the straight, white model.¹⁰⁵ This pluralisation also extends to genre, whereby fathers become the primary focus of comedies (*Big Daddy*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Father of the Bride* [Charles Shyer, 1991]), romances (*Sleepless In Seattle* [Nora Ephron, 1993]; *One Fine Day* [Michael Hoffman, 1996]), and dramas (*Magnolia* [Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999]; *American Beauty* [Sam Mendes, 1999]).¹⁰⁶

However, I argue that this diversification of the father image reveals a persistent anxiety as much as a broadening of the terms of family and fatherhood. If fathers were straying from the accepted ‘centre’ of paternal representation, then the underlying project appears to be one of future-proofing the father, ensuring that even if he was changing, Hollywood was not becoming post-paternal in its approach to the family and to the man. While the father became a common figure in a variety of films, and a variety of guises, during the 1990s, the desire remains the same: to advance active fatherhood as the key to survival in a landscape of uncertainty. The following chapters will analyse the construction of fatherhood as a saving mechanism and its application within Hollywood, whereby fatherhood becomes a means of accessing the future.

¹⁰³ Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy*, 153.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 162–9.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 169–91.

Chapter breakdown

Chapter 1 foregrounds one of the major sociocultural issues surrounding American fatherhood in the 1990s, that of the perceived erosion of paternal authority and the superfluity of fathers as exacerbated by greater judicial involvement in family matters.¹⁰⁷ I also wish to highlight how in choosing this particular battle—fathers vs. the law—the films discussed reveal the underlying neuroses of American men that contribute to the cultural preoccupation with fatherhood during this period. This chapter employs a psychoanalytic framework, based around Freud’s work on the Law of the Father and the primal battle between father and son, as established in “Totem and Taboo”.¹⁰⁸ The preoccupation with power and authority that propels the father’s resistance to the law cannot simply be read in terms of contemporary criticisms of the family court. It reveals much more fundamental issues of paternal power and the necessity of displacing the father in order that the son can triumph and envisage his own survival. This strand of Freudian theory provides a way of understanding and interrogating the relationship between the father and the law.

As discussed above, the government’s increased involvement in the family often saw the father cast as villain. Such involvement relocates power from the father, as traditional head of the family, to the state. In particular, the role and reach of the family court was widely debated and often criticised, particular with regard to perceptions of continued preference for the mother despite the ostensibly gender-neutral ‘best interests’ custody guidelines. In reality the family courts mediate a small number of custody cases in the U.S., with most resolved privately, yet the prolific appearance of the narrow-minded family law judge in Hollywood during this period suggests otherwise. The films examined in this chapter all place the father in direct conflict with the law, reflecting the on-going

¹⁰⁷ Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Freud, “Totem and Taboo”, 129–49.

contemporary debate over how much power the family court should, and does, possess, from *Liar Liar* (Tom Shadyac, 1997) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993) to *The Santa Clause* (John Pasquin, 1994), *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993) and *I Am Sam* (Jessie Nelson, 2001).

Pitching well-meaning (if somewhat inadequate or unconventional) dads against the impenetrable bastion of the law, these films reflect the neoliberal battle call of one of the decade's most successful films, *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990): "This is my house, I have to defend it". The private sphere of the family is foregrounded as the basis of a more secure future, whereby the father must take charge of his own future survival by eliminating the disruptive influence of the law, which has the power to break the connection between father and child and thus distance the father from the future inherent in the child.

These films do more than simply amplify the tension between fathers and the family courts, however. Though the law upholds the social order that the father wishes to remain part of, it must be diminished considerably in order for the father to retain—or regain—a position of authority. Such a scenario, when examined in terms of the Law of the Father, places the father in the position of the son, wishing to defeat his father (in this case, the law) while at the same time retaining a sense of deference and admiration, reflecting in the father's desire in these films not to dismantle the law, but simply to usurp it for his own gain.

Dismantling the law speaks to the father's desire for longevity and survival. The law threatens to remove the father from the family, thus undermining the legacy he may pass on to his own children. In overcoming the law, the father not only reverses this, but finds himself as victor over the law-as-father, and thus the survivor.

Building on this, chapter 2 examines this drive towards survival in terms of another important political and social issue of the decade, that of gay men becoming fathers. This

issue exists as part of the wider domestic wrangling over the family that was taking place during the 1990s, but must also be recognised in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Though more effective drugs and treatment, as well as the proliferation of the safe sex message, were established into the 1990s, HIV/AIDS still affected the lives of numerous gay men, whether directly or indirectly. The notion of survival is particularly potent in this context, and the ways in which this survival is once again tied explicitly to fatherhood forms the basis of this chapter.

Gay parents, both men and women, have been raising children for decades; it is not the practice, but the legal recognition, that has been lacking. A small number of U.S. states allow ‘second-parent adoption’, but many more place legal restrictions on gay adoption, with other states making adoption or fertility services difficult to access. The films examined in this chapter—*The Object of My Affection* (Nicholas Hytner, 1998), *The Next Best Thing* (John Schlesinger, 2000) and *The Birdcage* (Mike Nichols, 1996)—avoid meaningful engagement with these legal issues; while *The Next Best Thing* challenges the strict biological definitions of fatherhood in the courtroom, the films are content to offer heterosexual, genital reproduction as the only source of gay fatherhood. However, the emergence of three Hollywood films all focusing on gay men either becoming, or already being, fathers in the latter half of the decade reflects the contemporary campaign for social and legal recognition of gay parents in the U.S., and marks a tentative engagement with contemporary battles for the right of gay men and women to become recognised as parents and families in U.S. state and federal law.

However, these films do not simply make the case for recognition. They are engaged with the same project of immortality that, at the core of this thesis, all men are. However, this project is made doubly significant by their context within what may tentatively be

deemed, at least in terms of the United States and Western countries more generally, a “post-AIDS” period. AIDS is routinely constructed as the antithesis of the future, of life and of survival. As a result, the construction of a future for gay men on-screen is particularly potent after a decade characterised by death and vulnerability. Dan Savage’s proclamation, that following the devastation of AIDS, the future as achieved through becoming a parent is the “ultimate status item for gay men”, highlights the desire to mark survival with the prospect of continuing such a survival indefinitely, through the child.¹⁰⁹ Here, the films engage with Edelman’s theory of reproductive futurism, channelling the realisation of this newly-promised future through the act of becoming a father and so investing the self in the nurturing of the next generation.

The future thus becomes accessible once more. That this survival is achieved through fatherhood, however, raises questions surrounding the heteronormative structure of the families in these films. The reliance on heterosexual reproduction and the promotion of the gay man-straight female relationship as a viable substitute for a gay male relationship ensures that the future being offered to these men is heavily circumscribed by predication upon the successful imitation of a white, straight, American family. While the films in question construct sympathetic images of gay fathers in a period when such images were extremely rare, his success as ‘father’ is reliant upon the suppression of ‘gay’, so that survival is reliant upon sacrifice.

The second half of my thesis examines the ways in which fatherhood enables the extension of the self, beyond itself and, crucially, beyond death. The death of the child and the death of the father are the twin concerns of these final two chapters. While the first two chapters draw on two contemporary fatherhood issues, the following two chapters focus on

¹⁰⁹ Dan Savage, “Status Is... For Gay Men; The Baby”, *New York Times*, 15 Nov. 1998, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C00E6DB1E3EF936A25752C1A96E958260> (30 Nov. 2012)

the psychoanalytic issues identified in these earlier chapters—those of narcissism, immortality and the Law of the Father—and examine them in light of a spate of films during the 1990s concerning the loss of a young child, and the death of the father.

Chapter 3 focuses on the death of the child on-screen in Hollywood during the 1990s. Though the child's death remains a taboo subject, particularly within a culture in which infant mortality is relatively rare, a number of films during this period tackle the death of the child. Those that will be considered here include *Paradise* (Mary Agnes Donoghue, 1991), *The Mighty* (Peter Chelsom, 1998), *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), *Lorenzo's Oil* (George Miller, 1992), *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001), *The Good Son* (Joseph Ruben, 1993) and *My Girl* (Howard Zieff, 1991). I have chosen these films in particular for their domestic focus, with the child's death—or near death—the locus from which the impact on the father can be examined. The dead child is not a victim of war or famine or any other wider event, but rather an anomalous point that allows for an interrogation of paternal survival through the child.

Without exception, these films all concentrate on the death of a son. Within the context of the crisis of masculinity, this raises questions regarding the threat posed to America's "sons" by a lack of guidance and paternal input. If, as Faludi and Bly both claim, these sons (whether young or old) were floundering in a period of uncertainty and anxiety, then the death of the son on-screen mimics such fears.

The death of the son not only suggests the erosion of masculinity, however, but the erasure of the father's legacy along with it—the very legacy that has become crucial to masculine survival, as evidenced in the previous two chapters. With no progeny to pass on this legacy to, and no son to emulate the father and follow in his footsteps, the father is cast adrift, facing his own annihilation along with that of his child.

In American society, as in Western society more generally, the death of a child is an unnatural occurrence, both in frequency and in terms of what is viewed as being ‘natural’. The parent is assumed to die before the child. The child’s death, then, requires a renegotiation of parenthood, and is that process that these films engage with. Crucially, this involves a renegotiation of the future, of salvaging some semblance of fatherhood in the face of its erasure. Reproduction becomes the key to overcoming grief. From the fathers in these films (often in direct opposition to the mothers) comes a palpable desire to move forward. Investment in another child, or the sacrifice of one child for another, is a common theme. Freud theorises that mourning leads to a temporary diminishment of the world (as opposed to a diminishment of the ego, which he identifies as a condition of melancholia).¹¹⁰ This mourning must be managed and eventually overcome in order to regain an impression of the world. If the extension of the self is dependent on the existence of the child, through which the parent realises their future through an investment in their progeny, the death of the child threatens to rupture this future. Through a renewed focus on the child, life outside (and beyond) the self once again becomes possible.

Chapter 4 focuses on what might be considered the reverse of this issue, the death of the father. While this thesis is concerned with the survival of the father, the death of the father on-screen does not undermine such survival, but rather consolidates the desire to “not only [...] exist for always, but [...] exist when others are no longer there”.¹¹¹ The death of the father necessitates a consideration of the apocalyptic narratives commonly seen in 1990s’ big-budget blockbusters, including *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Dante’s Peak* (Roger Donaldson, 1997) and *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998), which posit end-of-

¹¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Completed Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), 246

¹¹¹ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 265.

the-world scenarios that reflect anxieties over survival and erasure on a broad scale in Hollywood. During the course of this chapter I will also examine *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) and *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996), which both concern disaster scenarios, as well as *Contact* (Robert Zemeckis, 1997), which deals with the uncertainties of alien contact with Earth. However, alongside these more overtly apocalyptic scenarios, I will examine in depth three films: *Field of Dreams* (Phil Alden Robinson, 1989), *The Lion King* (Rob Minkoff and Roger Allers, 1994), and *Jack Frost* (Troy Miller, 1998). Just as I have chosen those films discussed in chapter 3 specifically for their domestic focus, I wish to continue the exploration of domestically-centred apocalypse here, examining how these films reflect contemporary anxieties over eradication within a domestic narrative. What is examined in the first chapter—the underlying desire of the son to triumph over the father—is both acknowledged and subverted in these films, as the father both dies and does not die, constructing a form of immortality through the figure of the child.

If the death of the child disrupts the progression of life from father to son and the resolution of the Oedipus complex, then the death of the father may be viewed as the natural result of this progression, his demise facilitating the dominance of the son, who will in turn become a father. However, faced with the threat of obliteration, not only through death but more pertinently through the son's rejection of his legacy, the father must secure his own survival through the child by staging a return. In those films focusing instead on the daughter, the Oedipus complex is again employed, with the father's legacy guiding the daughter only until it threatens to disrupt her relationship with a male partner.

The figure of the returning father—the father who cannot truly 'die' until he is certain that he will continue to live on through his progeny—is crucial to the films in this chapter. Sons who are unsure of their direction in life and who have chosen a direction that diverges

from the example set by their father are revisited by their fathers from beyond the grave. The father's aim becomes one of setting the son on the right path not only for his own sake, but for the sake of the father too. Though no longer a mortal being, the father still has a stake in the survival of his legacy, and it is this that he attempts to secure during his temporary return. The project identified in chapter 1, of securing the father's survival through a triumph over the law, remains crucial even after death.

The themes of survival, erasure, death and the future that recur throughout these chapters situate these films within a wider apocalyptic narrative identifiable in Hollywood in the approach to the millennium. Christopher Sharrett roots this particularly "American apocalypticism [...] first in a crisis in meaning, second in the end of the social, two key elements which now seem essential to the thing called postmodernity".¹¹² Though the apocalyptic relates more obviously to those films depicting violence and disaster, often in a world-ending context, the erasure that these films grapple with—of fatherhood, of masculinity, and of men—suggests that they may be considered as more domestically apocalyptic, reacting against an "end" of a different kind. In choosing to counter such erasure with a return to fatherhood, Hollywood solidifies its investment in reproductive futurism:

And lo and behold, as viewed through the prism of the tears that it always calls forth, the figure of this Child seems to shimmer with the iridescent promise of Noah's rainbow, serving like the rainbow as the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now—or later.¹¹³

¹¹² Christopher Sharrett (ed.), *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film* (Washington D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1993), 1.

¹¹³ Edelman, *No Future*, 18.

The films under consideration in this thesis span the period from 1989 to 2001, and include a number of films that were released by the major Hollywood studios in the 1990s, as well as films made by smaller studios that may nevertheless be considered part of the Hollywood system, given the changing nature of Hollywood at the end of the 20th century, discussed below. Within this broader remit, my focus rests on those films that are rooted in a particular domestic ‘reality’, one that is frequently constructed around white, middle-class American families. This in itself has an influence on the image of fatherhood that is being advanced, that is, a model largely free of economic concerns. Comparatively, Hollywood offers few depictions of non-white fatherhood, *Boyz ‘N The Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) being a notable, if rare, example. (Though in *The Lion King* Mufasa is voiced by James Earl Jones, and the film is set in Africa, I will argue that Mufasa and Simba still stand in for a white American family.) Equally, working-class fathers are given little space. As a result, these films adhere to Hollywood’s vision of normative identity, a blank slate onto which it projects masculine and paternal anxieties.

This is not to suggest that such ‘reality’ is mirrored in American life, but that it adheres to the mainstream reflection of American families in what I would designate a contemporary, domestic setting. Though some anthropomorphic (*The Lion King*), fantastical (*The Santa Clause*) or supernatural (*Field of Dreams*) elements may occur, these films are all primarily concerned with “real” families in “real” neighbourhoods, however problematic this version of “real” may be in itself. Many of these films are made with a family audience in mind, reflecting back images of the ‘American family’ to its real-life counterpart. The family audience proved to be a lucrative investment for Hollywood studios during the same period.

Jon Lewis identifies the rise in Hollywood spectacles and a focus on “sensational entertainment”, through which large profits could be generated in both domestic and foreign

markets, as key to 1990s cinema.¹¹⁴ Increasingly, film on a large scale was moving away from “art” and towards “product”.¹¹⁵ Mergers between large studios and corporations ensured that not only cinema, but television, video games and the Internet could all play a part in the promotion and dissemination of this product.¹¹⁶ These mergers also meant that “independent” cinema must “be understood as a relational term—independent in relation to the dominant system—rather than taken as indicating a practice that is totally free-standing and autonomous”.¹¹⁷ As a result, the “high-concept” film began to dominate Hollywood, employing familiar storylines, conventional narratives and desirable stars.¹¹⁸ *Jurassic Park* is indicative of this wider trend, a film focused on sensation and special effects with an easily-digested narrative and an almost limitless capacity to spawn merchandise, spin-offs, toys and sponsorship deals. Within the film, the Jurassic Park gift shop sells the same branded items that could be bought in real life, replicating the film’s off-screen commercial triumph.

Resulting from these new, expanding markets was the rise of what Peter Krämer identifies as “family-adventure movies”.¹¹⁹ Such films were aimed at a family audience and possessed “cross-generational appeal”, drawing both adults and children to the cinema.¹²⁰ Family-friendly films were by far the most economically viable to Hollywood studios during the 1990s, and their output reflected this.¹²¹ Krämer’s observation that many big

¹¹⁴ Jon Lewis, *American Film: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 359.

¹¹⁵ Jon Lewis, “Money Matters: Hollywood in the corporate era”, in Lewis (ed.), *The New American Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 87.

¹¹⁶ Tino Balio, “A major presence in all of the world’s important markets: The globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s”, in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds.), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), 58–73; Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (London: Wallflower, 2003), 5.

¹¹⁷ Chuck Kleinhans, “Independent Features: Hopes and Dreams”, in Lewis (ed.), *The New American Cinema*, 308.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹¹⁹ Peter Krämer, “Would you take your child to see this film? The cultural and social work of the family adventure movie”, in Neale and Smith (eds.), 295.

¹²⁰ Robert C. Allen, “Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the ‘family film’”, in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds.), *Identifying Hollywood’s Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies* (London: BFI, 1999), 114.

¹²¹ The top 20 grossing films of the 1990s included *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (\$431m), *Jurassic Park* (\$357m), *The Lion King* (\$313m), *Home Alone* (\$286m), *Toy Story 2* (\$246m), *The Lost*

blockbusters have, at their core, a family restoration narrative highlights the marriage of dominant theme (the centrality of the family) to dominant form (the big budget family blockbuster).¹²² Such films were lucrative investments for the major studios, ensuring enviable audience share and a myriad of opportunities for auxiliary income in the form of various merchandising tie-ins, sponsorships, and spin-offs.¹²³ In addition, these big family blockbusters performed well internationally, thus accessing a wider market and extending a film's financial prospects even further.¹²⁴ The use of bankable stars such as Jim Carrey, Tom Hanks, Robin Williams and Macaulay Culkin, combined with the high-concept approach, made for low-risk, accessible films and so provided the most opportunity for wide distribution.¹²⁵

By the 1990s such a mission extended into the home. The home entertainment industry boomed as video recorders became widely available; by 1990, two thirds of U.S. households owned a VCR.¹²⁶ By the end of the 1990s, the number had risen to nine out of ten.¹²⁷ Successful films, particularly those with a built-in family audience, were sound economic prospects not only for the big screen but for repeated viewings on the small screen, too, and in the 1990s the home video market brought in a huge percentage of revenue for Hollywood studios.¹²⁸

World: Jurassic Park (\$229m), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (\$219m), *Aladdin* (\$217m), *Twister* (\$212m) and *Toy Story* (\$192m). Figures taken from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> (30. Nov 2012)

¹²² Krämer, "Would you take your child to see this film?", 294–5.

¹²³ Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, 6; Kleinhans, "Independent Features", 315.

¹²⁴ Family blockbusters such as the *Jurassic Park* films, *Star Wars Episode 1*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Toy Story 2* and *Twister* all grossed more than \$500m internationally. Figures taken from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> (accessed 30. Nov 2012)

¹²⁵ Arthur de Vany, *Hollywood Economics: How Extreme Uncertainty Shapes the Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 2004), 92–6.

¹²⁶ Tom Bierbaum, "Booming 80s behind it, vid faces uncertainty", *Variety*, 10 Jan. 1990, 31–2.

¹²⁷ Douglas Gomery, "The Hollywood Film Industry: Theatrical Exhibition, Pay TV, and Home Video", in Benjamin M. Compaine and Douglas Gomery (eds.), *Who Owns The Media? Competition and Concentration in the Mass Media Industry* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 411.

¹²⁸ Marc Berman, "Studios miss boat on vid demographics", *Variety*, 24 Sep. 1990, 15.

The extension of Hollywood into American living rooms further immortalises the father on-screen during a time in which such immortality was highly sought. Though Hollywood had a great investment in the family in the 1990s, both as audience and subject, it is the father that retains focus. Though the rehabilitation of the father is often framed as crucial to the development of the child, the children in these films are in fact largely incidental. The restoration of the father is concerned not with the future of the children but with the future of the man, for whom fatherhood is the key to longevity and to survival beyond the self. In *Nine Months* (Chris Columbus, 1995) Sam (Hugh Grant) and his girlfriend Rebecca (Julianne Moore) begin the film celebrating their anniversary, Van Morrison's "These Are the Days" playing over their romantic evening. Sam is later horrified when Rebecca reveals that she is pregnant and, following the example of his best friend Sean (Jeff Goldblum), attempts to recreate his life as a single man. Finding this lifestyle ultimately unfulfilling, however, Sam returns to Rebecca and his new-born son, the film closing with a scene of Sam playing "These Are the Days" to get his son back to sleep. The use of Morrison's song to bridge Sam's journey from carefree man with a sports car and a girlfriend to a father with an SUV—complete with the lyric, "There is no past / There's only future"—suggests that Sam has made the right choice, the one that guarantees him progression. In comparison, Goldblum's character is abandoned on the fringes, full of regret for making the 'wrong' choice when his own girlfriend proposed children.

Nine Months highlights neatly the apparent dichotomy between the individualist natures of men like Sean, who desire freedom (and with it, in this case, time, money and sex, although not the kind of sex that leads to children), and the willingness of other men, like Sam, to sacrifice some of this freedom for the good of the next generation. While it is possible, through the character of Sam, to see such films in light of a bad father / good father

transformation narrative, what underlies this is a more complex project of ‘othering’ the non-father while promoting the supremacy of the sacrificing father. Becoming a better father is secondary to using fatherhood as a means to self-preservation and the achievement of completion, a triumph against obliteration. If “[t]he moment of *survival* is the moment of power”, then as a father the man has the renewed power and agency to transcend the male crisis and thus survive.¹²⁹ Consequently, fatherhood may be viewed not only as an act of individual sacrifice, but as the very opposite: a self-serving bid for immortality. What follows is an examination of how this game of survival is constructed through the father, and to what extent fatherhood is legitimated as a means of engineering a viable (masculine) future against the backdrop of male crisis and familial fragmentation, the domestic apocalypse of 1990s Hollywood.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 265. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁰ The term “domestic apocalypse” is also used by Faludi (*Stiffed*, 6) to refer to the crisis of masculinity.

CHAPTER 1: THE LAW VS. THE FATHER IN HOLLYWOOD'S FAMILY COURTS

The turn towards fatherhood is paramount to the survival of American men in the 1990s. The survival of these men through fatherhood attempts to circumvent the pitfalls of traditional masculinity, assumed to be in crisis, and presumes instead a future based upon the unassailable structures of a paternal identity. Yet if fatherhood holds the promise of a tangible future, the realisation of this future is not without its obstacles. The anxieties surrounding fatherhood and masculinity in the U.S. during this period are not simply erased in this bid to construct fatherhood as a saving mechanism. The tension between fatherhood as a route towards masculine survival and as a site of continued conflict over power and authority is revealed in Hollywood's exploration of the family court during the 1990s, on which this chapter will focus.

Central to this examination is the extent to which the law is able to inhibit the paternal future on offer. Though the family court legislates on a number of issues relating to divorce and separation, in the following films the focus is on the court's mediation of custody cases. In depictions of disputed custody, the divorcing couple retain their primary definition as parents, and such a focus allows for an exploration of fatherhood as it is defined both by the law and by men themselves. A number of the films discussed take *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Robert Benton, 1979) as their precedent in dramatising the events inside the courtroom on-screen, including *Liar Liar*, *The Next Best Thing* and *I Am Sam*. In addition, this chapter will consider those films that deal with the aftermath of the court's decision, including *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *The Santa Clause* and *Falling Down*, in which the law remains an unseen but forceful presence.

The increased visibility of the family court on-screen lends an element of heightened drama to what is often a reasonably banal aspect of civil law.¹³¹ Custody cases retain more emotive elements than many civil issues, providing a source of tension within the narrative. It also suggests a building anxiety over the courts' role in contemporary family life. Further to this, the persistent desire to unpick the father's relationship with the law points to wider anxieties over the future of fatherhood and its viability as a tool of male survival. In *I Am Sam*, when Sam (Sean Penn) stands up in court and states, "I'm Lucy's father", the opposing attorney Turner (Richard Schiff) challenges him: "Are you really?" In one dismissive phrase, Sam's paternal claim is undermined and thus his survival becomes uncertain. This exchange reveals the precarious nature of fatherhood under scrutiny from the law. If fatherhood provides the answer to the question of how to deal with the crisis of masculinity and the desire for a future, the law is capable of asking a second question that threatens to unravel fatherhood: how is the father defined?

In these films, the law proves to be a formidable opponent to male survival, as the father's autonomy is threatened by legal interventions that seek to determine the parameters of family life and of fatherhood specifically. This chapter will first briefly examine the court's position within a wider cultural discourse regarding the reach of the law and the state into the lives of American families. It will go on to explore the ways in which such an institution threatens the father's survival, focusing on two particular elements of this threat. Firstly, in these films the law exploits the anxieties inherent in the crisis of masculinity, thus creating a power struggle that seeks to undermine men. Secondly, in adhering to a narrow and often outdated model of fatherhood, the law is shown to be out of touch, denying authority to deserving fathers who do not meet its quantifiable criteria. In the process, the

¹³¹ Paul Bergman and Michael Asimow, *Reel Justice: The Courtroom Goes to the Movies* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1996), 270.

very survival that a reliance on fatherhood seeks to secure is denied. If “[f]amily law has been traditionally concerned with ascribing status”, the law’s definition of ‘father’ is often narrow enough to exclude otherwise ‘good’ fathers.¹³²

Finally, this chapter will consider the psychoanalytic implications of the projected battle between the law and the father, using Freud’s theory of the Law of the Father as a basis from which to explore this conflict. In constructing a battle between two paternal forces, these films ultimately enact the law’s displacement in order to secure the father’s survival. At the end of *Mrs. Doubtfire*, in which Daniel (Robin Williams) is reunited with his children after an absence caused by two restrictive custody decisions, he is shown driving away with them in the car as the credits roll. Daniel is once again in the driving seat, occupying a position of power, while the influence of the law is subdued. This final scene reinforces the necessity of the father triumphing over a misjudged legal decision in order to get his own future back on track.

The triumph of the father over the law recalls Freud’s discussion in “Totem and Taboo”, in which the Law of the Father plays a large part. Here Freud discusses the tension between the son’s “affection” for the father, and a simultaneous, unconscious desire to witness his demise.¹³³ It is this same conflict that emerges in the films discussed here, with the father standing in for the ‘son’ and the law occupying the place of the ‘father’. The men concerned both rely on the law and wish to dismantle it in order to recover their own power. In “Totem and Taboo”, Freud demonstrates the ultimate triumph of this latter desire, in which the figure of the son (the father-in-waiting) is able to end the father’s reign and take power himself, alongside his brothers, who between them “killed and devoured their father

¹³² Richard Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family* (London: Routledge, 1996), 70.

¹³³ Sigmund Freud, “Totem and Taboo”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 13* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 129.

and so made an end of the patriarchal horde”.¹³⁴ The same triumph is enacted in these films, in which the father’s survival is dependent upon being able to usurp the influence of the law. The law as “father-substitute” feeds into the human desire for “certainty and security in a world of danger”, yet it does not necessarily always fulfil the role of benevolent father.¹³⁵ Often, the law appears to actively work against the father, one element of paternal authority asserting its dominance over another, the very show of power that Freud suggests is the catalyst for the son’s own bid for dominance.

However, even as the father aims to overcome the law, it is not dismantled entirely, hence its displacement rather than its complete erasure. The “end of the patriarchal horde” is in fact simply the beginning of another. The desire to “revive the ancient paternal ideal” remains at the heart of the sons’ paternal destruction.¹³⁶ Freud suggests that in the story told in “Totem and Taboo”, the sons absorb a part of the father in killing him, rather than erasing him completely: “in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him”.¹³⁷ Likewise, in these films the father ultimately assumes the authority previously held by the law, rather than destroying it.

The perception of the law is often that of an elevated paternal force administering both wisdom and justice. Victor Seidler suggests that “[t]he visions of authority which we inherit within Western culture are tied up with conceptions of the father”, and as an authoritative presence in modern American society, the law retains this paternal essence.¹³⁸ The law becomes another example of “a concrete agent acting as collective superego”, a

¹³⁴ Ibid., 141.

¹³⁵ Austin Sarat, “Imagining the Law of the Father: Loss, Dread, and Mourning in “The Sweet Hereafter”, *Law & Society Review* 34:1 (2000), 13.

¹³⁶ Freud, “Totem and Taboo”, 149.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 142.

¹³⁸ Victor J. Seidler, “Fathering, Authority and Masculinity”, in Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (eds.), *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 272.

“stable father” who is able to dispense guidance and justice.¹³⁹ For Freud, the superego “retains the character of the father”.¹⁴⁰ Theorising that the superego forms during the Oedipus complex as a source of self-repression modelled after the prescriptive behaviour of the father, he suggests that

[The superego’s] relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: ‘You *ought to be* like this (like your father).’ It also comprises the prohibition: ‘You *may not be* like this (like your father)—that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative.’¹⁴¹

Here, Freud’s imagining of the relationship between father and son is replicated in the relationship between law and man, whereby the law retains the privilege and authority that the man both desires to achieve, and yet cannot hope to attain. In acting as a form of superego, the law exists as a source of “conscience” and justice.¹⁴²

Likewise, just as the father may not always be a benevolent figure, neither is the law. The law often “acts the role of the distant, restrained father, unyielding to ‘natural sympathy’”.¹⁴³ While this lack of sympathy is suggestive of the objectivity required by the law in determining justice, in the films discussed here it is revealed as a fundamental flaw. The law-as-father is rigid, proscriptive and possessed of significant authority. Within the confines of the family court, it is able to dispossess real fathers, who are already dealing with the uncertainties and instabilities of masculine crisis, of their one stable source of autonomy. In doing so, the guarantee of future survival is fundamentally undermined.

¹³⁹ Andrew Ryder, “Politics after the Death of the Father: Democracy in Freud and Derrida”, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 44:3 (September 2011), 120.

¹⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id”, in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 19* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1961), 34.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴³ Sarat, “Imagining the Law of the Father”, 12 –3.

Equally, however, the father is dependent on the law. As Richard Collier observes, the law “has been fundamental in establishing paternity”.¹⁴⁴ The law effectively bridges the gap in knowledge that haunts all paternal claims, as Judith Roof suggests when she states that “[h]istorically, we have never been able to tell with complete certainty who the father of a child is”, adding that paternal naming is a way of “seal[ing] that gap in knowledge”.¹⁴⁵ Equally, the American family is reliant upon a traditionally patriarchal structure enshrined in the law. There is often a desire to imagine that the family predates the law, certainly when making an argument for reduced state intervention: “there were human families and moral relationships within families long before there were legal systems”.¹⁴⁶ Yet the converse must also be acknowledged, particularly given the heightened focus in the 1990s on defining and re-defining the parameters of ‘family’ in the U.S.:

law and social policy together determine which group of persons count as a family and which do not, who is a parent (mother, father) and who is not, who is a child and who is not, and what specific rights and duties people have within those groups designated as families.¹⁴⁷

The law, in essence, retains the power of definition. It is able to confer status and declare familial relationships, and yet at the same time dismantle this privilege. The relationship between the law and father, then, becomes fraught with complication. The father is both reliant upon, and placed in opposition to, the law, echoing the fundamental father-son relationship of affection and antagonism as described by Freud.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*, 182.

¹⁴⁵ Judith Roof, *Reproductions of Reproduction: Imaging Symbolic Change* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 16.

¹⁴⁶ Laurence D. Houlgate, “Must the Personal Be Political? Family Law and the Concept of Family”, *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 12 (1998), 108.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁴⁸ Freud, “Totem and Taboo”, p.129.

“Just Us”: The Law as Intruder

The aim of the U.S. family court, when established in the 1940s, was to “attempt to offset the harsh effects of adversary divorce” by appointing specially trained judges to rule on issues of custody and alimony.¹⁴⁹ In theory, the family court introduces an element of impartiality and stability to what remain, particularly in cases of disputed custody, emotive issues. Yet in these films the law is recast as an unwelcome intruder. It is able to reach too far into the confines of the family, disrupting the father’s survival in the process.

Mrs. Doubtfire grapples throughout with the unwanted (by the father) influence of the law on the family. Daniel Hillard is a man traumatised by an unexpected divorce and the subsequent restrictive custody agreement handed down by the courts. In order to spend more time with his children, Daniel resorts to masquerading as the eponymous Mrs. Doubtfire, an aging Scottish housekeeper, cook, nanny and all-round wonder woman that his ex-wife Miranda (Sally Field) soon declares indispensable (unlike Daniel himself). Eventually and inevitably unmasked during a disastrous family meal in the guise of his alter ego, Daniel is reprimanded by the judge and subject to extremely limited, supervised visitation with his children after a second custody hearing.

The moment at which the law becomes involved in the Hillards’ post-divorce parenting arrangements is the moment that Daniel’s fatherhood, and thus his future, is put at risk. Following Miranda’s petition for divorce, the Hillards are required to attend a custody hearing, in which the judge is able to set the parameters of Daniel’s time with his three children. In addition, Daniel is appointed a court liaison, Mrs. Sellner (Anne Haney), who is responsible for monitoring his employment status and residence, administering unannounced visits and reporting back to the court. Later, when Daniel is revealed as Mrs. Doubtfire, the

¹⁴⁹ Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 162.

judge is unequivocal in his condemnation. While Daniel is punished for infiltrating his own home, the law retains the absolute privilege to do just that, relegating Daniel to the sidelines in the process.

In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, the family undergoes a definite private/public shift as Daniel and Miranda's separation is made legal. One of the enduring criticisms of the family court is the way in which, as an "arm of [the] government", it "routinely reaches deepest into individuals [sic] and families' private lives".¹⁵⁰ This breach of the presumed private realm of the family leads Stephen Baskerville to describe the "discovery of fatherhood" by government agencies as "disturbing".¹⁵¹ Martha Fineman suggests that "[f]amily law has begun to reflect an assumption that the family may be harmful to an individual's (economic, emotional, and physical) health".¹⁵² This echoes the sociologist Dana Mack, who argues that there is a "fallacious assumption that in the modern world it is up to institutions, and not up to parents, to rear children".¹⁵³ Mack posits a move towards a "family-hostile culture", one in which parental authority is significantly weakened.¹⁵⁴ In invading this private space, the law poses an unwelcome intrusion, and one that is deemed largely unnecessary.

The unease over this public/private negotiation signifies the reliance upon the image of the middle-class "dream family" in these films, in which the implication is one of abundance and competence.¹⁵⁵ Poverty, abuse, violence, lack of security: all these issues, which often elicit the involvement of the law in the family, are erased. Such a family has little need of legal intervention, and it is only the dissolution of the parents' marriage that

¹⁵⁰ Stephen Baskerville, "Is There Really A Fatherhood Crisis? *The Independent Review* 8:4 (Spring 2004), 488.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 486.

¹⁵² Martha L. Fineman, "The Politics of Custody and Gender: Child Advocacy and the Transformation of Custody Decision Making in the USA", in Carol Smart and Selma Sevenhuijsen (eds.), *Child Custody and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1989), 33.

¹⁵³ Dana Mack, *Assault on Parenthood: How Our Culture Undermines Parenthood* (San Francisco: Encounter, 1997), 16.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁵⁵ Andrew Horton, "Is It A Wonderful Life?: Families and Laughter in American Film Comedies", in Murray Pomerance (ed.), *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home* (London: Wallflower, 2008), 51.

invites legal scrutiny. In keeping the focus on the middle-class, self-sufficient family who have hitherto existed largely unmonitored by the state, the law remains as an intrusion rather than a necessary aide. Here the films reveal a neoliberal ideology of self-regulation, in which outside assistance is both unwelcome and damaging. Just as the U.S. economy adhered to global, free-trade neoliberalism in the 1990s, here families are shown to benefit from diminished regulation and the opportunity to operate autonomously. Within this white, middle-class paradigm, Daniel is one of those fathers who are ‘worth’ saving, and yet his future is suddenly—and unnecessarily—under threat.

In outlining his theory of reproductive futurism, Edelman ties “*no baby*” to “*no future*”, yet these films reveal that the mere act of having the child is not enough to guarantee the father’s survival.¹⁵⁶ If having children has bestowed upon Daniel the potential for survival inherent in reproductive futurism, it has only done so for as long as Daniel can maintain his link to his progeny. The divorce ‘reveals’ the Hillards to the law, and from this point Daniel’s relationship with his children, and thus his identity as a father, falls under the jurisdiction of a third party. Here the law is not a benevolent force. Instead, it works to circumscribe Daniel’s fatherhood. The law in effect replaces the father as the paternal authority figure. As a result, Daniel’s survival is threatened as the law seeks to disrupt the father-child relationship and undermine their familial bond.

The final scenes of *Mrs. Doubtfire* demonstrate the necessity of overcoming the law in order to secure the father’s future and reinforce his place in what Peter Blos terms the “generational continuum”, in which a father sees his future mapped out in front of him through the existence of his children, indulging in a fantasy of endless replication through

¹⁵⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 13. Emphasis in original.

the generations.¹⁵⁷ The Hillard children, depressed by the prospect of meeting Mrs. Doubtfire's replacement, are surprised instead to find their father waiting to take care of them after school. Miranda assures the children that there will be "no more supervised visits, no more court liaisons", highlighting the extent to which Daniel has previously been disconnected from his fatherhood at the judge's behest. Daniel's re-entry into the family home, symbolic as the former domain of his paternal power, can only occur once the custody decision has been reversed. Daniel refuses Miranda's invitation to wait inside the house, but this choice is now left up to Daniel, rather than the terms of the legal custody arrangement. Following Miranda's promise that the family will now be dealing with the issues of custody and visitation themselves, Nattie hugs her father, asking, "Just us?" "Just us", Daniel promises, and it is following this exchange that Daniel is permitted to drive away with the children. With this conclusion, *Mrs. Doubtfire* suggests that the extent of the law's involvement in the family is a mistake. It is Daniel, waiting on the doorstep to pick up his kids, who truly knows what is best for his family. This recognition is critical to the realisation of his future through the child, predicated upon the continuation of his fatherhood that the law has threatened to usurp. Left to their own devices, families are shown to be able to mediate best among themselves, more capable of healing their own wounds than having someone else prescribe a cure.

The father's struggle for power

In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, the law distances Daniel from his children. David Blankenhorn characterises men like Daniel—a father in name but not in practice (he who has been "de-

¹⁵⁷ Peter Blos, *Son and Father: Before and Beyond the Oedipus Complex* (London: The Free Press, 1985), 6.

fathered”)—as “a father once removed”.¹⁵⁸ This notion of distance, of the bond between father and child being weakened, is particularly pertinent as it characterises both the power of the law and demonstrates the way in which this power is used, not to ensure stability but to undermine the father. The law has introduced layers of mediators, from the judge to the liaison officer and the attorneys, which serve only to disrupt Daniel’s ability to see his future through the prism of fatherhood. It is this outside involvement that must be curtailed.

What is revealed in this criticism of the law’s reach into the family is a fundamental power struggle between the father and the law. Depictions of the family court in Hollywood owe much to the initial example of *Kramer vs. Kramer*, which pits workaholic advertising executive turned model father Ted (Dustin Hoffman) against his ex-wife Joanna (Meryl Streep). Dissatisfied with her role as housewife and mother, Joanna leaves, only to return later in the film demanding custody of their son Billy (Justin Henry). Bruzzi suggests that the film “proved a far more influential social document than it did a movie”, given its in-depth examination of the custody process and the enduring critical interest in its depictions of contemporary parenting and the legal constructions of ‘mother’ and ‘father’.¹⁵⁹ *Kramer* is unequivocal in its denunciation of the family court, mounting two criticisms in particular. The first of these centres on the struggle to legally define ‘good’ fatherhood. The second concerns the necessarily antagonistic nature of custody proceedings that serve to pit mother against father, and father against law, despite the conciliatory objective of the family court. It is the latter that will be discussed here first.

In highlighting the combative nature of custody cases, these films, like *Kramer*, draw on the anxieties at the heart of the crisis of masculinity. This concept of crisis relies on a

¹⁵⁸ David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 148.

¹⁵⁹ Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-War Hollywood* (London: BFI, 2005), 79.

perceived loss of power, and in pitting the father against an institution he cannot hope to defeat these films acknowledge the damage that such a loss of power poses. Fatherhood may be constructed as a form of survival in Hollywood during this period, but in its ability to circumscribe the role of the father the law still threatens this survival. The power struggle that ensues demonstrates the extent to which the masculine crisis is constructed around a desire to reclaim authority.

In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Daniel and Miranda's divorce is not portrayed initially as being particularly antagonistic: "We've just grown apart. We're different". Yet the intervention of the family court sees the two of them facing each other in battle, to the entire family's detriment. Writing on *Kramer*, David Ray Papke suggests that the law "provides both the weaponry and battlefield".¹⁶⁰ The combat metaphors that Papke highlights reflect the language typically used to discuss custody cases (parents "fighting" for custody; custody "battles"; "winning" or "losing" custody), and Papke explicitly links this conflict mentality to the involvement of the law.

To retain custody is to retain control, whether emotional or financial.¹⁶¹ In the vast majority of custody cases, one parent's loss is figured as the other's triumph, and "[a]n adult who does not qualify as a legal parent can be shut out entirely".¹⁶² Carol Smart observes that "children form part of a nexus of power within family relations", despite how uncomfortable it may be to view children as objects of power, "which in liberal terms is the antithesis of love which is, in turn, regarded as the only appropriate emotional condition in which to

¹⁶⁰ David Ray Papke, "Peace Between the Sexes: Law and Gender in *Kramer vs. Kramer*", *University of San Francisco Law Review* 30 (1995–6), 1200.

¹⁶¹ Margaret F. Brinig and Douglas W. Allen, "'These Boots are Made for Walking': Why Most Divorce Filers are Women", *American Law and Economics Review* 2:1 (2000), 156.

¹⁶² Joanna L. Grossman and Lawrence M. Friedman, *Inside The Castle: Law and the Family in 20th Century America* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 287.

invoke the concept of the child”.¹⁶³ Undeniably, children are “often the most valuable assets in a family”.¹⁶⁴ When Miranda first arrives at Daniel’s new apartment to pick up the children, she asks: “Are my children ready yet?” Daniel is quick to correct her: “No, *our* children are not ready yet”. This brief exchange crystallises the power struggle at the heart of the custody process and the importance of the authority that is conferred through a sense of ownership.

In playing with notions of power *Mrs. Doubtfire*, like a number of the films discussed below, confers authority on the law and the mother simultaneously. The power of the law is established in the visual shift from home to courtroom on-screen. The courtroom is dark and cut off from the outside world, and the film eliminates an establishing shot to locate the courthouse, isolating the law and highlighting its distance from the realm of the family. The abrupt shift to the courtroom’s interior, in which the judge, not Daniel, has the authority to legislate on the Hillards’ family life, marks the point at which Daniel’s future is truly threatened. The judge’s position in this scene—high above the rest of the courtroom—further confirms Daniel and Miranda as pawns in the legal game. Seated on opposite sides of the courtroom, the two characters are placed immediately in a situation in which only one of them will be the ‘winner’.

Here the second power shift arises, from father to mother. The law not only absorbs the father’s power, but resituates it with the mother. The contrast in characterisation of Daniel and Miranda in the courtroom is instrumental in demonstrating this shift. Miranda is calm and collected, while her female attorney appears confident and professional. Daniel, meanwhile, is frantic and impassioned, while his lawyer—a weedy, nervous-looking man—is already resigned to the unfavourable outcome, suggesting to Daniel that “it looks like

¹⁶³ Carol Smart, “Power and the Politics of Child Custody”, in Smart and Sevenhuijsen (eds.), *Child Custody*, 1.

¹⁶⁴ Brinig and Allen, “These Boots are Made for Walking”, 136.

there's a little light at the end of our tunnel" even as Daniel laments the ruling and refuses to shake his lawyer's hand.

While *Mrs. Doubtfire* is not as hostile towards Miranda as *Kramer* is to Joanna, the film remains uneasy with her victory. A short but telling cut in the courtroom scene frames Miranda and her lawyer together, fists clenched in victory, as the judge delivers his verdict. The image of the two women quietly celebrating while Daniel despairs recalls the image of the "access bitch", the woman who "fabricate[s] allegations of violence and abuse in order to gain tactical advantage in family law disputes and to derive spiteful satisfaction from denying men contact with children".¹⁶⁵ Miranda does not launch any such attack on Daniel, yet the glimpse of victory is enough to mark her out as unsympathetic in this moment. It also goes back to one of the underlying accusations of the crisis of masculinity, revealing its postfeminist context: that men are losing power precisely because women are gaining it.

Falling Down utilises this "access bitch" image in a scene depicting a conversation between Beth (Barbara Hershey) and a police officer. The officer is responding to Beth's call about her ex-husband Bill (Michael Douglas), who is threatening to breach his restraining order. Beth is unable to remember the exact details of the restraining order: "He can't come within one hundred feet of us. Or is it yards?" She adds that the judge "said we should make an example of him", citing Bill's "horrendous temper" and his propensity for turning up "on the wrong day". Despite this, when the police officer pushes the issue, Beth admits that Bill never expressed violence towards her or their daughter. "He could [be a threat], I think", she offers, to which the police officer expresses scepticism: "You think?" Here, the law and the mother have combined to deny Bill his fatherhood on what appears to be flimsy evidence. Though this scene occurs between numerous others depicting Bill's violent rampage through

¹⁶⁵ Angela Melville and Rosemary Hunter, "'As Everybody Knows': Countering Myths of Gender Bias in Family Law", *Griffith Law Review* 10 (2001), 127.

the city, there is still a sense of antipathy towards Beth, as the audience is invited to presume her “ridiculous” and “encouraged to resent” her for her part in Bill’s ostracism, despite the fact that he clearly poses a legitimate threat.¹⁶⁶

Rather than uniting the parents in the face of the law, *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Falling Down* root the transfer of power in the exchange between the law and the mother. This perceived maternal bias is at the heart of many contemporary fathers’ rights campaigns, which routinely suggest that the family court continues to favour the mother, a hangover from U.S. custody guidelines pre-1970.¹⁶⁷ In alluding to such a lingering preference, *Mrs. Doubtfire* is less overt than *Kramer*, in which Ted loses custody based largely upon the perception that the mother will be a more nurturing and more capable parent. Even in *Kramer*, the judge’s decision to abide by what is known as the ‘tender years’ doctrine is incorrect, given the time period, and in *Mrs. Doubtfire* the judge is quick to present a doctrine of equality.¹⁶⁸ In telling Daniel of his initial decision, he acknowledges that

although these custody proceedings have always tended to favour the mother, we also realise, perhaps now more than ever, that it is not in a child’s best interests to deprive him or her of an obviously loving father.

Equally, in the films discussed below, there is no overt suggestion that the father loses out to the mother simply because of lingering gender stereotypes. However, the consistent alignment of the law with the mother further emphasises the loss of power with which the father is threatened. During the Hillards’ court case, the future of the family is clearly in the hands of the judge, Miranda and her competent attorney, rather than Daniel. The

¹⁶⁶ Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997), 37.

¹⁶⁷ Smart, “Power and the Politics of Child Custody”, 16–17.

¹⁶⁸ Michael Asimow and Shannon Mader, *Law and Popular Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 234.

marginalisation of the father plays into the wider perception of male disenfranchisement in the 1990s, whereby masculine power is no longer assured.

In noting the transfer of power from the law to the mother (with the law retaining ultimate authority), a second issue arises. A transfer of power from the law to the father mimics the “generational continuum” of father-son inheritance. In pushing the father to the margins and granting authority to the mother, this line of patriarchal inheritance is disrupted. Such a disruption mirrors the break between father and son that puts the survival of both in doubt: the father has no one to imagine his future through, and the son lacks a model of masculinity with which to construct his own future, a theme that will be revisited in chapter 4.

One crucial element of the father’s loss of power in these films is his removal from the family domain. In losing custody, Daniel is rendered largely superfluous to the family. This casting out is not simply symbolic but, in the case of the father leaving the home, a physical removal. Following the separation, Daniel is shown stacking a few boxes in the back of his car, his presence effortlessly erased. Blankenhorn suggests that a father who is no longer permitted access to the family home “vacates the only headquarters available to him for effective fatherhood”.¹⁶⁹ While this assessment errs towards the dramatic, it captures the potential damage done to the father once he is no longer an inclusive member of the family unit. If part of the crisis of masculinity involves having nothing concrete around which to construct masculinity, being consigned to a position outside of the family heightens this lack. In turn, this calls into question the man’s ability to survive through fatherhood. A legal ruling of limited contact weakens the link between father and child. As a result, the father’s

¹⁶⁹ Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, 157.

own future is insecure; if he has no one to inherit his legacy, there is little promise of immortality, which remains the ultimate fantasy of reproductive futurism.

The conclusion of *Mrs. Doubtfire* relies on a power shift back to the father from both the law and the mother. The court's decision is rejected, whilst Miranda absorbs some of the blame and willingly relinquishes the position of privilege the law had previously conferred on her. Miranda visits Daniel on the set of his new television show, hosted by Mrs. Doubtfire. The show has become the only way for Daniel's children to see him, and by way of an apology, Miranda throws the custody papers on the fire in Mrs. Doubtfire's living room, using the fictional family space to destroy the legal documents that have limited Daniel's family life to this stage set.

The burning of the custody papers as a symbolic act is used in *The Santa Clause* to much the same effect, demonstrating a reversal of the mother's alliance with the law over the father. Initially, Laura (Wendy Crewson) succeeds in revoking the visitation of her ex-husband Scott (Tim Allen), who believes (correctly) that he is Father Christmas. Scott transports their son Charlie (Eric Lloyd) to the North Pole on Christmas Eve, leading Laura and her husband Neil (Judge Reinhold) to allege kidnap. However, when Scott returns and convinces Laura and Neil that he really is Santa—achieved by giving the two of them the longed-for presents they never received as children—Laura repays him by burning the custody papers in the fireplace. “It's my Christmas present for you. It's the custody papers”, she tells Scott, adding that he should come and see Charlie as often as he likes.

The displacement of the law, and the elimination of its influence over the family, diffuses much of the antagonism between parents, as the ‘best interests of the child’ are recognised as being more complex than any attempt to determine one parent more ‘right’ than the other. *The Next Best Thing* also builds its ending around a rejection of the law in

favour of a private solution that involves the mother renouncing a legal decision in her favour. Robert (Rupert Everett) is prevented from seeing his son Sam (Malcolm Stumpf) after a bitter custody battle against his former best friend Abbie (Madonna). Robert and Abbie raise Sam until Abbie meets her current partner Ben (Benjamin Bratt) and decides she wants to move away. This particular custody case is complicated by the fact that Sam is revealed to have been biologically fathered by Abbie's ex-boyfriend, rather than Robert. The implications of the non-biological relationship between Robert and Sam, particularly with regard to Robert's status as one of Hollywood's few gay dads, will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Following the court ruling against Robert, he resorts to loitering outside Sam's school to catch a glimpse of his son, until Abbie and Ben suggest tentatively that contact be re-established. The film ends, much like *Mrs. Doubtfire*, with Abbie and Ben allowing Sam to spend the evening with Robert, who is shown driving away with his son in the final shot of the film. Again, the father is shown to triumph over the law.

The Next Best Thing, like *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *The Santa Clause*, concludes with a return of power to the father that puts his survival back on track. The mother is also returned to a position of limited authority. When Miranda and Wendy burn the custody papers, it comes as a form of apology and a realisation that the power granted to them by the law was misplaced. Miranda goes so far as to tell Daniel, "I don't want to hurt our kids anymore". The "I" is important here: Miranda effectively absorbs the blame for the court's decision and for Daniel's disenfranchisement. Wendy and Miranda's ability to reverse the legal decision when Scott and Daniel could not is suggestive of paternal weakness, yet it also suggests a belated recognition that father still knows best. Trust has been temporarily placed in the hands of the wrong 'father': in correcting such a decision, credence is once again lent to the

neoliberal desire to retain authority over one's own family, while the father is able to regain—and even strengthen—his own power.

These films demonstrate the limitations of the law in mediating family relations, as well as the difficulties of measuring the 'best interests of the child' in a legal vacuum. In creating a combative atmosphere between parents, the family court is represented as an antagonistic force, forcibly and unnecessarily casting the father outside of the family and thus jeopardising his future survival. The power exercised by the courts is enough to override the interests of the father, and one crucial power that the courts retain is the ability to determine what makes a good (or good enough) father. In wielding this power, the law is potentially able to sever the relationship between father and child, thus disrupting the continuation of the paternal line and undermining the potential for survival.

The prescription of a particular kind of fatherhood

The root of the father's loss of power resides in the law's prescription of a particularly narrow interpretation of fatherhood. The turn towards fatherhood as a means of orchestrating masculine survival relies on the basic tenet of reproductive futurism: that the narcissistic human desire to harness the "immortality of the ego" may be achieved by channelling the self into the next generation through reproduction.¹⁷⁰ The 'availability' of fatherhood, however, is also important to recognise. If, as discussed in the introduction, the crisis of masculinity renders some images of masculinity less achievable—breadwinner, lifetime company employee, protector, moral authority—then becoming a father is an act broadly available, biologically, to the vast majority of men. The act of being a father in its broadest sense—of loving and taking care of a child—to an extent decouples masculinity from the

¹⁷⁰ Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction", in James Strachey (ed. and trans), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), 91.

signifiers of authority, money and status. This is particularly true when the parameters of ‘new fatherhood’ are taken into account. New fatherhood is defined by Robert Griswold as the “refashion[ing]” of fatherhood around domesticity, a changing work culture, feminism and a burgeoning culture of co-parenting.¹⁷¹ Griswold places the rise of new fatherhood within a “therapeutic culture”, identifying it as a way of facilitating male growth, establishing a sense of identity, and destroying “outmoded conceptions of masculinity”.¹⁷² While a father was once primarily identified as “moral teach[er]” and “breadwinner”, new fatherhood relies on a more abstract interpretation, taking into account the emotional relationship and an investment of time and interest.¹⁷³

These films characterise ‘good’ fathers as being involved, loving, willing to educate, and having time to spend with their children. This definition both adheres to Griswold’s concept of new fatherhood and again suggests a middle-class notion of paternity that is implicitly reliant on the more generous availability of money and time. The 1990s witnessed an economic boom in the U.S., and these films retain an often paradoxical relationship to capitalism and its rewards during this period. On the one hand, affluence is a precondition of this image of ‘good’ fatherhood, although unacknowledged in the films themselves. Daniel, for instance, can afford to spend time with his children precisely because he does not need to worry about money. Likewise, at the end of *Liar Liar* Fletcher (Jim Carrey), a high-powered lawyer who comes to realise that his relationship with his son needs fixing, can eventually cut his hours at work without concern for his livelihood. Yet at the same time, the instinct to measure fatherhood using largely economic criteria is seen as damaging and ultimately short-sighted. The long hours worked by men such as Scott and Fletcher actively curtail their

¹⁷¹ Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood In America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 6–7.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁷³ Joseph H. Pleck, “American Fathering in Historical Perspective”, in Michael S. Kimmel, *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity* (London: Sage, 1987), 84–90.

ability to be involved fathers, and their place within a booming capitalist economy often dictates that work must supersede the family. The law, favouring those criteria which are easily measurable, further hinders survival by adhering to a narrow, outdated image of paternal masculinity as being inextricably linked to the role of provider. The focus on middle-class families in these films somewhat obscures the wider implications of this reliance on the father-provider model, particularly for those working- or lower-middle-class men more likely to be affected by falling job security and downsizing in the 1990s, yet the criticism remains.

Ultimately,

[t]here is to be found in law a form of paternal masculinity which has been constructed through reference to historically and culturally specific ideas of masculine authority and masculinity as an economic resource within a sexual economy of hierarchic heterosexuality.¹⁷⁴

In this imagining, the law leaves little room for masculinity, and therefore fatherhood, that falls outside of this model. A ‘good’ father, therefore, can easily be rendered ‘other’ and denied the possibility of a future. The inability of the law to measure accurately the worth of nurturing and the investment of “human capital” has been criticised by Susan Moller Okin, alongside other feminist scholars, ever since the best interests guidelines were introduced in the 1970s.¹⁷⁵ These criticisms have focused largely on women’s unpaid contributions to the household economy, yet in the films discussed here such concerns become appropriated by a desire to highlight the court’s ineffectuality in relation to fatherhood. Again, *Kramer* provides the precedent. Ted takes on a lower paid, less demanding job in order to spend more time with Billy. In court, the judge simply focuses on Ted being fired from his

¹⁷⁴ Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*, 176.

¹⁷⁵ Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 163.

previous job (for prioritising Billy ahead of his work) and the lower wage that Ted now earns, to Ted's detriment.

The father's adherence to the traditional breadwinner role proves to be important in measuring his worth within the courtroom. In limiting his visiting rights, the judge in *Mrs. Doubtfire* informs Daniel that he is offering him the chance to adapt to a court-approved model of fatherhood:

I'm giving you three months, Mr. Hillard. Three months in which to get a job, keep it, and create a suitable home. If this proves to be a possibility for you, I will consider a joint custody arrangement when we reconvene.

Daniel's fatherhood, then, is immediately reduced to his ability to provide both a "suitable" residence and financial support.

What is notable in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and what makes the judge's decision even more indicative of a broad, impersonal approach, is that Miranda and Daniel's roles do not adhere to the traditional father-breadwinner / mother-carer dichotomy. It is Miranda who works late on Chris's birthday, and she who holds a successful position in her own interior design firm, supporting the Hillards' affluent lifestyle. Daniel, meanwhile, is shown picking up the children from school and reading *Charlotte's Web* to Nattie (Mara Wilson) every night. Yet rather than recognise the ways in which Daniel performs his fatherhood, the court continues to measure his paternal contributions in terms of material provision.

In the first few scenes, *Mrs. Doubtfire* establishes in Daniel three significant qualities. Firstly, he is protective of his (and other) children, demonstrated when he quits his voiceover job rather than indirectly promote smoking to the cartoon's young audience. Secondly, he dotes on his son and two daughters, a warm relationship emphasised in a

subsequent scene in which he collects them from school. Here, the parting crowd and the soft lighting and music are loosely reminiscent of a romantic reunion, establishing Daniel's particularly emotional bond with his children. Daniel pursues no romantic relationships in the film; instead, he remains "addicted" to his children and singularly focused on them for fulfilment. Finally, the impromptu birthday party he throws for son Chris (Matthew Lawrence) establishes Daniel as an involved parent, endeavouring to make his son's birthday both memorable and fun.

There is, however, a suggestion of underlying irresponsibility that accompanies this characterisation. Quitting his job relieves him of the responsibility of providing for his family. This tension between Daniel's responsibility as provider and his responsibility as moral guide is highlighted by his boss, who tells Daniel bluntly: "If you want a pay cheque, stick to the script. If you want to play Gandhi, do it on somebody else's time". Outside the school gates, his older daughter Lydia (Lisa Jakub) immediately surmises that he has been fired "again", suggesting that this is not an isolated incident. Equally, the party that Daniel throws for Chris may demonstrate his commitment to having fun with his kids, but it also calls into question his responsibility yet again. The party involves a host of petting zoo animals, loud music and unsupervised children, and is subsequently shut down by the police. Collier states that "[t]he idea of the 'errant' and irresponsible father... taps into and reproduces deep-seated ideas about respectable familial masculinity".¹⁷⁶ The positive qualities attributed to Daniel at the beginning of the film are reinterpreted by those around him—his wife, his neighbours, the police, and finally the family court judge—as the markings of an irresponsible, selfish man grounded in a version of unreality that obscures the

¹⁷⁶ Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*, 229.

demands of everyday life as a father. It is this reinterpretation that threatens his survival as a father and thus as a man.

Likewise, the allegations of kidnap levelled against Scott in *The Santa Clause* demonstrate a misinterpretation of his intent: while the audience know that he has been called to the North Pole in his capacity as Santa, Laura, Neil and the police see only a desperate father stealing his child away. The father's survival is thus jeopardised by the interference of the court. As discussed above, the fathers and families in these films are largely free of overt legal intervention before the onset of divorce. As married men, Daniel and Scott's style of fathering was not eligible for public comment. Daniel's propensity for getting fired invited no rebuke from a judge or a suggestion that he was not a good enough father, yet in being released from one legal institution (marriage) he is immediately at the mercy of another. While the "less-than-heroic fathers" that abound in 1990s Hollywood see their faults simply absorbed back into the family, as their children "[learn] to love them nonetheless", divorce brings with it an increased scrutiny and the removal of the familial safety net that would usually absolve such unconventional or deficient fathering.¹⁷⁷ When Lydia tells Daniel during one of their scheduled visits that "you're not trying very hard, Dad", the accusation reveals the added scrutiny now awarded to Daniel as a result of his removal from the family. His efforts as a father are not only monitored by the court, but by his own children, who have been exposed to the idea of fatherhood as something that can be performed to greater or lesser extent.

Daniel's subsequent behaviour is further misinterpreted by the court. Daniel creates Mrs. Doubtfire out of a desire to spend more time with his children, after telling the court, to no avail:

¹⁷⁷ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 95.

One day a week. That's not enough. I have to be with my children. It's not a question, really, I mean I have to be with them, sir, please. I know it seems like a lot but for me it's not enough, really. I haven't been away from them for more than one day since the day they were born.

However, his masquerade as Mrs. Doubtfire is misunderstood by the court as an act of delusion, perversion and deception. To the judge, it is demonstrative not of Daniel's love for his children, but of his skill as an actor and his lack of responsibility and seriousness, both of which are perceived as a hindrance to his ability to be a good father. "Your lifestyle over the past month has been very unorthodox", the judge informs him. "I refuse to further subject three innocent children to your peculiar and potentially harmful behaviour".

In the final scene in which Daniel arrives at the house to pick up the children, Lydia, Chris and Nattie are watching Mrs. Doubtfire's new television show, in which she dispenses sage advice to her young viewers, advising one particular child on how to cope with her parents' separation. The irony of such a sympathetic, informed approach being restricted to the fabricated living room set is captured here, as Mrs. Doubtfire preaches a more inclusive and forgiving model of family politics: "If there's love, those are the ties that bind". The inability to recognise Daniel as a good father who happens to fall outside the court's parameters of acceptability is thus revealed as short-sighted, marginalising his parenthood to the point of containing it on a film set, performed by a fictional version of himself, while depriving his children of actual contact.

This misunderstanding between the one-size-fits-all approach of the law and the father as an individual invites a tension between the perceived qualities of a 'good' or 'acceptable' father, and the actual relationship between father and child. A measurably 'good' father (one with the ability to provide sufficient financial support, for example) may

still be a ‘bad’ father in reality, while a man like Daniel—lacking a job and a good lawyer—is not a bad father but rather lacks the recognisable marks of one. The judge’s decisions, then, may be legally sound, but the dispassionate approach to the case is revealed to be inadequate.

This notion of having to somehow quantify fatherhood is further revealed as faulty in *The Next Best Thing*, in which Robert’s lack of biological relation to Sam (something easily ‘measured’ in a routine DNA test) is used as proof that he should not be granted custody. In this scenario, it is Sam’s biological father Kevin (Michael Vartan) who retains the most comprehensive paternal rights, in this case the right to visitation and the right to stop Abbie taking Sam out of the state. This is despite Kevin’s previous lack of knowledge regarding Sam’s existence, and his general reluctance to be involved in his life beyond a brief period of initial contact motivated by curiosity.

Ben, too, has considerable scope within which to act as Sam’s father, as Abbie’s live-in partner. Though Robert has done everything for Sam that one might expect of a father—cared for him, fed him, read to him, played with him, been present at the birth and birthday parties, school events and sick days—none of these things are accepted by the judge as sufficient in themselves. Robert suffers not from a lack of action, but a lack of evidence. When Abbie’s lawyer demeans Robert by referring to him as “caregiver”, rather than “father”, it raises questions of a lingering prejudice towards gay fathers; it also reveals an inability to reconcile the two roles. All those actions that become subsumed into “caregiver” are difficult to assign value, while the biological element is a simple yes or no, and it is this piece of irrefutable evidence that tips the balance towards “father”.

The Santa Clause reveals a similar disconnection between the requirements of the law and the reality of fatherhood. When the film begins, Scott is characterised as a typical

workaholic father. The opening scenes show him celebrating a successful year at his toy company with his colleagues. Driving home late after the party, he calls Laura to offer an excuse for why he missed his scheduled visit with Charlie. This image of Scott as an emotionally neglectful father corresponds with the similar image of Ted offered at the beginning of *Kramer*, as well as the initial characterisation of Fletcher in *Liar Liar*, discussed below. The theme of transformation—of a man formerly uninterested in his child, or prone to taking their presence for granted, who becomes compelled to change for the better—is common in these films. Yet while this transformation is portrayed as positive to the audience, the law’s assessment remains punitive.

The initial visit in the film between Scott and Charlie takes place on Christmas Eve. Charlie begs his mother to pick him up as early as possible the next day, and the whole evening is an awkward affair. Scott sets the kitchen on fire and uses a fire extinguisher to put out the turkey. Later, he half-heartedly reads Charlie a bed time story, skipping out half the pages. Scott is able to provide the home and the financial support so crucial to the courts, yet his bond with Charlie is weak and his commitment to his son is questionable at best.

Following the accidental death of Father Christmas after falling off Scott’s roof, Scott inherits the role of Santa. As he begins to accept this new role, his priorities begin to change along with his physical appearance. His transformation from uninterested father to caring, involved dad is welcomed by Charlie, and the two of them bond as Scott embraces his unlikely new responsibilities. His good business sense in meetings is replaced by his enthusiastic turn as civilian Santa, criticising the depiction of elves and Santa’s sleigh (now a “Total Tank”) in a new range of toys. Rather than avoid visits with his son, he and Charlie spend an increasing amount of time together. Charlie becomes obsessed with everything Santa-related, to the point of posting a sign outside his bedroom door reading ‘The North

Pole' and creating a herd of reindeer out of some dining room chairs. An event at Charlie's school sees all the fathers invited to talk about their jobs, during which Charlie requests that Scott, not Neil, be the one to speak to his class first, marking a thaw in their relationship. The role of the stepfather in these films will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

Yet this transformation, whilst welcomed by Scott and Charlie, is viewed negatively by both the family court and by Laura. Concerned by Scott's apparent delusions, Laura seeks legal advice. She is alarmed when she sees Scott—complete with large grey beard and new rotund frame—sitting on a playground bench inviting children to sit on his knee and tell him what they want for Christmas. Neil tells him, whilst handing over his psychiatrist business card, “Scott, I think it's safe to say you're taking this Santa thing to an unhealthy level”, even as Scott acknowledges, “this probably looks pretty odd, doesn't it?” To Laura and Neil, as uninformed onlookers, Scott's actions appear suspicious. To the children (who, it is implied, recognise Santa when they see him) and to the audience, his behaviour is entirely in keeping with what one might expect from Santa.

This chasm in understanding is transferred to the family court, in which the judge sees not Scott's new found paternal responsibility but a delusional man who has filled his son's head with ludicrous fantasies. When Charlie emerges from the judge's office, he cheerfully informs his dad that, “it's all okay. I told the judge everything. About you and the North Pole”. Scott, however, does not share Charlie's ebullience, aware of the way in which Charlie's stories of elves and toy workshops are likely to have been construed. As Scott is told that he can no longer spend time with his son, he watches Laura and Neil leading Charlie away. Later, he observes the three of them eating dinner together, watching through the window. The law has transformed Scott into a passive character, able to do nothing but

watch someone else raise his son. Such a position suggests the unlikelihood of active survival.

While *The Santa Clause* relies on elements of fantasy, the use of the custody storyline is determinedly rooted in contemporary reality. By taking away Scott's visiting rights, the family court is shown once again to disregard any kind of fathering that does not fit an accepted model. Scott's transformation into Father Christmas demonstrates his undertaking of a broader paternal role, yet both this and his increased involvement with Charlie, to the point where the two find genuine pleasure in being around each other, are difficult to quantify and are thus dismissed. Ironically, the emotionally detached, work-obsessed Scott who appears at the beginning of the film is the one more acceptable to the judge. While this Scott may not have had a particularly positive relationship with Charlie, he was at least a good provider and suffered no delusions over his true purpose in life. Again, the reliance on Scott's financial capabilities as a measurement of his fatherhood becomes apparent, further demonstrating the construction of rampant capitalism in opposition to the family even when, given the neoliberal ideology of these films, self-sufficiency remains the ideal.

John Dewar, in recognising the "chaos" of family law, highlights the inherent problem of applying the law—by definition rigid and based on the ability to quantify 'right' and 'wrong'—to something so personal as the family and its members.¹⁷⁸ There is little room within such a model for fathers who do not conform to the courts' prescription of acceptable fatherhood. *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *The Santa Clause* both present unconventional fathers. Yet this unconventionality, played for entertainment, broadly suggests a more general shift towards a form of fatherhood more focused on nurturing and emotional involvement. It is

¹⁷⁸ John Dewar, "The Normal Chaos of Family Law", *The Modern Law Review* 61:4 (July 1998), 468.

this kind of fatherhood, which became increasingly prominent during the 1990s as a model of male parenting, that the courts are unable to recognise, thus disenfranchising the very men who have invested in fatherhood as a means of transcending the limitations of traditional masculinity.

The use of Robin Williams and Tim Allen in these roles is significant. Allen's role as Tim Taylor, the father in *Home Improvement* (ABC, 1991-9), established him firmly as a father figure in popular American culture during the 1990s, a role further augmented in such films as *Jungle 2 Jungle* (John Pasquin, 1997), in which Allen plays a workaholic transformed by a visit from his previously unknown teenage son. Similarly, Williams took on the role of John Keating as teacher and paternal substitute in *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989) and the role of Peter-Pan-turned-father in *Hook* (Steven Spielberg, 1991), and would go on to play numerous fatherly roles throughout the 1990s, from *Father's Day* (Ivan Reitman, 1997) and *Patch Adams* (Tom Shadyac, 1998) to *Good Will Hunting* (Gus van Sant, 1997) and *What Dreams May Come* (Vincent Ward, 1998). Crucially, Allen and Williams are both known for portraying the ordinary, well-meaning (if slightly buffoonish) dad that suggests an everyman nature. The Tim Taylor character fits the mould of the "amiably goofy male chauvinist" that makes up Allen's "comic persona", a persona that informs the slightly inept but ultimately lovable family man image that Allen channels through Scott in *The Santa Clause*.¹⁷⁹ Likewise, Williams "has made a career out of being a father who acts in a childlike manner: playing games and creating domestic disasters", not wholly reliable but generally sympathetic.¹⁸⁰ His reputation for playing childlike men of the "cuddly, cute and hirsute" type throughout the 1990s underlines the particular brand of

¹⁷⁹ Bill Carter, "After Being No.1, What? Ask Tim Allen", *New York Times*, 14 Sep. 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/09/14/movies/after-being-no-1-what-ask-tim-allen.html> (30 Nov. 2012)

¹⁸⁰ Nicole Matthews, *Comic Politics: Gender in Hollywood Comedy After the New Right* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 112.

unthreatening dad-next-door he comes to represent.¹⁸¹ In using these actors, already well-established in the audience's imagination as likeable and sympathetic father figures, the family court is doubly vilified for its inability to recognise the value of their fatherhood.

I Am Sam perhaps most clearly demonstrates the struggle of proving fatherhood to an audience of outsiders, with the added misunderstanding stemming from the learning difficulties that Sam has. Sam has been bringing up his daughter Lucy (Dakota Fanning) alone since her birth, when her homeless mother disappeared. Over the ensuing seven years, the two of them have developed a close and mutually dependent relationship, until the involvement of social services threatens to rupture the father-daughter bond.

It is one of the key markers of their close bond, reading together, that becomes the source of their threatened separation. Sam has a mental age of seven and, as she turns eight, Lucy's learning is shown to surpass Sam's own abilities. She begins to read beyond him, subverting the expected father-child relationship, even as she pretends to be unable to read the words on the page that elude Sam: "I don't want to read it if you can't", she tells him. Intuitively, Lucy appears aware of the looming problem, that if she leaves Sam behind intellectually she may also be leaving him behind in a more complete sense, and the father who is left behind is the one with the least chance of survival.

The inability of Sam to teach Lucy beyond her current knowledge attracts the attention of social workers, yet they have no concrete grounds on which to challenge Sam's custody. In this way, *I Am Sam* recalls the immunity offered to married fathers: Sam is not visible legally, and so his paternal relationship with Lucy remains private. Sam is shown working at Starbucks, and though he is terrible at his job, it also demonstrates Sam's independence. In working, Sam is able to avoid government assistance, further emphasising

¹⁸¹ Lizzie Francke, "Being Robin", *Sight and Sound* 4:4 (April 1994), 28.

the private nature of Sam and Lucy's existence outside of the realm of state intervention. When Sam, however, engages in what amounts to an act of accidental solicitation, followed by the physical handling of one of Lucy's school friends, who refers continually to Sam as a "retard", a social worker has evidence on which to mount a case for Lucy's removal. For Daniel, Scott and Ted, it is divorce that opens their fatherhood up to heightened scrutiny; for Sam, it is these two legal transgressions that make him visible to the law, and thus vulnerable.

Like these other fathers, Sam is forced to "prove" that he is a good father within a system that has a limited capacity to understand him as a father. Referring to her close relationship with Sam, Lucy suggests that she is lucky, as "nobody else's daddy ever comes to the park", but as with Daniel and Scott such an assessment means little in legal terms. As referred to at the beginning of this chapter, in court Sam states plainly that, "I'm Lucy's father", to which the opposing attorney Turner responds, "Are you really?", going on to clarify: "I'm not talking about the fact you got some homeless woman pregnant". Here Turner evokes the argument that biology alone is not enough to connote 'Dad', returning again to the uneasy debate over how much weight biological relation should carry in determining parenthood. In *I Am Sam*, certainly, disavowal is in Turner's interests as the lawyer charged with justifying Lucy's removal. Yet Sam's status as father up to this point is not reliant upon his biological relation to Lucy, but on his having brought her up, cared for her, and developed a relationship with her. Biology ensures that, at birth, Sam is charged with Lucy's care, but beyond this it is disingenuous of Turner to suggest that Sam's only contribution to Lucy's life is one of sperm donor.

Sam and Lucy's emotional relationship, however, proves just as difficult to quantify. In large part this relies upon Sam's testimony in court, a fact complicated by his trouble in

articulating himself. Aware that Sam requires some eyewitnesses to testify on his behalf, his attorney Rita (Michelle Pfeiffer) counsels his friends on how to answer when asked about Sam's suitability as a father. Like Sam, however, his friends all have some level of learning difficulties. As a result their answers, though honest and well-intentioned, fall considerably short of what Rita knows the court requires. "Sam is a very good father", one of his friends suggests, "because he likes green things". This statement exemplifies the difficulty in expressing what exactly a "good father" is, emphasised by Sam's attempts to record an outgoing message on his new answer machine, in case Lucy (now installed with foster parents) should call. "Did I sound like a good father?" he asks repeatedly of his friends, after numerous recordings. Sam and his friends all believe that Sam *is* a good father, yet they are unable to express it in a way that is acceptable to the judge. 'Knowing' that Sam deserves custody of Lucy is no substitute for being able to articulate this in a courtroom. Here, Sam's future as a father is threatened not by a lack of action, but a lack of (the right) words. The law becomes a site of privilege, a privilege doubly inaccessible to Sam given his intellectual capabilities.

In the end Sam resorts to giving Ted's emotional speech from *Kramer vs. Kramer*, in which Ted declares that

I've had a lot of time to think about what makes somebody a good parent and you know it has to do with constancy, it has to do with patience, it has to do with listening to them, it has to do with pretending to listen to them when you can't even listen any more. It has to do with love.

I Am Sam recognises the courtroom convention of the father, on the verge of being dispossessed, appealing directly to the judge. In lieu of being able to articulate his own feelings, however, Sam chooses instead to memorise Ted's speech. The approach appears to

work, until Sam continues to parrot the script, using the name “Joanna” in the process. Sam recognises that his survival depends upon convincing the court that his fatherhood is of enough worth to be of consequence. It is articulation, rather than truth, that lets him down.

I Am Sam remains true to neoliberal convention by emphasising the benefits of a private, inclusive solution to the custody issue. The final scenes depict a children’s football match, in which Lucy participates. In the crowd is her newly extended family: her former foster parents, Rita, and Sam’s group of friends. Sam himself acts as referee in the match. Just like the images of Daniel and Robert driving away with their children, suggesting a renewed power and agency, Sam’s role as referee is similarly associated with authority and centrality. The foster parents and Rita are allowed to watch, but Sam and Lucy are the participants. This scene suggests strongly that it is those closest to Lucy, rather than the distant force of the law, who are able to effect a solution in which the family, and the father, once again are able to thrive.

Practicing what they preach: Lawyers with failed families

The inability of the law to fully understand and accommodate the needs of the individual family is crystallised in these closing scenes of *I Am Sam*. They also serve to rehabilitate Rita, whose own personal life has cast doubts on her suitability to decide the fates of other families. As referenced in the introduction, the refrain of *Home Alone*—“This is my house, I have to defend it”—encapsulates the larger project here, of the family always being the best equipped to defend itself. In the films discussed above, this assumption remains central: namely, that no outsider is truly equipped to legislate on the family.

Colin Murray MacLeod determines three different models of “parental autonomy” based upon a spectrum of outside involvement versus absolute parental authority, with a

preference for limited state involvement being seen to stem from the notion that parents will always have a better idea of what is best for their child: “because parents love their children, they will seek to promote their best interests”.¹⁸² The portrayal of the lawyers in these films as having dysfunctional personal lives of their own, despite the fact that they are tasked with deciding the fates of others, emphasises the dubious nature of their ability to pass judgement on another family and determine these “best interests” for themselves.

Michael Asimow notes the widespread negative portrayal of lawyers in cinema during the 1990s.¹⁸³ In doing so, Asimow outlines a number of common negative personality traits often attributed to these characters, identifying one of the key negative aspects as being their “mostly unhappy personal lives and dysfunctional families”.¹⁸⁴ Such characterisation is particularly pertinent when considering those lawyers who are involved in custody decisions. In *Rita*, Pfeiffer portrays a high-achieving lawyer whose “family life is a mess”.¹⁸⁵ Her disintegrating relationship with her husband is accompanied by a strained relationship with her young son Willy (Chase MacKenzie Bebak). Their poor relationship calls into question her suitability to work on Sam’s case, and her lack of control over her own family life contrasts with the high level of control she has over Sam’s. Her attendant inability to draw parallels between her own family life and the families for whom she is working suggests a harmful disconnect, rather than professional distance. Sam observes that she is “so lucky... you get to play with Willy any time you want”. Meanwhile, Sam is reduced to spending time with Lucy in a supervised visitation centre. Yet it is not until Sam points out Rita’s privilege that she is shamed into realisation, immediately going home and crawling into bed with her sleeping son. Here, Sam fulfils the role of the idiot savant in revealing to Rita—ostensibly

¹⁸² Colin M. MacLeod, “Conceptions of Parental Autonomy”, *Politics and Society* 25:1 (1997), 123.

¹⁸³ Michael Asimow, “Bad Lawyers in the Movies”, *Nova Law Review* 24 (1999–2000), 569.

¹⁸⁴ Michael Asimow, “Embodiment of Evil: Law Firms in the Movies”, *UCLA Law Review* 48 (2000–1), 1341.

¹⁸⁵ Asimow and Mader, *Law and Popular Culture*, 187.

the smart lawyer—a basic truth to which she has been blind. It also further marks out Sam as a man who understands the value of family, while Rita is alienated from her own.

A lack of emotional involvement from these judges and attorneys is in keeping with the expectation of professional impartiality, and yet such distance is recast in these films as a deficiency. The unrecognised spectre of parental love establishes the family courts as a peculiarly anti-family force, even though the lawmakers who have the power to curtail a father's relationship with his child are often parents themselves. In *The Santa Clause*, the family court judge who decides to limit Scott's visitation delivers his verdict from behind a desk, upon which sits a photograph of a young boy, presumably the judge's own son. The judge's own status as a father, however, does not lead him to sympathise with Scott, but rather rule in Laura's favour, further restricting Scott's access to Charlie.

The theme of the father-as-lawyer failing to recognise the plight of another father is central to *Liar Liar*. The protagonist, Fletcher Reede, is an unscrupulous, morally challenged attorney who must engineer a custody case win for Samantha Cole (Jennifer Tilly) against her husband Richard (Eric Pierpoint). Mrs. Cole has little demonstrable regard for their children, and is characterised as self-centred and uninterested in their emotional needs. Richard, by his ex-wife's own reckoning, is a "wonderful father". Yet the promise of being awarded a better financial settlement convinces her to aim for sole, rather than joint, custody. If he wins Fletcher can expect both a financial victory for his firm and a lucrative promotion for himself. "You don't get paid to care", his boss Miranda (Amanda Donohoe) reminds him, "you get paid to win". This statement captures the essence of the law in *Liar Liar*: broadly unsympathetic, uninterested in the consequences of its rulings, and fighting for the

wrong reasons: in short, “a greedy pack of liars and thieves”, rather than the upholders of justice.¹⁸⁶

The film also engages with Baskerville’s suggestion that there is a financial motivation within the family court, primarily through the enforcement of child support payments, but also in the money law firms can make from representing divorce and custody cases.¹⁸⁷ Miranda’s desire to win outweighs any concern for Mr. Cole’s own desire to maintain a meaningful relationship with his children. Highlighting this financial element further emphasises the unnaturalness of children as objects of “allocation”, as well as revealing the court’s less than altruistic motivations.¹⁸⁸

Like the judge in *The Santa Clause*, Fletcher is also father to a young boy. His son Max (Justin Cooper) lives with Fletcher’s ex-wife Audrey (Maura Tierney), and though Fletcher has ample opportunity to spend time with his son, he routinely fails to do so. Like Scott, Fletcher begins in the mould of casually dishonest father, turning up late, or not at all, armed with a flimsy excuse at best. Fletcher’s inability to equate his own situation with that of Mr. Cole ensures that an injustice is done to Mr. Cole by virtue of a lawyer in pursuit of a favourable settlement rather than the truth: in this case, the best interests of the Cole children.

Fletcher is unable to reconcile his own precarious paternal situation with that of Mr. Cole. When Max makes a birthday wish that effectively stops Fletcher being able to lie for twenty four hours—Max being particularly disillusioned by his father’s repeated broken promises—Fletcher’s primary concern is how he can still win the Cole case. He is surprised when his enforced penchant for telling the truth leads him to re-evaluate his own fatherhood. “Oh, I’m such a shit!” he declares at one point, followed later by a declaration that surprises

¹⁸⁶ Asimow, “Embodiment of Evil”, 1357.

¹⁸⁷ Stephen Baskerville, “The Politics of Fatherhood”, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35:4 (2002), 696–8.

¹⁸⁸ Smart, “Power and the Politics of Child Custody”, 1.

him in its blunt simplicity: “I’m a bad father”. These epiphanies lead Fletcher to realise that he loves his son and wants to spend more time with him.

Audrey, however, equally disillusioned by Fletcher’s unreliability, has plans to move across the country with Max and her partner Jerry (Cary Elwes). Audrey is keen to secure Max a reliable father figure in the shape of the eager-to-please Jerry, who though irritating is at least sincere in his commitment to Max. Fletcher, suddenly transformed by the realisation that he wants to rebuild his relationship with his son, endeavours to stop the move, culminating in his hijack of a moving staircase on an airport runway. Yet amidst these dramatic gestures he does not recognise a fellow disenfranchised father until, following the judge’s decision, he witnesses Mr. Cole tearfully hugging his children goodbye, telling them, “we’ll be together soon, I promise”. The passing remarks of Fletcher’s fellow lawyers—“I love children. They give you so much leverage in a case like this”—again raises the uncomfortable idea that the law is not working in the best interests of either children or fathers. By implicating Fletcher in the custody decision that severs the father from his children, the film further emphasises the potentially harmful distance between the law and the family and the ability of the law to alter the father’s future on a whim.

The conclusion of *Liar Liar* reinforces the battle between the law and the father, and the necessity of the father’s ultimate triumph. Recognising his part in the injustice done to Mr. Cole, and desirous of a more family-centred existence, Fletcher quits his job and takes up less morally dubious legal work. Reconciliation with Audrey appears likely, as the two celebrate Max’s sixth birthday with a kiss. Fletcher’s suits are replaced by more casual attire, suggesting a repudiation of work in favour of more family time. At the end of the film, then, Fletcher is no longer primarily identified as “lawyer” (or, indeed, “liar”, as Max declares when the film opens, in response to a question about his father’s occupation), but as “father”.

Such a shift recalls Amy Lawrence's reading of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962) and the evolution of the character of Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck), perhaps the quintessential lawyer-father in cinema. Atticus represents a benevolent, morally upstanding image of the lawyer as paternalistic moral guide, a quintessential American hero.¹⁸⁹ His background as a lawyer has a direct effect on his conduct as a father, revealed when he tells his daughter Scout, "I couldn't hold my head up in this town, I couldn't even tell you and Jem not to do something again", referring to the reasons why he cannot turn down the Tom Robinson case. Separating the two roles is almost impossible, as Lawrence observes: "the role of the father is everywhere inflected by Atticus' function as upholder/performer of the Law".¹⁹⁰ Atticus's status as heroic lawyer is only as potent as his status as heroic father, a man who takes on the hopeless case of Robinson not only because it is the right thing to do ethically, as a practitioner of the law, but because it is the right thing—indeed the only thing—to do as a father in order to set the right example to his children.¹⁹¹

Atticus exists at the opposite end of the scale to Fletcher. Fletcher's ethics are non-existent, and his status as lawyer is largely incompatible with his status as father: both roles are performed badly, and neither informs the other. Yet both Atticus and Fletcher demonstrate the necessity of subsuming the law beneath the father by the end of each film. Even though the identities of "lawyer" and "father" are so intricately interwoven in the character of Atticus, Lawrence suggests that the law must still be undermined in favour of the father's authority. Following Atticus's decision to turn a blind eye to Boo Radley's killing of Bob Ewell, Scout is shown at the end of *Mockingbird* curling up on her father's

¹⁸⁹ Atticus Finch was voted the top cinematic hero by an American Film Institute Jury in 2003. "AFI's 100 Years: 100 Heroes & Villains", <http://www.afi.com/100years/handy.aspx> (11 Apr. 2012)

¹⁹⁰ Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 171.

¹⁹¹ Bergman and Asimow, *Reel Justice*, 141.

lap. “The father can now be restored”, Lawrence suggests, “because the law has been subtly but firmly displaced”.¹⁹²

Phasing out the father: The role of the stepfather

Liar Liar reveals the necessity of the father triumphing over the law in the end. It also engages with the figure of the stepfather as a substitute for the threatened loss of power, by pitting Fletcher in a secondary battle against Jerry. Freud suggests that “[t]he child finds relief from [...] [the] ambivalent emotional attitude towards his father by displacing his hostile and fearful feelings on to a *substitute* for his father”.¹⁹³ This attitude underlies the wider criticism of the law at the heart of these films. It can also be seen in the use of the stepfather character, doubling the threat to the father. The stepfather exists not just as the literal (threatened) substitute for the father, but as a substitute for the hostile presence of the law. In these films the stepfather stands in for this overarching threat as the idealised father figure who nevertheless falls somewhat short of being a viable replacement, lacking as he does the indefinable essence of the father-child bond, perhaps the “immortal substance” of Freud’s reckoning.¹⁹⁴

In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Stu (Pierce Brosnan) threatens to usurp Daniel, going so far as to tell a friend: “God knows they [the children] need some kind of stable father figure in their life right now”. Daniel, as Mrs. Doubtfire, overhears this statement and is compelled to throw a piece of fruit at Stu’s retreating head. The threat Stu poses both to Daniel’s own masculinity (Mrs. Doubtfire implies benignly on numerous occasions that Stu has a small penis, revealing Daniel’s own desire to undermine his rival) and to his fatherhood is not dissimilar to the threat posed to Daniel by the law. Yet while he is unable to eliminate the

¹⁹² Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus*, 180.

¹⁹³ Freud, “Totem and Taboo”, 129. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹⁴ Freud, “On Narcissism”, 78.

law, Daniel is able to eliminate Stu's presence by the end of the film. No mention of Stu is made following the disastrous meal in which Daniel is unmasked and his absence from the screen suggests his diminishment in favour of Daniel's returned authority.

Stu takes on the role of the suave interloper, not unlike Ben in *The Next Best Thing*. Abbie and Robert have an enviable friendship, yet in this case Ben is able to offer the romantic companionship that Robert, as a gay man, cannot. Ben's immediate affinity with Sam is a further threat to Robert's position. When Stu tells his friend that he's "crazy" about Miranda's kids, "especially that little Natalie", Daniel's particularly close relationship with his youngest daughter is explicitly threatened. Likewise, images of Ben running in the sea and playing on the beach with Sam, while Robert looks on, demonstrate the real possibility of replacement.¹⁹⁵ While Ben remains as part of the family at the end of *The Next Best Thing*, the film is clear in its demarcation of authority: Ben is Abbie's partner, and Robert is Sam's father.

This is emphasised in the final scene when Sam asks Robert what the two of them will be having for dinner, "roast beast" being the in-joke the two of them share. This idea of father and son sharing an in-joke or code that only the two of them understand is also employed in *Liar Liar*, in which Fletcher routinely performs "The Claw" for Max, tickling him with a clawed hand. When Jerry attempts to do the same in Fletcher's absence, Max is perturbed. Audrey asks Jerry to desist, adding that "it's like they have their own little world together" when pressed to explain Fletcher and Max's relationship. Jerry's inability to do "The Claw" does not make him a bad father, but it does make him a poor substitute for the real thing. Fletcher's bond with Max may be difficult to quantify, but it is both crucial and enduring.

¹⁹⁵ Tasker, "Practically Perfect People", 185.

In terms of survival, the importance of this bond must be recognised. Fletcher quips that “my plan to phase myself out is almost complete” with regard to the over-enthusiastic Jerry, a statement that encapsulates the truth of the matter: if Jerry is permitted to take Fletcher’s place, then Fletcher’s own future is in danger of disappearing. The link between the father and child must remain in order to effect the passing on of the father’s legacy, in order that the child (most often a son) can go on to replicate the father. If the father is to survive through the child, another man—just like the law—must not be permitted to disrupt the progression of the self from father to child.

This is perhaps most explicit in *The Santa Clause*, in which Charlie has begun to spout various snippets of psychological jargon picked up from Neil. “I learn a lot from him”, Charlie tells Scott over their aborted Christmas Eve meal, while the only lesson that Scott can teach his son is “the importance of having a high quality fire extinguisher in the kitchen”, a lesson borne of failure. Yet later, when Charlie diagnoses Neil as having been “denying [his] inner child”, Neil’s suggestion that Charlie will make a “great psychiatrist someday” is quickly rebuffed. “No, I think I’m going to go into the *family* business”, Charlie asserts, looking at his father. Here, the linear generational progression is restored. Charlie will follow in his father’s footsteps, thus securing Scott’s survival through his son. Neil’s influence is confined to the margins, and the end of the film sees Scott and Charlie going for a ride in Santa’s sleigh. Like Daniel and Robert driving away with their children, Scott taking Charlie up in the sleigh puts him back in a position of control.

These films use the stepfather to demonstrate the impact of the law, mirroring the threat posed to the father on a more tangible level. Most often employed as a somewhat derisory figure (both Jerry and Neil in particular demonstrate a penchant for ridiculous knitwear and earnest platitudes), the stepfather’s presence is as unwelcome as the law itself.

Though they must be tolerated, their authority must not be permitted to sever the father's own link to his children. Equally, in their privileged relationship with the mother, their threat is heightened: they remain 'inside' the family while the father languishes on the outside.

This existence on the outside of the family, and its implications for survival, are revealed in *Falling Down*. While the films discussed above all enact an eventual displacement of the law in their conclusion, *Falling Down* illustrates the opposite. Here, the law's continued triumph reveals the potential (and complete) erasure of the future. In the film, Bill is divorced, and his daughter Adele lives with his ex-wife Beth. Bill's contact with his daughter has been legislated by the family court some time before the film begins, and in this case the terms of contact are more severe than most: Bill is not permitted to go near Adele, Beth or his former home.

Falling Down documents Bill's violent odyssey through Los Angeles, but his motivation, repeated throughout, is unshakeable: he is "going home" to his daughter's birthday party. Though routinely obscured by his unpredictable and increasingly unhinged attacks against other citizens, all of whom he perceives as somehow receiving a fairer deal than him, it is his enduring desire to see his daughter on her birthday that drives his journey forward. Bill's escalating violence complicates the image of the deserving father unfairly marginalised by the law. However, as discussed briefly above, there is a sense that the law, in siding with Beth at Bill's expense, is responsible for his violent meltdown.

Unlike the fathers discussed above, Bill is unable to defeat the law and regain a semblance of his previous authority as patriarch. Incapable of challenging the decision of the judge in any other way but to bullishly advance on Beth and Adele's house, pausing periodically to make plaintive and vaguely threatening phone calls to his ex-wife, he eventually comes up against the 'good cop' of the film, Detective Prendergast (Robert

Duvall). Bill's final stand-off with Prendergast encapsulates his impotence in the face of the law. Prendergast is sympathetic to Bill's situation, having been bereaved by the death of his own daughter. However, he remains resolutely opposed to Bill's violent attempts to overcome his disenfranchisement. At the end of the film, the two characters meet on the pier, a location that symbolises Bill having reached the end: overlooking the Pacific Ocean, he has nowhere left to go. Bill's pretence that he has a gun causes Prendergast, with visible reluctance, to shoot him, only for Bill to reveal the "gun" in his hand was in fact a child's water pistol. If the gun may be considered symbolic of the phallus, a plastic toy is a poor substitute, and Bill falls backwards into the sea, his reproach—"I would have got you"—serving only to highlight the erosion of authority that Bill has been powerless to reverse.

Bill's rationale for allowing himself to be shot is predicated upon his view that Adele will be better off with the life insurance that will follow his death, rather than his actual physical presence in her life, which has already been curtailed. In sacrificing his own life, Bill can at least entertain visions of being the provider once more. Jude Davies suggests that "[i]n death... [Bill's] fatherhood transforms him from maniac to hero", as his primary motivation is revealed: the desire to provide for his daughter, in the mould of the traditional father that Bill still reveres.¹⁹⁶

Bill is clear where the blame lies. Though masked by his violent outbursts towards those of a different class, race and gender throughout the film, it becomes apparent that Bill's anger is largely misdirected. The source of his dispossession and disenfranchisement is not women or rich golfers or Chicano youths, but the law. His primary motivation is one of "going home", yet for Bill this home does not exist anymore, a direct result of the judge's decision to "make an example" of him. When Bill does finally see Adele, minutes before his

¹⁹⁶ Jude Davies, "I'm the bad guy?: *Falling Down* and white masculinity in 1990s Hollywood", *Journal of Gender Studies* 4:2 (July 1995), 150.

death, he asks her, “How’d you get so big? I missed it. They stole it from me, honey. Don’t you worry. They’re not gonna take it anymore”. This faceless “they” must, in great part, be read as the mechanisms of the law that have prevented Bill from being a father. Having “stolen” what is rightfully Bill’s—the chance to participate in his daughter’s upbringing—the law has effectively “stolen” his future.

Conclusion: The best interests of the father

Sharrett links a sense of disillusion with a wider tendency towards the apocalyptic in 1990s cinema:

The cinema of postmodernity suggests a society no longer able to believe fully its received myths (the law of the father, the essential goodness of capitalism, the state, religious authority, the family). Yet it is also unable to break with these myths in favor of a historical materialist view of reality.¹⁹⁷

The simultaneous desire to undermine the law and at the same time transfer its power to another figure of paternal authority is indicative of the conflict Sharrett posits. The ultimately ambivalent attitude towards the law in these films does not simply reveal a cultural aversion to the law’s involvement in the American family, or the actions of the family court. As discussed in the introduction, Faludi’s assessment of masculinity at the end of the 20th century suggests a fundamental dissatisfaction with the father, as the sons—the men of the 1990s—deal with feelings of abandonment and disappointment in a legacy of masculinity that they have yet to inherit. “Behind all the public double crosses, they sensed,

¹⁹⁷ Christopher Sharrett, “End of Story: The Collapse of Myth in Postmodern Narrative Film”, in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 319.

lay their fathers' desertion", argues Faludi, and so underneath this disillusion with a public entity (the family court) a wider disenchantment can be identified.¹⁹⁸

In securing a future for himself, the father must find rapprochement with the law. The circumscription of the father's authority sees the law take the place of the authoritative paternal figure. In doing so, the link between father and child is threatened with severance, a rupture stemming from this break in the generational chain. The father's legacy cannot pass to the child with the law as an obstacle, and so in order to effect a survival through the child, the law must not be permitted to extend its authority unnecessarily in place of the father. When Daniel tells the court that he and his children "have a history", this is only half the story; here, Daniel emphasises the generational link between them, the reference to them having a history together acting as a reason for them to have a future together.

Victory over the law recalls the Freudian desire on the part of the son to gain supremacy over the father, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The image of the father returning to the family home recurs in *Liar Liar*, *The Santa Clause* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and signifies his renewed agency, as well as his insertion back into the "generational continuum" of the family.¹⁹⁹ Similarly, *I Am Sam* and *The Next Best Thing* drive towards conclusions that see the father placed back in a position of power.

This position of power can only be achieved through subduing the law. In Freud's terms, the son must eventually usurp the father, killing him and taking his place:

The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one acquired a portion of his strength.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), 596.

¹⁹⁹ Blos, *Son and Father*, 6.

²⁰⁰ Freud, "Totem and Taboo", 142.

This notion of “[acquiring] a portion of his strength” is crucial to the father’s overcoming of the law. The lack of power perceived to be at the heart of the crisis of masculinity translates into a lack of power in the face of the law. In overcoming the influence of the law, then, the father is also able to absorb some of this power, and so cement his position and therefore his future. In the scene in *The Santa Clause* where Laura burns the custody papers, Scott appears to be equally conciliatory. “I can’t be selfish. I can’t be with you all the time”, he tells Charlie, adding, “We’re a family. You, me, your mom...” After a pause, Scott adds, “...and Neil”. Yet underlying Scott’s seemingly magnanimous statement is an attempt to rewrite the family, inserting himself back into the primary family unit while designating Neil as an afterthought. What the law previously had the power to decide—Scott’s place as a father, as well as the wider definition of family—is now reclaimed by Scott. In regaining this power of definition, Scott makes a determined bid for his own survival.

However, in discussing the necessary displacement of the law on the part of the father, it is necessary to acknowledge the ambiguity at the heart of this suggested defeat. While the father must overcome the law in order to secure his own future, there is no express desire for a *dismantling* of the law. While the father has a battle to win, the law must ultimately remain in place as a structuring force that cannot—and, perhaps, must not—be dismantled in the interests of the continuance of patriarchy.

Such an ambiguous relationship is analogous with the tension Freud posits between father and son, a relationship characterised on the son’s part by a mixture of affection and hatred, with “distrust of the father... intimately linked with admiration for him”.²⁰¹ In short,

The hatred of his father that arises in a boy from rivalry for his mother is not able to achieve uninhibited sway over his mind; it

²⁰¹ Ibid., 50.

has to contend against his old-established affection and admiration for the very same person.²⁰²

Similarly, the fathers in these films tend to begin with a fundamental trust in the law. Ted's lawyer, in *Kramer*, tells him before the custody case to "just tell the truth, and you'll be fine". Ted accepts this advice and approaches his testimony with this in mind, admitting at one point that "there's a lot of things I'd do different if I could", and "I'm not a perfect parent": both understandable statements in any other context. Only as the case progresses and these admissions are used against him does Ted realise the naivety of his trust in the law. This is replicated in *I Am Sam* when Sam expresses considerable unease over Rita's question: "Can you grasp the concept of manipulating the truth? Not lying, just a little tweak here and there". Sam's flat response—"no"—reveals his belief in the inherent justice of the law, and yet telling the truth is inadequate in securing a victory for Sam.

There is both a desire to believe in the law, and a growing disillusion with it. Sarat uses the analogy of the Binding of Isaac from the Old Testament to demonstrate this dual relationship:

The law that we encounter in Genesis, rather than rescuing us from danger, is its source; rather than preventing loss, it threatens to impose it; rather than allying itself with fatherhood, it exposes the weakness and the vulnerability of all fathers; and rather than providing a structure within which to order and reorder the world, it is itself a profoundly disordering force.²⁰³

As a result, a balance exists between a belief in the good of the law, and the reality of the "disorder" that the family courts impose upon the fathers involved.

²⁰² Ibid., 129.

²⁰³ Sarat, "Imagining the Law of the Father", 12. The Binding of Isaac tells the story of Isaac and his father Abraham, who is asked by God to sacrifice his own son to prove his faith.

An overarching investment in the law remains, however, despite all the criticisms these films highlight. A determined focus on the individual victory is key to this. While Daniel, in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, endeavours to circumvent the law in order to regain control over his own life and the lives of his children, he expresses no interest in changing or undermining the law in a more permanent way. Daniel meets no fathers in a similar situation to his own, and there is no indication that his battle against the courts is anything more than a personal, private dispute. As Freud suggests, the son engages in an act of replacement, rather than complete destruction: in eliminating the figure of the father, the “wish” of identification is achieved.²⁰⁴ The sons in “Totem and Taboo”, in “devouring” the father, go on to follow in his footsteps. Daniel’s triumph over the law is, similarly, a rerouting of power, rather than a dismantling of it.

In the end, the law remains as the unassailable, faceless entity. The raft of lawyers, judges and liaison officers may be dispensed with, allowing the father to re-assume a position of authority, but the law itself remains. What is at stake in these films is not an overhaul of the law, but a desire to remove it at its most intrusive so that the father may exercise his paternal privilege in private, his judgement rendered superior. The fathers in these films do not wish to destroy the law; they simply wish to absorb its authority. What is theoretically available to any man (to father a child, whether biologically or otherwise) is threatened by a legal system whose definitions of fatherhood remain narrow and discriminatory. Paternal autonomy is only guaranteed once the false paternal authority of the law has been rendered inflammatory and unnecessary; only then can power, and thus long-term survival, be achieved.

²⁰⁴ Freud, “Totem and Taboo”, 143.

While the law may be concerned, to a greater or lesser extent, with the best interests of the child, it is the best interests of the father that must be taken into account if his survival is to be enacted. The children themselves are of relatively little concern on-screen. Lucy's outburst at the psychologists in *I Am Sam*—"I said I didn't want any other daddy but him! Why don't you write *that* down?"—is atypical in that it reveals the desire of the child. Elsewhere, the focus is firmly on what is best for the father, and what will ensure his survival into the future. The wavering faith in the law that these films suggest as a condition of uncertain masculinity in the 1990s hints at a broader collapse of pre-millennial masculinity. In doing so they reflect the fears of erasure at the centre of masculine crisis by constructing the law as out of touch and unnecessary. These fears are compounded in the images of failed fatherhood. Yet the ultimate triumph of the father goes some way to restoring faith in patriarchy, as power is handed back to the father who always knows best.

CHAPTER 2: "I COULD BE THE GUY THAT SAYS GOODNIGHT": GAY
FATHERHOOD AND THE LIMITATIONS OF SURVIVAL

The films discussed in the previous chapter reveal what is at stake in the battle between the law and the father. The ability of the father to control his own future by retaining the bond with his child is predicated upon his ability to subdue and circumvent the powerful influence of the law. The potency of this future and its ability to save the man must not be underestimated, particularly in a period of masculine crisis. While Davies insists that D-Fens' death is somehow "heroic" at the end of *Falling Down*, it still marks a point of failure.²⁰⁵ In essence, it highlights the lack of future open to men who fail to hold onto their fatherhood, and who fail to recognise in fatherhood the opportunity for future survival: in D-Fens' case, the failure to understand "that little girl"—his daughter—as "the only thing that makes [him] special", as Prendergast tells him.

The potency of survival is particularly pronounced, however, when considering representations of gay men as fathers in the 1990s. The three films that will be considered in this chapter, *The Object of My Affection*, *The Next Best Thing* and *The Birdcage*, a remake of *La Cage Aux Folles* (Eduoard Molinaro, 1978), all emerge amidst a broader project of redemptive fatherhood in Hollywood. Here, tying the future to fatherhood takes on increased significance in a decade characterised by challenges to the inferior legal status of gay parents and the devastation of the AIDS epidemic.

These films form the basis of James Keller's discussion on queering the American family in *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television*, in which he suggests that

²⁰⁵ Jude Davies, "I'm the bad guy?: *Falling Down* and white masculinity in 1990s Hollywood", *Journal of Gender Studies* 4:2 (July 1995), 150.

[w]hile all three films adopt a progressive point of view, revealing the benign influence of gays and lesbians on children, they, like all queer cinema, also offer an alternative discourse on the subject that consistently interrogates the wisdom of gay parenting.²⁰⁶

Keller's predominant focus concerns how contemporary issues of gay parenting are filtered through these films and how a socially progressive motivation for their production does not preclude "such a bleak picture of gay parental rights".²⁰⁷ While Keller constructs an important analysis of the three films, I wish to continue the interrogation of fatherhood as a means of survival within a context that includes not only shifting perceptions of gay parenting, but the AIDS epidemic and the threat to futurity that this posed.

This chapter will examine how fatherhood is constructed as a site of survival for gay men in a determinedly post-AIDS American landscape. In these films, fatherhood is bestowed only on those men who are willing to undergo a significant erasure of identity and sexuality, a sacrifice of self for the greater good of the child, the "unquestioned good" of futurism that Edelman posits.²⁰⁸ Though critical of the execution, Keller argues that broadly "queer friendly theses" reside at the heart of all three films, constructed around the view that "the desire to raise a child is unrelated to sexual orientation".²⁰⁹ Yet in decoupling 'father' and 'gay man', what is in fact revealed is an incompatibility between the two. Desiring fatherhood is permitted, but negotiating the identity of 'gay father' ultimately encourages the elimination of one or other element in the construction of the self, undermining the very survival promised through fatherhood.

It is apparent here that Edelman and Keller construe queerness differently. For Edelman, acknowledging the distinction between a queer identity and a homosexual one,

²⁰⁶ James R. Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2002), 154.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁰⁸ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 7.

²⁰⁹ Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television*, 172–173.

“*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism”.²¹⁰ For Keller, the queerness of these films rests on a willingness to insert gay characters into existing models of the family, “avoid[ing] the revolutionary, opting instead for accommodation and reconciliation”.²¹¹ In constructing a future through fatherhood, these films circumvent the possibility of creating a space outside of the familial arena of reproductive futurism. It is not the pursuit of fatherhood in these films that becomes problematic—to hold all gay men to this queer space both misinterprets queerness as interchangeable with gayness, and assumes the desire to father as the privilege of heterosexual men—but rather that it becomes the *only* source of survival, as Edelman observes:

nothing intrinsic to the constitution of those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, or queer predisposes them to resist the appeal of futurity, to refuse the temptation to reproduce [...]. Neither, indeed, is there any ground we could stand on outside that logic.²¹²

Furthermore, although fatherhood is made available, it is restricted to those gay men who are able to adhere to a heteronormative vision of paternal masculinity. This chapter will examine the ways in which this heteronormativity is enforced, as well as the extent to which a sacrifice of identity, sexuality and politics underwrites the promise of paternity. In doing so, it will consider the implications of funnelling survival exclusively through fatherhood in a way that disavows the possibility of imagining the future through a queer lens.

²¹⁰ Edelman, *No Future*, 3. Emphasis in original.

²¹¹ Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly and Television*, ix.

²¹² Edelman, *No Future*, 17.

Survival and its limitations in a ‘post-AIDS’ landscape

In constructing survival through fatherhood, these films also reflect contemporary debates regarding gay rights in the U.S., including those around parenthood. While gay parenting could not be considered a new occurrence by the 1990s, social and legal recognition was gradually increasing during this period, as discussed below. More pertinently, within a decade that remains inextricably linked to the continued battle against AIDS in both political and medical terms, the construction of any kind of viable future for gay men—who, as Judith Halberstam states, have seen their “horizons of possibility [...] severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic”—is potent.²¹³

Leo Bersani acknowledges the tension between AIDS and the future succinctly in *Homos*: “We demand a future without discrimination *even as AIDS makes us wonder how much of a future we have*”.²¹⁴ That a future can once again be formulated is therefore powerful, as illuminated in an article written by Dan Savage in 1998, in which Savage employs fatherhood as a way of drawing a line under AIDS. Fatherhood, consequently, becomes a way of formulating a vision of the future that was previously unimaginable. “At its darkest hour”, Savage suggests,

AIDS seemed as if it would swallow all of us up. But now, thanks to those wonder cocktails, gay men, with H.I.V. and without, can imagine our lives going on and on—provided we stay the hell out of Wyoming.²¹⁵

²¹³ Judith Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

²¹⁴ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 20. Emphasis added.

²¹⁵ Dan Savage, “Status Is... For Gay Men; The Baby”, *New York Times*, 15 Nov. 1998, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C00E6DB1E3EF936A25752C1A96E958260> (30 Nov. 2012)

The oblique reference to the death of Matthew Shepard acts as a reminder that the threat of death has not been entirely eradicated, but that medical advancement is such that the threat of HIV/AIDS is now second to the threat of violent, personal attack.²¹⁶ Savage encapsulates neatly the idea that fatherhood not only opens up a future for gay men (in which, through the child, their lives may “[go] on and on”), but also acts as a salve on the trauma caused by the AIDS epidemic.

The previous chapter posits that a fundamental part of the father’s battle to survive is to ensure that the family return to the private realm, erasing the influence of the law as a public entity. Savage’s insistence on formulating a future based around fatherhood also hints at a turn away from the overt campaigning and protest of the AIDS era, and refocuses attention on the individual and his survival through the private, familial sphere. In doing so, AIDS is both relegated to the past and to a space outside the family, recalling the frequent and problematic designation of AIDS as ‘other’ to the family.²¹⁷

It is this ostensibly ‘post-AIDS’ landscape that the films discussed here adopt, revealing a privileged U.S.-centric viewpoint in the suggestion that AIDS is no longer as significant an issue. Savage’s article also roots this future-through-fatherhood in a particular American temporality, not only in the passing reference to Wyoming but also in the assumption that the “darkest hour” of the AIDS epidemic has passed, with the U.S. benefiting from the availability of highly active anti-retroviral therapy (HAART) by the mid-1990s.²¹⁸ Adding that he and his partner have committed to the future by adopting a son, Savage suggests that “considering what the last 15 years were like, perhaps that future is the

²¹⁶ Matthew Shepard was murdered in Wyoming in October 1998, a month before Savage’s article appeared, after being subject to a violent homophobic attack. James Brooke, “Witnesses Trace Brutal Killing of Gay Student”, *New York Times*, 21 Nov. 1998.

²¹⁷ Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS”, in Douglas Crimp (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism* (London: MIT/October Magazine, 1996), 75.

²¹⁸ Tony Barnett and Alan Whiteside, *AIDS in the Twenty-First Century: Disease and Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 338–9.

ultimate status item for gay men”.²¹⁹ Savage’s demarcation of “the last 15 years” as the boundary of the threat of AIDS, beyond which it cannot reach, places AIDS firmly in the past, and children firmly in the future. As a result, fatherhood becomes the underlying structural element of the future, not just for straight men but for gay men too, thus reversing the destruction of this future by the proliferation of the AIDS virus throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Edelman, in highlighting Savage’s commitment to “compulsory reproduction”, casts parenthood as “the lethal counterweight of narcissism, AIDS, and death”.²²⁰ In essence, “the Child” enacts a triumph of life over death, “the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” that works to obscure the reality of death in favour of investment in the next generation.²²¹ The narcissism that has often been equated with homosexuality is derided as selfish, while the parental narcissism bound up in the very fabric of reproductive futurism paves the way for cultural acceptance. Fatherhood promises immortality for the self, a form of completion that works against the erasure of death.

The extended fairground scene that occurs in the first third of *The Object of My Affection* encapsulates the notion of fatherhood as a (or perhaps more accurately *the only*) viable pathway to the future for the gay man at the centre of the film’s narrative, George (Paul Rudd). Nina (Jennifer Aniston) discovers she is pregnant and rushes immediately to tell George, her best friend and roommate. George offers his congratulations, telling her that she will be a “wonderful mother” and will make the father, Vince (John Pankow), the “happiest man alive”. As George designates his role in the child’s life as being “in charge of all musical education”, it becomes clear that Nina has another, less peripheral, role in mind. At the fairground, she asks him, “George, would you consider raising this baby with me?”

²¹⁹ Savage, “Status Is...”.

²²⁰ Edelman, *No Future*, 75.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Initially, George is thrilled at what he construes as an invitation to be “Uncle George”, until Nina clarifies that what she is asking for is not an uncle, but a father. “I was thinking we should keep living together”, she explains, “like a family”. George’s protestations on behalf of Vince—“you should be with the father of your child”, he insists—do not sway Nina, who believes that she, Vince and the baby would be “a bad equation”. “But don’t you see how exciting this could be?” Nina asks George, as he begins to walk away, unconvinced. “We can make this up for ourselves. None of the old rules apply”.

In this scene, Nina’s offer of a ready-made family suggests a broadening of paternal horizons that allow George, as a gay man, to be situated within—rather than outside—the family. It also opens up the potential of a future to George. Nina rejects the idea of marriage for marriage’s sake, using the example of her own widowed father, who “married somebody wrong because he thought it was good for me”. In throwing out the “rules” that dictate this more traditional view of family life (one shared initially by George, who reads Nina’s offer of co-parenting as a marriage proposal in disguise), an alternative future is precipitated, one in which not only George’s personal future, but fatherhood in general, can be re-imagined.

For George, the exchange of “Uncle” for “Dad” becomes an exchange of outsider status for a privileged place on the inside, of temporariness for permanence; thus, in permanence, a future. Yet *Object*, like *The Birdcage* and *The Next Best Thing*, also reveals fundamental limitations in this future at both a personal and political level. The above scene serves as a useful microcosm through which to outline some of these limitations briefly, to be expanded on in the course of this chapter.

To begin with, Nina’s suggestion that raising the baby with Vince is a “bad equation” recognises that the family is not always best served by rigid definitions, and that biology does not necessarily equal harmony. The necessary consideration of Vince, however,

underlines the continued reliance upon heterosexual genital reproduction. Nina + Vince = baby may be a “bad equation”, but here it is still the only equation that results in the possibility of a child. Nina may wish to raise a child with George, but Vince cannot be dispensed with prematurely. A reliance on the heterosexual make-up of the family dictates that George is circuitously offered a chance at fatherhood, not on his own terms, but on the rejection of someone else’s. George’s autonomy is thus curtailed. This is exacerbated by a continued reliance upon a visualisation of the family within a nuclear paradigm, rejecting same-sex parenting in favour of limiting gay fatherhood to an arrangement with a straight woman.

Furthermore, when Nina tells George “we should keep living together *like a family*”, the designation of “*like a family*” rather than “*as a family*” marks out a subtle but nevertheless crucial difference. Nina’s vision is imitative, rather than definitive, and George’s future as envisaged through fatherhood may be interpreted as a shadow of the same future as offered to Vince. While Nina is actively choosing this version of the family, for George this constitutes something of a best—and final—offer.

George’s suggestion that he be responsible for the child’s “musical education” also hints at a belief that his performance of fatherhood will be less authentic than Vince’s, that as a gay man his contribution will be restricted to a peripheral and feminised artistic input. This is further emphasised in a later scene in which George watches a father and son play baseball. This tableau subsequently convinces George that he does want to play an active role in raising Nina’s child. However, the placement of George outside the perimeter of the playground, removed from the site of father-son bonding by a metal fence, hints at a lingering unease surrounding George’s ability to be a masculine father. The fairground scene also suggests an attempt to infantilise George, who rides the children’s rollercoaster rather

than watches his own child on it, surrounded by candyfloss and gaudy lights. By applying these caveats—peripheral, feminine, infantile—to its imagining of gay fatherhood, *Object* circumscribes the survival of George’s identity and his capacity to perform masculine fatherhood even as it advances the hopeful possibility of the future.

Finally, when Nina states that “none of the old rules apply”, it is worth recalling Edelman’s argument that reproductive futurism is so pervasive and inarguable as to be almost invisible, while structuring the political order to such a degree that it is impossible to be ‘for’ or ‘against’, as everyone is already assumed to be on the ‘inside’.

How could one take the *other* “side,” when taking any side at all necessarily constrains one to take the side *of*, by virtue of taking a side *within*, a political order that returns to the Child as the image of the future it intends?²²²

Nina’s dismissal of the “old rules” does not go so far as dismissing the one overarching rule: that the future is better, and that this future is to be achieved through the child. Keller may designate these films as “queer friendly”, but in the end there is little room for queerness as Edelman imagines it, as a resistance to the insistence of forgoing self-fulfilment and pleasure for the sake of its deferral in favour of the hope represented in the child.

The fairground scene highlights a number of issues that problematise Hollywood’s depictions of gay fatherhood. The renewed availability of a future within a period so close temporally to the AIDS epidemic is promising. However, funnelling the promise of future survival through fatherhood becomes problematic when it is the only option made available, particularly when cast as the ‘pure’ alternative to an empty, hedonistic and/or tragic existence, as is the case in both *Object* and *The Next Best Thing*. Fatherhood has long been

²²² Ibid., 3.

articulated as involving a significant amount of self-sacrifice; in the case of George, as with Hollywood's other gay dads, this sacrifice bleeds much further into his personal and political life than it does for his straight counterparts, so that at best, "gay" and "father" remain uncomfortable consorts. On closer inspection, what exist as the antithesis of AIDS and death—the child and the future—involve a significant death of self in order to achieve this future.

Bersani addresses the issue of "self-erasure" in a discussion regarding assimilation, suggesting that in attempting to achieve distance from an "enforced identity",

we are reduced to playing subversively with normative identities—attempting, for example, to "resignify" the family for communities that defy the usual assumptions about what constitutes a family. These efforts, while valuable, can have assimilative rather than subversive consequences; having de-gayed themselves, gays melt into the culture they like to think of themselves as undermining.²²³

For Bersani, "[d]e-gaying gayness [...] accomplishes in its own way the principal aim of homophobia: the elimination of gays", going on to state that "[t]he consequence of self-erasure is... self-erasure".²²⁴ Constructing fatherhood through a heteronormative lens, and bestowing the label of 'father' only on those men willing to "de-gay" themselves (along sexual, political and social lines), welcomes gay fathers only at the point of significant self-sacrifice, a survival based on a paradoxical erasure of the self.

The "bad equation" and the "logical family"

George realises the possibility of becoming a father initially through Nina's proclamation that she, Vince, and their unborn child constitute a "bad equation". Nina's subsequent

²²³ Bersani, *Homos*, 5.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

suggestion to him that the two of them raise the baby together invokes the notion of the “chosen family” or, as author Armistead Maupin names it, the “logical family” (as opposed to the biological family).²²⁵ Nina believes that, despite their more obvious sexual incompatibility, she and George are better suited than she and Vince, and this compatibility extends to their ability to co-parent together.

Kath Weston characterises “chosen families” as those “different in kind and composition”.²²⁶ This assessment is based broadly on definitions of ‘gay’ and ‘choice’ as ideologically opposed to ‘straight’ and ‘biology’, while acknowledging the myriad of kinship patterns that may arise from such a definition.²²⁷ Valerie Lehr questions the unnecessary limitations of “a rhetoric of family that understands biological parents as inherently superior”, and that limits inclusion to the nuclear family at the expense of the queer family; that is, the family that deviates from the norm of nuclear relational composition.²²⁸ Rather than the logic of biology and a political system that retains an investment in the nuclear family, the structuring element of the queer family is an active move outside of this most narrow definition—or, in Nina’s words, equation—of family.

The choice of George as father, therefore, is a deliberate one on Nina’s part. There is nothing ‘wrong’ with Vince as a potential father, yet Nina is adamant that she wants George to help bring up her child, invoking personal choice over biological prerogative. The characterisation of Vince and George is crucial here. Vince is just domineering and annoying enough that Nina’s aversion is understandable to the audience, yet George must be significantly ‘better’ than Vince to ensure Nina is not demonised for her summary dismissal

²²⁵ Armistead Maupin, *Michael Tolliver Lives* (London: Black Swan, 2008), 88.

²²⁶ Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 110.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

²²⁸ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 3.

of the biological father (a line walked less favourably by the mothers in the previous chapter).

George, as a result, is characterised relentlessly as being preferable to Vince, both as partner and father. As a romantic lead, George occupies the space of the “right partner” against Vince’s “wrong partner”, the one positioned to ‘save’ the heroine from an ill-advised commitment.²²⁹ Vince is argumentative, overtly political, and often oblivious to Nina’s feelings. George, in comparison, is constructed in line with what Baz Dreisinger describes as “a new incarnation of the perfect man”, in line with other prominent ‘gay best friends’ in contemporary popular culture.²³⁰ He is attentive, sensitive, and accompanies Nina to dance classes willingly. He stays up late to eat ice cream and discuss his and Nina’s failed relationships. His job as an enthusiastic primary school teacher ensures his credentials as a father are sound. In choosing George, the restrictive logic of the nuclear family is subjugated by the freedom to choose your own family.

This element of choice is crucial to the way fatherhood is visualised for gay men in these films. Choice connotes activity and privilege, not least in the very act of being offered a choice in the first place. The fact that George can ‘choose’ fatherhood at all plays into the notion of Western entitlement and a particular Americanised viewpoint, especially when considering the contemporary presence of AIDS. When Edelman refers to men such as Savage, in their veneration of gay fatherhood, as “choos[ing] life” in a bid to counteract the threat of annihilation posed by AIDS, the idea of “choosing” life and of engineering a future

²²⁹ Steve Neale, “The Big Romance or Something Wild?: Romantic Comedy Today”, *Screen* 33:3 (Autumn 1992), 290.

²³⁰ Baz Dreisinger, “The Queen in Shining Armor: Safe Eroticism and the Gay Friend”, *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28:1 (Spring 2000), 7.

through paternity (indeed, any kind of future at all) belies a privilege borne of the dissipation of AIDS in Western culture.²³¹

George, then, is a product of a particular time and place that allows his future to be visualised through the lens of fatherhood; that in fact allows it to be visualised at all. Ostensibly, George is given the opportunity to choose fatherhood, and thus choose life. Yet ingrained in this privileged position there is a distinct passivity that characterises George's entire relationship to his possible fatherhood. However "logical" Nina believes her and George to be as a family, she and Vince both remain crucial to George's ability to become a father. The 1990s as a decade witnessed a "turbulent national debate" regarding parental equality and the recognition of gay parents.²³² Yet George's passive entry into fatherhood sidesteps any engagement with these issues in favour of relying on accidental fatherhood by way of a straightforward case of genital reproduction within a heterosexual couple. While George is given a choice, this amounts to whether or not he agrees to Nina's re-imagined family. It demonstrates little in the way of autonomous decision-making. For George the prospect of fatherhood is a surprising one, characterised by his realisation that "I don't always have to be the one watching them leave".

Arlene Lev suggests that while "LGBT people have 'regular, average, and normal' families, we do build our families in unique ways, utilising alternative methods of reproduction and family-building", identifying elements of "creativity, passion, and ingenuity" in the methods by which such families are built.²³³ Yet the ways in which

²³¹ Edelman, *No Future*, 75.

²³² David W. Dunlap, "Homosexual Parents Raising Children: Support for Pro and Con", *New York Times*, 7 Jan. 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/07/us/homosexual-parents-raising-children-support-for-pro-and-con.html> (30 Nov. 2012)

²³³ Arlene Istar Lev, "Gay dads: Choosing surrogacy", *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review* 7:1 (2006), 72.

individuals or same-sex couples can and do choose to have children are notably absent from any of these cinematic considerations of gay fatherhood.²³⁴

It is important here to acknowledge the evolving notions of gay parenthood over time, and the reality of gay fatherhood during the 1990s in the U.S. Legally, the status of gay parents remained uncertain during the decade, particularly when no biological relationship existed between parent and child. While some states began to move towards explicit legal recognition of second-parent or joint adoption, others enacted prohibitive laws.²³⁵ Many more states remained ambiguous, with decisions often decided on a case-by-case basis by individual judges and social workers, occupying a spectrum from acceptance to condemnation.²³⁶ With regard to gay men who wish to become fathers, Grossman and Friedman suggest that “the planned family has always been more difficult to achieve” in comparison to gay women who, from the 1980s onwards, could utilise alternative insemination.²³⁷ In comparison, surrogacy and adoption have emerged as more common in gay fathering arrangements.²³⁸ These options, however, require both time and money.²³⁹ As a result, the availability of fatherhood remains uncertain, and skewed in favour of middle-class, affluent, established couples.

The reality facing George in *Object* is, in part, a reflection of the period. As a single gay man on a teacher’s wage, an informal parenting arrangement with a good friend is

²³⁴ See Weston; Lehr; Turan Ali, *We Are Family: Testimonies of Lesbian and Gay Parents* (London: Cassell, 1996); Robert E. Goss and Amy Adams Squire Strongheart (eds.), *Our Families, Our Values: Snapshots of Queer Kinship* (New York: Haworth Press, 1997).

²³⁵ American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), “States where same-sex couples are able to get joint and/or second parent adoptions statewide”, http://www.aclu.org/files/assets/aclu_map4.pdf (19 Oct. 2012)

²³⁶ Susan Chira, “Gay Parents Become Increasingly Visible”, *New York Times*, 30 Sep. 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/30/us/gay-parents-become-increasingly-visible.html> (30 Nov. 2012). Chira contrasts the “two faces of gay parenthood in America”, giving the example of a third grade child speaking openly at school about having gay parents, and the opposing example of a Virginia woman “forced by a judge to choose between her children and her partner”.

²³⁷ Joanna L. Grossman and Lawrence M. Friedman, *Inside The Castle: Law and the Family in 20th Century America* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 322.

²³⁸ Ibid. See also Lev, “Gay dads”, 72–6.

²³⁹ Lev, “Gay dads”, 74.

perhaps one of the more realistic options available. Yet this also sidesteps neatly any political consideration of gay fatherhood in a film particularly keen to emphasise its status as a (straight) romantic comedy. Furthermore, the accidental, one-off nature of the fatherhood on offer is notable. This is not George's vision of his logical family, but Nina's. The notion of the chosen family does not extend any real element of choice to George. Nina may decide that her current situation amounts to a bad equation, but George can only factor into this equation at someone else's behest. If fatherhood is a form of active masculine survival, the passivity with which George is offered this role has implications for the realisation of his own future. A space in which gay men can be imagined as fathers opens up, yet its projection through a heteronormative framework dilutes this future, which remains beholden to the actions and choices of others. At no point is fatherhood established on George's terms. Here, in contradistinction to Canetti's declaration that "[t]he moment of *survival* is the moment of power", is the concept of survival *without* power, a shadowy, accidental fatherhood offered as a simulacrum of the real thing.²⁴⁰

The Next Best Thing is similarly constructed along the lines of a gay male/straight female relationship, with one crucial variation. As discussed briefly in the previous chapter, for the majority of the film Robert believes that he is the biological father of Sam, as does the audience. Therefore, in contrast to George, Robert's paternity is presented as active, rather than passive. Once again, however, Robert's fatherhood is predicated upon an act of heterosexual genital reproduction, both in the original assumption that Abbie becomes pregnant after their one night stand, and in the actuality of her becoming pregnant through sex with her ex-boyfriend Kevin.

²⁴⁰ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (London: Penguin, 1992), 265. Emphasis in original.

That this is the only way Robert may become a father once again narrows the parameters of fatherhood to a heteronormative framework. This is encapsulated in a conversation between Robert and his mother Helen (Lynn Redgrave), who suggests that, with regard to Robert's indecision over accepting Abbie's offer to raise the baby together: "It's an opportunity that's come up. It won't come up again". Helen believes that Robert's one and only chance at fatherhood is through the accidental impregnation of his best friend. Robert, in telling Abbie, "I don't want to be some gay uncle who lives on the other side of the tracks with his roommate Bruce, who no one's supposed to talk to. I want to be the baby's father, forever and always", apparently agrees with his mother. The possibility of Robert and the fictional Bruce having a child together is left unacknowledged. Robert either has a child with Abbie, or is consigned to a shady existence as "uncle". There are echoes of George's predicament here, in the distinction between father and uncle, but here uncle is not simply a secondary role, as imagined by George, but a role tinged with a certain amount of disgrace and ostracism.

Neither George nor Robert is permitted to make a choice to become a parent within a relationship of their own, or at a time of their choosing. In contrast, *The Birdcage* does present an image of two men, Albert (Nathan Lane) and Armand (Robin Williams), parenting together. Yet this is tempered by their son Val (Dan Futterman) being an adult, which puts Armand and Albert's active parenting in the past and effectively eliminates any image of two gay men bringing up a young child, which has often aroused unease based upon erroneous notions of paedophilia.

The inclusion in the narrative of Val's birth mother, Katherine (Christine Baranski), further disrupts this image of two men co-parenting. Val's status as 'son' must be explained, and in explanation comes a tacit hierarchy of parenthood. Armand, as biological and

custodial father, enjoys a clearly defined and accepted role denied to Albert, who is never designated “father” in the way that Armand is. Despite Katherine’s self-confessed lack of maternal instinct, and her lack of involvement in Val’s upbringing, she is not excised from the narrative. Care is taken to explain that Val is the product of a short-lived affair between Armand and Katherine. When Albert mourns the fact that Val is getting married, “and we won’t have any others”, Armand responds, “not without a miracle”. The “miracle” required for Armand and Albert to become parents again highlights Val’s conception as a one-time-only deal, just as Robert perceives his chance to be a dad. Once again, a straight woman is required to facilitate gay fatherhood. Katherine’s desire to concentrate on her business rather than motherhood—again recalling the binary opposition of family and capitalism noted in the previous chapter—is what paves the way for Armand to become a full-time father. Latterly, Albert is offered a kind of secondary fatherhood as Armand’s partner.

The insistence on gay fatherhood as the result of heterosexual genital reproduction undermines the notion of the “chosen” family. While Armand plays an active sexual role in Val’s conception, George is excised from this role, and the truth of Sam’s paternity again distances Robert from biological fatherhood at the same time that it roots paternity in heterosexual reproduction. Reproduction outside of the genital, heterosexual model retains the perception of being unnatural, reflecting the idea that “[i]t takes a certain ‘violence,’ if one is homosexual, to want a child”.²⁴¹ This violence is reflected in scenes leading up to Abbie and Robert’s one night stand, in which furniture is overturned, lamps are smashed and glasses and vases are broken, the “encounter [...] presented as a disorienting and destructive

²⁴¹ Sylviane Agacinski, in interview with Eric Lamien and Michael Feher, “Questions autour de la filiation”, *Ex aequo* (July 1998), 23. Translated from the original French (“Il faut une certain ‘violence’, quand on est homosexuel, pour vouloir un enfant”) in Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?”, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13:1 (Spring 2002), 29.

brawl”, so relating back to the “violence” proposed by Agacinski.²⁴² In choosing to ignore the emerging ways in which gay men might become fathers away from acts of genital reproduction, these films do not simply commit themselves to more easily attainable permutations of gay fatherhood. They limit the autonomy of the gay male characters, who must instead rely on happy accidents and “miracles”.

This is compounded in the disavowal of a biological relation between George and Robert and their children. To father a child relates to both the biological act of reproduction and the social functions of fatherhood, and the former is denied in both these cases. While this denial suggests a desire to broaden the terms of fatherhood beyond biology, it is also used to distance George and Robert from the family. This denial becomes indicative of a desire to further curtail gay fatherhood. Avoiding a biological relationship between father and child bestows a kind of impotency, again relating back to passivity. It also suggests a desire to disassociate the child from a blood relation to gay men, blood (and semen) being implicated in the threat of HIV/AIDS. In court, Robert, arguing that blood does not matter in his ability to be Sam’s father, makes reference to blood “getting bad”, alluding further to this unease. The denial of Robert’s biological relation to Sam disrupts Robert’s survival, as it becomes clear that for the court, blood does matter.

Gay parenthood is often discussed in terms of choice and the idea of children as the result of a conscious decision, given the unlikely occurrence of accidental impregnation.²⁴³ However, here this choice, and thus the power associated with it, is erased. The passivity of gay men as fathers suggests a continued approximation between homosexuality and a sterility that ensures its position outside of generational reproduction, a continued

²⁴² Yvonne Tasker, “Practically Perfect People: Postfeminism, Masculinity and Male Parenting in Contemporary Cinema”, in Murray Pomerance (ed.), *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home* (London: Wallflower, 2008), 184.

²⁴³ Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 131.

“denigration [...] on the grounds that it (unlike heterosexuality) is a sterile or non-reproductive, and unnatural relationship”.²⁴⁴ Sue Ellen Case sums up this perceived dichotomy in two opposing equations, “hetero=sex=life” and “homo=sex=unlife”.²⁴⁵ Therefore, while Nina may dismiss Vince, the baby and herself as a “bad equation”, in the end the equations that prevail are those proposed by Case. If he is to access the future staked to his potential fatherhood, George (and Robert, and Armand/Albert) must do so on someone else’s terms. The failure to choose this future, restricted as it is, propels him back to the realms of the “unlife”, the antithesis of survival.

“Like” a family / “As” a family

The reliance on images of heterosexual reproduction in the construction of gay fathers on-screen dictates the formation of the family within a heteronormative framework. Within this established framework, Nina’s suggestion to George that they live together “like” a family, rather than “as” a family, is a telling one. Nina’s words suggest two things: a desire for imitation, and an acknowledgement that there remains a space between this imitation and the “family” it aspires to. As such, she endorses an assimilationist approach, whereby she and George create a “child-rearing famil[y]” based upon the two-parent, nuclear model: a monogamous, privatised unit that deviates almost imperceptibly from the normative, heterosexual family.²⁴⁶

An initial consideration of Nina’s character suggests that she alone is open to the kind of chosen, or queer, family that the film appears to advocate. While George is adamant initially that Nina should stay with the “father of [her] child”, Nina is eager to break out of this mould. The fact that George reads Nina’s offer of fatherhood as a marriage proposal also

²⁴⁴ Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 52.

²⁴⁵ Sue Ellen Case, “Tracking the Vampire”, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3:2 (1991), 4.

²⁴⁶ Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 47–9.

suggests that he ascribes to a more traditional image of the nuclear family. Unlike Nina, George's ability to imagine a permutation of the family where he might be included as a parent is limited to a rather outdated one involving marriage to a woman.²⁴⁷ As a result, George is constructed as the more conservative of the two, while Nina is the one willing to transcend normative boundaries. This characterisation is consistent with a determined effort to make George as politically non-threatening as possible, discussed in more detail below. Prevalent right-wing rhetoric in the 1990s regarding the undermining of the 'traditional' American family led to a number of attempts to define the family retrospectively at federal and state level, to un-include same-sex couples or gay parents.²⁴⁸ For George to *want* to be on the inside of Nina's new family would be an imposition, echoing such right-wing concerns. George must instead wait to be invited. Again, a particular passivity characterises his potential fatherhood.

As argued above, this passivity relates to a lack of choice. However, it also feeds into an 'othering' of gay fatherhood, whereby the gay father is infantilised and feminised to the point that they more accurately resemble an almost-father, a shade away from the "real" thing. This is related to a persistent denial of masculinity, and in doing so casts doubt on the ability of gay fatherhood (in opposition to "real" fatherhood) to enact a survival for the men in question. George being on stage, both at the beginning and end of the film, immediately places him in a performative, and therefore feminised, role. This is compounded by his job as a primary school teacher, again more commonly associated with women. Furthermore, his conversation with Nina about the possibility of a co-parenting arrangement occurs on a children's rollercoaster, his oversized body crammed into the seat as Nina lays out her plans. The location gives the whole discussion an undertone of indulgence, rather than gravity, as if

²⁴⁷ Bruce Voeller and James Walters, "Gay Fathers", *The Family Coordinator* 27:2 (April 1978), 152.

²⁴⁸ Scott Ruskay-Kidd, "The Defense of Marriage Act and the Overextension of Congressional Authority", *Columbia Law Review* 97:5 (1997), 1435–1482.

Nina and George are merely ‘playing’ at families. This infantilisation has the effect of “preserving the distinctiveness of heterosexual male parenting”, by refusing masculine or authoritative positions to George.²⁴⁹

Robert, too, is often visualised in a performative role. In one scene, he and Sam are shown playing in the garden, dressed up as spaceships in homemade costumes. Robert also creates the “Adventures of Princess Tinyfuse” for Sam, by pretending to read books upside down to reveal hidden stories. At the start of the film Abbie dispatches Robert to get her keys back from her hostile ex, yet Robert does not approach this with threats of violence, or even a display of authority; rather, he dresses flamboyantly and embarrasses Kevin into returning the keys by pretending (in front of Kevin’s friends) that they are ex-lovers. Yvonne Tasker notes that, much like the dichotomy between George and Vince, there is a definite distinction between Abbie’s new partner Ben and Robert. In a scene depicting a family visit to the beach, Ben runs through the surf with Sam on his shoulders, displaying a kind of masculine “ease”, while Robert is isolated in the foreground, sitting on a blanket, emphasising his comparable “fragility”.²⁵⁰

George’s speech to Nina, in which he accepts her offer to co-parent, plays on this notion of genuine fatherhood as a masculine privilege:

I always thought that I could teach other people’s children, but someone else, you know, a real guy like Vince gets to take them home. Then I thought, I don’t always have to be the one watching them leave. I don’t always have to be the one who waits for twilight to pass. For the first time I thought, I could be the guy who says goodnight.

²⁴⁹ Tasker, “Practically Perfect People”, 185.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

Here, George demonstrates two things: one, the realisation that a future, through fatherhood, is available to him (“I could be”), and two, that in order for this future to be realised, he must assume the role of “the guy who says goodnight”, that is, “a real guy like Vince”. Fatherhood, “as a site of specific and distinctly masculinist pleasures”, is therefore not so much available to George, as available to George-as-imitation-of-Vince.²⁵¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that “the healthy homosexual” (that is, a gay man who may find acceptance in mainstream culture) is “a) one who is already grown up and b) acts masculine”.²⁵² George’s acceptance as a father is thus tempered by suggestions regarding his childishness and his unmanliness. To take Sedgwick’s term, if George is not strictly “a healthy homosexual”, by her criteria, he is unhealthy (again inviting parallels with AIDS) and thus once again potentially ‘outside’ the family. Imitation becomes a necessary condition of fatherhood.

In *The Birdcage*, Albert is described persistently as “auntie” or “mother”, rather than “father”. Armand informs Katherine that not only is he (Armand) “very maternal”, but “Albert’s practically a breast”. Albert is therefore feminised to the point that he is denied any acknowledgement as a father or as a man. “Auntie” is Albert’s own designation, and in his discussion of *The Birdcage* Keller refers to Albert, in part, as “she”. Yet rather than functioning as a means of interrogating the gendering of parenthood, the male/female parenting structure is enforced in *The Birdcage* as the norm, again suggesting imitation.

The infantilisation and feminisation of gay fatherhood echoes not only notions of gay men as un-masculine, but assumptions of “arrested development” and “perpetual

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay”, in Michael Warner (ed.), *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 71.

adolescence” once associated with homosexuality.²⁵³ “Perpetual adolescence” does not correspond with fatherhood as a role of adult responsibility, and by presenting fractured and incomplete images of George and Robert as “real” men the films ensure that their fatherhood remains uncertain. This infantilised and ultimately narcissistic rendering of gay male identity reveals the space *outside* of reproductive futurism (and its attendant “fictional coherence and stability”)²⁵⁴. This space, reserved for the non-reproducing, pleasure-seeking queer, becomes associated with the pleasure/pain blurring of *jouissance* and a drive towards oblivion not rendered through “future” but rather through death.²⁵⁵ This becomes problematic when the “coherence and stability” of fatherhood is rendered as the *only* means of survival.

As these films attempt to mount an assimilative, imitative vision of the family that includes gay men in a paternal role, an elision occurs whereby the man is both awarded and not awarded fatherhood. In binding him to such a heteronormative vision of the family, his potentially queer (non-straight) sexuality is “normalize[d]”; yet the potential of this queerness is never fully erased, thus threatening to disrupt the future that is, in theory, on offer.²⁵⁶ Rather than actively choosing the future, or indeed no future, George and Robert occupy a passive in-between space that connotes weakened, de-masculinised, sort-of fatherhood.

Though *Object*, at first, appears to endorse a queered image of the family in which there is room for George to be a father without resorting to mimicry of Vince, this does not bear out on closer examination. Nina’s progressive vision is enacted in the film’s final scenes, in which her daughter Molly (Sarah Hyland) appears in a school play. Orchestrated by George, now the school’s principal, the play is also watched by Nina, Vince, Nina’s new

²⁵³ Martin Hoffman, *The Gay World: Male Homosexuality and the Social Creation of Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), quoted in Weston, *Families We Choose*, 154.

²⁵⁴ Edelman, *No Future*, 34.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 33–5.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 74–5.

partner Louis (Kevin Carroll), her stepsister Constance (Allison Janney), Constance's husband and teenage daughter, George's partner Paul (Amo Gulinello), and Paul's former lover and mentor, Rodney (Nigel Hawthorne), now ersatz grandfather to Molly. Afterwards, Molly is thrilled to report that she had "more people come see me than anyone". Nina responds, "Honey, you're just the luckiest little girl". Such an inclusive image of the family bears out, at first glance, Nina's advocacy of the chosen family.

Yet this is not the "family" that Nina envisaged in her original conversation with George, in which she suggests George as a replacement for, rather than addition to, Vince. Even in these final scenes, the film ends with the gradual dispersal of all these characters until only George, Nina and Molly are left. While the audience are aware that Nina and George are no longer a 'couple' in the way they once were, the final shot immortalises them as a heterosexual family unit, walking down the street together with Molly between them. Though George and Nina both have men waiting for them at home, this is elided in favour of one final glimpse of the "right" couple. Molly's chosen family is thus subsumed beneath the more traditional image of mother, father and child, ensuring that George's fatherhood (such as it exists at this point) is frozen within a heteronormative framework at the film's end.

The Next Best Thing is similarly beholden to this framework. Unlike George and Nina, whose idealised parenting arrangement falters before Molly is even born, Robert and Abbie remain together beyond Sam's fifth birthday. The three of them live together as a family, the only obvious marker of their difference being that Sam's parents do not share a bedroom. Sam is unaware that this is unusual until his school friends assure him otherwise. Robert eventually chooses to explain that they sleep apart because Abbie snores. Keller suggests that this scene addresses the belief that children of gay parents will be

“stigmatized”.²⁵⁷ Certainly, his parents’ discomfort in explaining their alternative living arrangements to Sam reflects their belief that he is too young to understand both his parents’ unconventional relationship and why this has garnered him the curious attention of his peers. However, it also again suggests imitation and an inability to interpret their family in any other way but through a heteronormative lens.

This imitative vision of the family is likewise established early in *Object*. Nina claims that “none of the old rules apply”, but it soon becomes apparent that, in fact, almost all of the old rules apply, especially to George. The beginning of his and Nina’s relationship as parents-to-be is idyllic. In one scene, he accompanies her to an ultrasound appointment, during which the camera focuses not on Nina but on George’s rapturous expression and invocations of amazement, demonstrating his wonderment not only at human reproduction but at his location within its midst. The two also go shopping, arm in arm, for baby paraphernalia. The shopping trip, however, hints at a stumbling block in their parenting arrangement and their relationship more generally. As they browse through baby clothes, they are interrupted by the appearance of an old fling of George’s. The two proceed to flirt while Nina looks on, troubled. Though the scene is brief, it underlines a tension between George as father within the paradigm of his relationship with Nina, and George as an active gay man, which his relationship with Nina largely obscures.

Their formerly idealised situation is ruptured more permanently when George meets his new boyfriend, Paul, and begins to split his time between him and Nina. The fact that George is “fucking a man in the next room” proves a step too far for Nina, who has been harbouring romantic feelings towards George and, additionally, possessive feelings towards him as belonging to her and the baby. That the tension established in the shopping scene

²⁵⁷ Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television*, 169.

becomes increasingly pronounced as the film progresses—and that it can only be resolved by the removal of George from the family equation—highlights the disingenuous nature of Nina’s claims to throwing out the “old rules” in favour of a new approach to the family.

These two incidents, both of which focus on George and another man, demonstrate Nina’s discomfort with George having a relationship outside of their family. While George’s brother Frank (Steve Zahn) makes numerous appearances in the film, always alongside a different woman, this suggestion of irresponsible promiscuity is viewed with benign amusement, in which Steve (unlike George) has yet to discover the value of an ‘adult’ relationship, and indeed the value of family. Yet the definition of ‘adult’ relationship for George is a platonic, non-romantic, non-sexual one with a woman. His relationship with Paul is, conversely, characterised as an act of irresponsibility much like Steve’s consistent womanising, not least when a weekend away with Paul causes George to forget to call an anxious, pregnant Nina.

George and Paul’s relationship leads eventually to an ultimatum, issued at Steve’s wedding—for all his womanising, Steve has eventually ‘done the right thing’—in which Nina informs George that he must choose between her (and the baby, and so the chance of being a father), and Paul. George chooses Paul, in a move that signals the end of Nina’s ‘logical’ family as she first envisioned it. This all-or-nothing approach to George’s fatherhood falls some way short of a rule change, and in fact circumscribes his experience of fatherhood to such a degree that any aberration from a normative model of the family ensures a regression back to ‘Uncle’. A failure to imitate the heteronormative family ensures that, for George, fatherhood becomes off-limits.

The personal and political sacrifice that characterises these cinematic images of gay fatherhood will be considered more extensively below. Firstly, however, it is worth

interrogating these Hollywood images of the chosen family in light of the theory, proposed by Bruzzi in relation to both *Object* and *The Next Best Thing*, of the “domestic ‘third term’”.²⁵⁸ This notion purposely recalls Marjorie Garber’s “third term”, applied originally by Garber to the unique space that cross-dressing individuals occupy in relation to binary definitions of ‘male’ and ‘female’.²⁵⁹ Bruzzi’s adaptation of the term to cover domestic arrangements further recalls Lehr’s extensive work on queer kinship, in which she states that

[t]he ability of gays and lesbians to play a role in constructing... an alternative narrative [of family] requires that we reject making arguments about our worth as citizens on the basis of our ability to copy, albeit with some modification, the sexual family.²⁶⁰

Lehr’s core argument—that imitation should be abandoned in favour of forging genuinely alternative forms of family—resonates in this “third term” posited by Bruzzi. This “domestic ‘third term’” dictates that the union formed between a straight woman, gay man and child, “should not be subsumed into and understood as being either heterosexual marriage or a gay relationship”, but rather afforded its own space.²⁶¹

Bruzzi’s theory is further supported by Karin Quimby, who suggests that in the sitcom *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), which centres similarly on a gay man and a straight woman, the titular characters “represent two people who are navigating their way through a relationship that has *no prescribed model* in our culture”.²⁶² Michel Foucault poses the question, “What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied

²⁵⁸ Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-War Hollywood* (London: BFI, 2005), 175.

²⁵⁹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992), 11.

²⁶⁰ Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 107. “Sexual family” is a term originally coined by Martha Fineman in *The Neutered Mother, the Sexual Family, and Other Twentieth Century Tragedies* (London: Routledge, 1995).

²⁶¹ Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy*, 175.

²⁶² Karin Quimby, “*Will & Grace*: Negotiating (Gay) Marriage on Prime-Time Television”, *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38:4 (2005), 714. Emphasis added.

and modulated?”²⁶³ When Nina states that “none of the old rules apply”, it suggests the beginning of an answer to this question. Her declaration theoretically opens up a space in which it is possible for Nina to turn away from Vince and towards George and form a more desirable image of the family within previously uncharted territory, and it is this space where such a “domestic ‘third term’” can be imagined.

Bruzzi’s reading of the two films as products of this alternative domestic space reveals the idealised vision of the family that these films appear to advance. Yet I would argue that this “third term” as it pertains to these domestic arrangements remains little more than a fallacy. The “available lexicon of legitimation” leaves spaces—what Judith Butler terms “nonplaces”—where it is possible for alternative forms of kinship to operate, yet Butler suggests further that to exist in these “nonplaces” is to elude recognition from others, as well as self-recognition.²⁶⁴ George and Nina may believe that they have discovered something superior in their attempt to articulate themselves with one of these “nonplaces”, yet their inability to fully recognise the space that they occupy, and their attempts to define it within the already available lexicon of kinship, ensures that this “third term”, or “nonplace”, remains elusive.

Prior to their encounter with George’s ex-boyfriend on their shopping trip, George turns to Nina and asks her, “Do you think most married couples are as happy as we are?” On first inspection, his question is testament to the superiority of the family that he and Nina are in the process of constructing. Having apparently broken free of the normative rules of family, the two of them have surpassed the happiness afforded to their more traditional counterparts. Yet George’s suggestion relies on two points: one, that marital bliss is still the standard to aim for, and which they will measure themselves by; and two, that in order to

²⁶³ Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life”, Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (trans.), *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961–1984*, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 308.

²⁶⁴ Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?”, 20.

legitimise their own familial setup, they must not only match, but exceed, the happiness experienced by “most married couples”. George and Nina, as a result, are more inclined to imitate and aspire to a heterosexual relationship than they are to carve out any recognisable alternative. The very fact that their family crumbles under the weight of George’s relationship with Paul suggests that at best, they are simply imitating a family.

This withholding of legitimacy has important ramifications within the context of gay fatherhood. Survival is based upon the ability to imitate straight men, first and foremost. This imitation, furthermore, must take place within a relationship that mimics a monogamous, heterosexual one. Any deviation from this framework results in a cessation of fatherhood. Robert insists in court that he is both “a father” and “a homosexual man”, yet these films in fact rest on the incompatibility of these two markers of identity. George can be an active father or an active gay man, but in *Object’s* vision of “like a family”, only one can be envisaged at once. Paradoxically, the survival of the self (through fatherhood) becomes predicated upon an erasure of the self in order to achieve its very survival.

A denial of comparable legitimacy also occupies the heart of *The Birdcage*. When George compares his and Nina’s happiness to their married, heterosexual counterparts, he is both pointing to their superiority, and acknowledging their need to prove this superiority by way of achieving legitimacy through imitation. *The Birdcage* makes these twin quests its primary concern, as the audience are reminded of Armand and Albert’s worth as fathers even as they are forced to acknowledge—despite the film’s overt protestations—the primacy of the white, normative heterosexual family unit in the shape of the Keeleys, Val’s future in-laws.

The film centres on Val’s impending marriage to his girlfriend Barbara (Calista Flockhart) and his struggle to pass off his unconventional family as acceptable to the

conservative Republican Senator (Gene Hackman) and his wife (Dianne Wiest). The contrast between the two families is established immediately. Armand is the flamboyant owner of a South Beach drag club; Albert, as Starina, is the club's star act. The two live above the club with their Guatemalan housekeeper Agador (Hank Azaria). While the Goldmans' home is sunny and obviously lived-in, the rooms in the Keeleys' mansion are lavishly decorated but wholly impersonal; the family, likewise, are stiff and reserved in their interactions. Barbara's revelation to her parents that she and Val are engaged is conducted much like a business deal, with her father interrogating Armand's invented credentials (Barbara suggests that her future father-in-law is "the cultural attaché to Greece"). When Val tells Armand of the engagement, meanwhile, Armand is quick to embrace his son, even as he expresses his mild disapproval. These two scenes lay the groundwork for the favourable comparison of the Goldmans to the Keeleys: the Goldmans knowing the 'true' meaning of family, while the Keeleys remain more concerned with the true *appearance* of the family.

The difference between the two families is cemented in each set of parents' reaction to the wedding news. Though the Goldmans are disappointed to see Val marry at such a young age, this is outweighed by their desire to see him happy. "Tell me it's all right", Val implores his father. "It's all right", Armand promises him. Albert's disappointment is also short-lived, as he dashes out to buy a celebratory cake. Again, there is a distinctly passive air to these scenes, as Armand is disapproving but begrudgingly accepting.

The Keeleys, too, are alarmed initially by news of the engagement. However, they come to welcome the impending wedding when it becomes useful as a political tool. After the senator's running mate is found dead in the bed of an underage black prostitute, the Keeleys are eager to detract from the scandal. Mrs Keeley suggests a "big white wedding" to restore the public image of her husband via their wholesome daughter. "A wedding is hope",

she declares, “and a white wedding is family and morality and tradition”. For the Keeleys, their daughter’s wedding symbolises the triumph of “love and optimism” over “cynicism and sex”, the irony being that it is the Keeleys who are engaging in a cynical piece of misdirection from a sex scandal, while it is the Goldmans who promise love (if not exactly optimism).

Armand and Albert, then, are constructed as the good fathers against a poor alternative. As far as the audience is concerned, the Keeleys have something to learn from the Goldmans, not the other way around (as the Senator’s right-wing politics would no doubt prefer). These films all make a concerted effort to elevate the families in which these gay fathers reside, whilst simultaneously highlighting the flaws of those long-accepted families they sit alongside. (Nina’s plan to raise a child with George causes her stepsister much consternation, yet Constance’s family are far from ideal: Constance is mulish and judgemental, her husband suggests to Nina that he would have an affair with her, and their daughter is spoilt and uncooperative.) In doing so, Armand, Albert, Robert and George are all recognised as being the more exemplary fathers.

Yet this recognition does not translate into legitimacy. Just as there is a visible reliance on heterosexual genital reproduction, above and beyond the biological logistics of male/female human reproduction, there is a similar reliance on the enduring appearance of heterosexuality in the social construction of these families. In this light, fatherhood may retain its status as a survival mechanism, but this survival is predicated upon a strict model of heterosexuality and heterosociality. This is masculine survival with a significant erasure of autonomy and choice, where once again, the future is predicated upon terms induced from outside. Moulding these gay fathers to fit within an existing familial structure, rather than offering the opportunity (and the power associated with such an opportunity) to form their

own families, undermines the notion of fatherhood as survival mechanism. Instead, access to the future is rooted within a particular image of fatherhood—itsself within a particular image of the family—that resists ‘otherness’ in a variety of forms, as I will now discuss.

Sacrifice

Above all, there is a significant and comprehensive sacrifice, at both a personal and political level, that accompanies the prospect of fatherhood by the male protagonists in these films. As a concept, sacrifice is inherent in the cultural construction of fatherhood, whether this is the sacrifice of time, money, personal fulfilment or ambition. The reward for such sacrifice is framed as the particular and exclusive joy of fatherhood. As discussed in the introduction, viewed as a means of survival fatherhood plays into a narcissistic desire to achieve immortality. Griswold suggests that a nurturing approach to fatherhood is valued not only as beneficial to children, but to those men whose lives it “enhance[s]”, revealing the ability of fatherhood to benefit both father and child.²⁶⁵ The fact that this narcissism is channelled through the child and a desire to see that “[t]he child shall have a better time than his parents”²⁶⁶ feeds into this notion of self-sacrifice, which in cultural terms is more often imagined as a selfless and venerable undertaking.²⁶⁷ Edelman argues that, with regard to parenting and reproduction, narcissism is necessarily “strategically misrecognized” as regard for a being outside of the self.²⁶⁸ This reference to “strategy” suggests an underlying political motivation, whereby the child’s welfare is promoted, fulfilling the necessity to focus not on the individual and the present, but to work towards an indistinguishable point beyond one’s

²⁶⁵ Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood In America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 249.

²⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), 91.

²⁶⁷ David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 201–2.

²⁶⁸ Edelman, *No Future*, 13.

immediate lifetime. The father's sacrifice is therefore ostensibly for the greater good, whilst in actuality cementing his own survival through reproductive futurism.

Yet the sacrifice experienced by the gay fathers in the three films being discussed does not adhere to the same sacrifice/survival model. I have already discussed some of the barriers to survival—and thus the future—that are enacted in these films through the withholding of legitimacy and the insistence on both heterosocial relationships and heterosexual reproduction. These visions of gay fatherhood, then, necessarily obscure “gay” in favour of “father”, until this obfuscation of gay identity is disrupted and fatherhood is curtailed as a result. What emerges, therefore, is not an image of fatherhood that plays a part in rebuilding masculine identity—as it does in the case of straight men during the same period—but one that involves a severe limiting of autonomy and thus calls into question the concept of masculine survival.

This sacrifice becomes apparent on three fundamental levels: a sacrifice of identity, a sacrifice of politics, and a sacrifice of sexuality. The first level of sacrifice—of personality, behaviour and, in the case of *The Birdcage*, religion and ethnicity—recalls the claims of enduring “Hollywood homophobia” made by Suzanna Danuta Walters, through a requirement of subjugation to straightness.²⁶⁹ Fatherhood, and thus a future, is granted on the basis of successful mimicry of white, heterosexual, normative family values. This is perhaps best demonstrated in scenes in *The Birdcage* that depict the build-up to the Keeleys' arrival in South Beach, and the visit itself, in which the Goldmans transform their home, modify their name, and, in Albert's case, change their gender, in order to ensure the wedding between Val and Barbara will take place.

²⁶⁹ Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All The Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 133.

Identity sacrifice

Val, terrified that the Keeleys will oppose the wedding if they discover his unconventional family, asks Armand to remake both the house and the household in anticipation of their visit. Herein lies much of the film's farcical comedy, as Armand, Albert and Agador attempt to conform to Val's idea of a conventional family. Originally, Armand is adamant that Val will not dictate his behaviour or the appearance of his home. When Val suggests that Armand should "be a little less obvious", his father is unimpressed:

Yes, I wear foundation. Yes, I live with a man. Yes, I'm a middle-aged fag. But I know who I am, Val. It took me twenty years to get here, and I'm not going to let some idiot senator destroy that. Fuck the senator.

Yet later, in deference to his son, Armand agrees to obscure the more unpalatable elements of the family behind a façade of normality that will appeal to two middle-aged, Christian Republicans. To "fuck the senator" jeopardises Val's chances of successfully entering into a heterosexual union, in which "fucking" retains the prospect of reproduction. Armand and Albert are permitted space as fathers, and as a couple, as long as they do not risk Val's own future. Walters observes that the success of the heterosexual romance in *The Birdcage* "is constructed on the bent backs of gay fathers (proving their love through self-abnegation and denial), and the arrogant shoulders of straight sons (proving their privilege through requesting the denial)".²⁷⁰ Val asks, and his fathers comply, aware that "father" must supersede all other elements of their identity if the label is to be kept.

Val's instructions ensure that the apartment's flamboyant design and a myriad of phallic sculptures give way to a more austere form of interior design. Even then, Armand is

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 141.

tempted to hang a large, decorative crucifix, much to Val's exasperation. Performing 'straight' and 'Christian', Armand still tends towards a camp interpretation that his son deems excessive and thus "obvious" in itself. In requesting such a comprehensive makeover, Val is placed in a position of power. Conversely, Armand is no longer the patriarch, but in the position of an errant child being told to behave. The film builds up Armand as a successful businessman and well-liked member of the community, only for this confidence to be ruptured by Val's need for a display of conventionality. Once again, like George in the fairground, the gay father is infantilised, undermining the masculine construction of fatherhood.

As Walters suggests, that Val "[requests] the denial" in the first place suggests that he is certain his fathers will comply. Such privilege does not extend to Armand and Albert, who have built an open and fulfilling life together only to find it necessary to hide it. The film reveals a precedent for this denial: in elementary school, Armand permitted Val to tell his teacher that his father was a "businessman", without elaborating on the nature of this business. Armand protests that it is one thing to allow a young Val to fudge his father's profession, but quite another for him to now expect his fathers to masquerade as something they are not. Val counters this by reminding his father, "I could still get hurt", the consequence of Armand's non-compliance being the possible cancellation of the wedding. That Val's marriage is based upon the Keeleys' acceptance of his family is not interrogated. Rather, this suggestion that Armand's refusal may jeopardise Val's relationship is enough to convince the Goldmans to play along. As a result, the importance of the wedding between Val and Barbara supersedes the "dignity" of Albert and Armand.²⁷¹

²⁷¹ Harry M. Benshoff, "Queers and Families in Film: From Problems to Parents", in Pomerance (ed.), *A Family Affair*, 226.

The potential “hurt” that Val may be exposed to displaces the hurt experienced by Albert, who finds he will be excluded from the dinner after his attempt at dressing ‘straight’ is upset by his penchant for colourful socks. “You hate me”, he accuses Val and Armand sadly, who appear chastised but unable to deny Albert’s reproaches. “And I wanted so much to help you. But you hate me”. Albert’s place in the family is at the mercy of Val’s quest for conformity. Prior to the dinner, Armand has given Albert a palimony agreement, countering Albert’s accusations of being taken for granted by Armand. “There. We’re partners”, Armand tells him. “You own half of my life and I own half of yours. There’s only one place in the world I call home and it’s because you’re there”. That Armand lets Val modify this “home”—both the physical home and the home that Armand locates within his relationship with Albert—becomes a denial of one love for the realisation of another.

The request for subjugation extends well beyond interior decoration into other areas of Albert and Armand’s life. The gaudy crucifix is rejected, but nevertheless the Goldmans become the ‘Colemans’ for an evening. Like the crucifix, ‘Coleman’ symbolises the Goldmans’ temporary non-Jewishness, a Jewish heritage deemed equally disagreeable to a gay one to the Keeleys. As Keller suggests, “[t]he encounter between the Goldmans and the Keeleys invokes the tradition of Jewish passing”, and in doing so draws parallels between Jewish persecution and homosexual persecution.²⁷²

The requirement of a blank ‘American’ identity that does not include the Goldmans’ Jewish background is further testament to the normative parameters of the future being (tentatively) offered. When the truth is eventually revealed, comedy is derived from the senator’s shocked exclamation of “You’re Jewish?” rather than the expected, “You’re gay?”.

²⁷² Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television*, 160.

playing on the “not-quite-mentionable” nature of both.²⁷³ Within the film, Armand and Albert’s Jewishness is of relatively little consequence, while their homosexuality is constantly reinforced. That Senator Keeley sees not this but the label ‘Jewish’ is both amusing to an audience conditioned to see the label ‘gay’, and a further reminder that the heterosexual family also retains the privilege of ‘American’ family.

Though none of the Goldmans are immune to Val’s mission to re-code his family as straight, conservative Christians, it is Albert who must endure the most significant erasure of identity. Val is keen to dissuade Albert from joining the dinner, because although Armand may be able to pass for the evening, Albert will surely not. To placate both his anxious son and slighted partner, Armand attempts to teach Albert how to “be a man”, focusing on masculinising his walk, his handshake, and how he drinks his tea. When it becomes apparent that such a transformation is impossible, Armand reiterates Val’s request that Albert stay away. In response, an aggrieved Albert makes himself over as ‘Mrs. Coleman’ and joins the party anyway. A model conservative housewife, Mrs. Coleman espouses the benefits of a “stricter moral code” while Armand and Val struggle to control Albert’s performance. Meanwhile Agador, also compelled to play ‘straight’, serves a questionable soup in bowls depicting a pattern of tiny men having sex with each other and struggles to remain upright after being forced to wear shoes, adding to Val and Armand’s despair. The Keeleys remain largely oblivious, enamoured in particular with Albert’s performance as Mrs. Coleman.

It is notable that Val and Barbara have no analogous qualms about the Keeleys. There is no suggestion that Barbara’s parents tone down their politics or personalities in order to be more palatable guests to the Goldmans. The sacrifice—for the good of the children—rests entirely on the shoulders of Val’s parents. Val’s fathers hide their

²⁷³ Eve Sicular, “Outing the Archives: From The Celluloid Closet to the Isle of Klezbos”, in David Shneer and Caryn Aviv (eds.), *Queer Jews* (London: Routledge, 2002), 204–5.

relationship, their sexuality, and their livelihood. Katherine, too, is co-opted into conforming. Having had no contact with Val since his birth, she is invited to play the part of his mother after Val pleads for a show of normality. To do so, Katherine must subsume her conscious identity as not-wife (“I’m between husbands”, she tells Armand earlier in the film) and not-mother (“I’m not exactly maternal”) in order to provide Val with the family he requires in order to impress his new family. As a woman bound neither by marriage nor children, Katherine is just as threatening to the heteronormative family as two gay men, adopting the queer position against reproductive futurism as she turns her back on parenthood.

Val’s belated realisation that he has done his fathers a disservice sees him reveal Albert’s true identity to his future in-laws. The late arrival of Katherine heralds the unravelling of the entire charade. When Senator Keeley demands to know “just how many mothers” Val has, Val replies, “just one”, whilst removing Albert’s wig. Albert gains an overdue acknowledgement of his parenthood, while Katherine is granted her non-maternal identity. Yet it is notable that even here Albert is never acknowledged as a father, but rather as Val’s mother.²⁷⁴ Keller notes that Armand and Albert “represent positions within the traditional gender hierarchy of marriage”, and thus discusses Albert as ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ using female pronouns.²⁷⁵ However, this again obscures the reality of two men parenting together. It conflates maternal traits with motherhood and denies the parental model of two fathers bringing up a child, instead relying on a traditional image that is performed rather than challenged. Even in its revealed unconventionality, Val ensures that his family

²⁷⁴ In *La Cage*, the insistence on a feminine role for Albin is emphasised even more, as when Albin is distraught to find that the celebration cake has been iced from “uncle” rather than “auntie”: “He hasn’t got an uncle!”

²⁷⁵ Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television*, 156.

conforms to the same nuclear framework that dictates the structure of George and Robert's not-so-queer families.

The big reveal arguably comes too late for the Goldmans. It does not occur soon enough to prevent any member of Val's family (aside from Val) having to perform roles they do not feel comfortable in; ones that, more to the point, require a comprehensive modification of identity. The Keeleys may be constructed as the poor equivalent in terms of the family as far as the audience are concerned, but never are they asked to sacrifice any significant aspect of their identity for the sake of their daughter's happiness. To prevent being discovered at The Birdcage by journalists keen for comment on the death of Senator Keeley's running mate, the Keeleys escape the club dressed akin to the other male dancers in drag. Yet this is not so much a sacrifice as an attempt to save themselves: meant to demonstrate the Keeleys' gradual acceptance of the Goldmans' way of life, instead it ensures that the senator's reputation remains untarnished, so that he may continue in his role as moral compass in the Coalition for Moral Order.

Such a sacrifice of personal identity in effect dilutes the very future offered through fatherhood. It is no longer Armand and Albert who survive, in this version of events, but rather an untrue version of themselves. This suggests that even with a future in front of them, they will not access it as themselves, but rather as a facsimile of themselves that undermines the very notion of survival.

Political sacrifice

Attendant to this dilution of identity is a political erasure that informs the characterisation of the Goldmans, and of Robert and George in particular. These films all emerge in a period of much political and social attention regarding the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Though these films

occupy a determinedly post-AIDS landscape (and, in the case of *The Birdcage*, this may be better characterised as a no-AIDS landscape), to examine them apart from the contemporary AIDS crisis is both difficult and disingenuous. Groups such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which grew out of founder Larry Kramer's frustrations with the non-political approach of the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in the early/mid-1980s, continued their overtly political campaigns during the 1990s.²⁷⁶ ACT UP adopted the slogan Silence=Death, mounting direct action campaigns for improved medical treatment and changes to existing legislation.²⁷⁷ In addition, gay rights campaigns for marriage equality, equal parenting rights, access to healthcare benefits and anti-discrimination legislation gained increasing prominence during the 1990s, spearheaded by organisations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC).²⁷⁸

The Birdcage occupies a curious historicity, its resemblance to the French original, of which it is a remake, superseding any reflection of its relocation to a new decade. Walters observes that, despite the contemporary setting, Armand and Albert "are not at all updated", despite being transplanted to 1990s Florida.²⁷⁹ Andrea Weiss suggests that "*La Cage aux Folles* doesn't really improve on the early cross-dressing comedies of the silent era"; likewise, I would argue that *The Birdcage* is hardly a daring update of its parent.²⁸⁰ This is reflected in the persistent desexualisation of the two men, as I shall demonstrate below; it is also reflected in an insistently apolitical characterisation.

With Senator Keeley's re-election campaign brewing, *The Birdcage* is hardly devoid of politics. The film mounts a gentle criticism of right-wing "family values" policy, rooting

²⁷⁶ Kramer's desire to form a "powerful pressure group", rather than be content with the GMHC's non-political manifesto, is discussed in Randy Shilts, *And The Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic* (London, Souvenir Press, 2011), 139.

²⁷⁷ Aids Coalition To Unleash Power, "ACT UP NY Homepage", <http://www.actupny.org> (12 Oct. 2012)

²⁷⁸ Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 14.

²⁷⁹ Walters, *All the Rage*, 141.

²⁸⁰ Andrea Weiss, "From The Margins: New Images of Gays in the Cinema", *Cineaste* 15:1 (1986), 4.

the film in the present even as the present is disavowed in another sense by the lack of political involvement on the part of Armand and Albert. In discussing lesbian motherhood, Nancy Polikoff states that “the perception that one’s interest as a mother supercedes [sic] one’s interest as a lesbian is politically devastating”.²⁸¹ The same conflict structures the acceptable parameters of gay fatherhood in these films, obscuring political concerns beneath a distinctly more private pursuit of parenthood, recalling Savage’s approach to fatherhood as a way of relegating AIDS to the past. Reagan-Bush conservatism has made it to Florida, it seems, but campaigns for gay rights and AIDS activism are nowhere in evidence. In Armand and Albert’s case, the hastily assembled palimony agreement is a poor substitute for any real political engagement. The exchange of the palimony agreement is entirely personal: Armand is not lamenting the lack of legal recognition for gay couples, but rather Albert’s feelings of being underappreciated. That it takes place in a bus shelter also ensures that the scene feels disjointed from the rest of the film, rendering it of little consequence and slightly apologetic in its inclusion in the narrative at all.

Object employs a similar tactic, marking a political nature as being undesirable through the character of Vince. He works as a legal aid lawyer, which has earned him the label of “Bolshevik” from Constance. Vince and George’s first meeting descends into a lecture in which Vince suggests that George should be teaching in a public school, rather than a private academy, particularly as a gay man who should be standing up for other “disenfranchised” people. George shrugs this off, saying that he took the job at the private school because it was offered to him. Here, George explicitly locates himself outside the label “disenfranchised”, a move that translates to an apolitical gay identity, in which George has little discernible interest in the political ramifications outside of himself. As a white,

²⁸¹ Nancy D. Polikoff, “Lesbians Choosing Children: The Personal is Political Revisited”, Sandra Pollack and Jeanne Vaughn (eds.), *Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1987), 52.

professional, American gay man, George appears insulated from any form of overt oppression. His dismissal of Vince's arguments, with a knowing look at Nina that the camera captures in a single shot (thus involving the audience in the dismissal), assures the audience of George's safeness. Here is a gay man who is not likely to disrupt proceedings with any seizure of rights or privileges. "Vince can really fill a room", Nina reflects with something approaching embarrassment, to which the subtext is surely that George cannot, and furthermore has no interest in doing so. George, instead, will occupy the corner of the room, waiting to be invited to the table.

The insistence on apolitical gay characters reinforces the desire to construct these characters as safe and unthreatening. Legitimacy and survival are, once again, reliant on a lack of difference. These films rely on the notion of characters who are nominally gay, but 'untainted' by any kind of political involvement, recalling Weiss's "'happen to be gay' syndrome", whereby a character is "sexually 'gay'" but otherwise "straight", so that their sexuality "doesn't touch on other aspects of their lives".²⁸² Homosexuality is therefore confined to a way of having sex, thus eradicating much of the threat posed. This relates back to Bersani's notion of "[d]e-gaying gayness".²⁸³ For Bersani, such assimilation threatens erasure, channelling the same Silence = Death message that ACT UP proposes, if silence is taken as subsuming any trace of gay identity. However, in these films this same silence is rewarded with life and survival: only by erasing any trace of political concerns with equal rights or AIDS and any overt sexuality can survival be assured to these men, as their fatherhood is mortgaged to such a modification of identity.

Crucially, a lack of political involvement allows these films to enact a disavowal—and thus a distancing—from AIDS, as well as from AIDS activism. *The Next Best Thing*

²⁸² Weiss, "From the Margins", 5.

²⁸³ Bersani, *Homos*, 5.

engages with AIDS on a superficial level, but is eager to confine it to the death of David's (Neil Patrick Harris) partner Joe. It is Joe's funeral, rather than Joe himself, that is seen. AIDS is pushed to the margins and into the past, as something that happens to other (unseen) people. David, Robert and *Object's* George live as out and active gay men in San Francisco and New York respectively, both epicentres of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, yet at the end of the 1990s they have a negligible relationship with both AIDS and people with AIDS. If AIDS can be related to "a future which constantly diminishes", then the insistence that AIDS belongs in the past is necessary in order to pave the way for Robert, in this case, to be constructed as a gay man *with* a future.²⁸⁴

As a concrete opportunity for male survival, fatherhood is a potent choice for those men threatened by the often abstract 'crisis of masculinity'. For gay men, who less than a decade previously were facing a significant crisis of mortality as a demographic, it is significantly more potent. Fatherhood becomes a concrete chance at a future for men who not so long ago were promised no future at all. In erasing the political and sexual identities of these men, however, such a guaranteed existence becomes, in effect, a reward for those 'good' gay men who remain untouched by AIDS and thus worthy of a place in the family. Fatherhood, with its in-built promise of a future, becomes the antidote, one that is reliant on an actively apolitical and, especially, asexual existence before survival is guaranteed.

Sexual sacrifice

One major element of sacrifice in these films, and one that must be further understood within the framework of HIV/AIDS, is the fundamental lack of sex. These films all offer up a remarkably sexless image of fatherhood, of straight women, and of gay men, engaging in a

²⁸⁴ Mark Doty, *Heaven's Coast: A Memoir* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 4.

determined disengaging of fatherhood from reproduction. This disengagement may be identified as a positive disambiguation, a re-articulation of fatherhood along the lines of social function rather than biological function. Yet in this case I would argue that it is not the intention to decouple father-as-sperm-donor from father-as-hands-on-dad, but rather to further undermine the gay father and relegate him to a secondary role. The erasure of the biological link presents an enduring desire to remove the notion of children—the pure hope of what is yet to come, but what will most certainly be better—from a blood relation to gay men. Therefore, while there is a lack of overt political engagement with AIDS, there remains an underlying preoccupation that emerges in both the representation of sex and the structuring of biological relations.

The lack of sex is originally filtered through the female characters. Nina declares confidently that “sex is no big deal”, while Abbie tells Robert that she is “over” sex and all its complications. This post-sexual approach ensures that the companionable benefits of a relationship are saved, while the “detriments” of a sexual relationship are avoided.²⁸⁵ Dreisinger’s observation that “[*Object*] sets up a rhetoric that privileges the warm and fuzzy over the orgasmic” highlights the way in which sex becomes secondary to the pseudo-romantic relationship.²⁸⁶

Abbie’s decision to forgo sex is validated in a scene in which she has lunch with a group of female friends, all of whom express a certain degree of envy at Abbie and Robert’s new arrangement. Robert, they agree, will do everything a husband would, “including not sleep with you”, but this way Abbie “won’t be all bitter and resentful about it”. Abbie’s situation is viewed as privileged by her friends, who are still struggling with straight partners who promise no sex without the superior companionable qualities of the ‘gay best friend’.

²⁸⁵ Dreisinger, “The Queen in Shining Armor”, 6.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

Quimby describes the gay man/straight woman partnership as a response “to straight women’s dissatisfactions with traditional—marital—definitions of male-female love, commitment, and desire”.²⁸⁷ This echoes Tasker’s assertion that the complexities of gay parenting in cinema are erased through a “repeated figuring of lonely women and unsatisfactory men”.²⁸⁸ Yet the idealisation of this post-sex relationship can only go so far. In “The Saviors and the Saved”, discussed in the introduction, Aronson and Kimmel suggest that this post-sexual relationship is idealised within both films, with the appeal of the gay best friend to the straight woman being that of securing a father for their child with whom they are not required to have sex.²⁸⁹ Like Tasker, who highlights Nina and Abbie’s “[failure] to find suitable romantic partners”²⁹⁰, Aronson and Kimmel read *Object* in particular as an example of female dissatisfaction with straight men and their subsequent quest for an alternative.²⁹¹

Yet the reading of these relationships as idealised in their lack of sex obscures the tension that results from these non-sexual parenting arrangements, as Bruzzi observes. Despite her declarations to the contrary, in the end Nina *is* interested in having sex with George.²⁹² It is herein that their consequent problems emerge. What evolves from a friendship between roommates into a comfortable, tactile relationship latterly becomes an almost sexual encounter midway through the film. Watching old films in Nina’s bedroom, George reveals that he had a girlfriend in high school. Shortly after this revelation, the two kiss and narrowly avoid having sex when they are interrupted by a well-timed phone call from George’s ex-boyfriend Joley (Tim Daly). The film is thus saved from going down the

²⁸⁷ Quimby, “*Will and Grace*”, 713.

²⁸⁸ Tasker, “Practically Perfect People”, 186.

²⁸⁹ Amy Aronson and Michael Kimmel, “The Saviors and the Saved: Masculine Redemption in Contemporary Films”, in Peter Lehman (ed.), *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), 48.

²⁹⁰ Tasker, “Practically Perfect People”, 184.

²⁹¹ Aronson and Kimmel, “The Saviors and the Saved”, 48.

²⁹² Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy*, 175.

dubious route of heterosexual conversion. Nevertheless, this scene opens up the possibility of a relationship between Nina and George that, on the surface, is unachievable.

The fundamentally unachievable nature of these relationships remains key, however. Dreisinger characterises the result of these gay man/straight woman partnerships as a kind of “safe eroticism”, by which the audience is rewarded with a frisson of sexual attraction between the lead characters, while actual sex remains elusive.²⁹³ The notion of “safe” as it pertains to sex is particularly interesting with regard to AIDS. The discovery that HIV could be transmitted through unprotected sex between men (and between men and women) led to numerous safe sex campaigns in the 1990s, whether related to the promotion of condom use, alternative, non-penetrative sexual activity, or abstinence. The notion that “[t]he only thing you can come up with that keeps the lead actor and actress from doing it today is homosexuality”²⁹⁴ relates to the “edgy allure” of the gay man/straight woman friendship to a liberal audience.²⁹⁵ However, the emphasis on *not* “doing it” also functions as a way of neutering homosexuality. Bersani refers to the “passiv[ity]” of anal sex in its receptive form, suggesting the “seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman”.²⁹⁶ This reference to suicide, along with “an unquenchable appetite for destruction”, highlights the characterisation of gay male sex along the lines of annihilation and death.²⁹⁷ Again, the spectre of AIDS from which this desexualisation stems reiterates the implied dichotomy of the ‘good’ gay man versus the ‘bad’ gay man. Survival becomes the privilege of those who abstain, and this translates into

²⁹³ Dreisinger, “The Queen in Shining Armor”, 6.

²⁹⁴ Armistead Maupin, quoted in A. J. Jacobs, “When gay men happen to straight women”, *Entertainment Weekly*, 23 Oct. 1998, http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,285408_2_00.html (30 Nov. 2012)

²⁹⁵ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 109.

²⁹⁶ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 18.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

a future structured around a denial of pleasure, *jouissance* and queerness, pertaining not only to sexuality but to the rejection of the normative more generally.

The desexualisation of the gay male characters takes the safe sex message to its extreme, whereby the safest form of sex becomes no sex. In order to achieve the reward of fatherhood, the men in these films must sacrifice a significant portion of their sexual identity. AIDS is often constructed as existing ‘outside’ of the family, despite the reality of families—both biological and “logical”—of those living with HIV/AIDS. Simon Watney argues that portrayals of AIDS in popular culture invite the audience “to imagine some absolute divide between the two domains of ‘gay life’ and ‘the family’”, enabling “the family” to retain ‘purity’ away from the threat of AIDS that is, in the 1990s, an undeniable political (and sometimes personal) aspect of “gay life”.²⁹⁸ The future is relocated to fatherhood, but this fatherhood must be characterised by asexuality, both in the behaviour of the father and, in the case of both *Object* and *The Next Best Thing*, his biological status. Fatherhood, as an indicator of life being passed on, must remain distinct from gay sex and the “slippage, from ‘gay’ to ‘AIDS’ to ‘death’” (or, to return to Case, homo=sex=unlife).²⁹⁹

In *The Birdcage*, this erasure of sexuality is achieved by portraying Armand and Albert in the fashion of an old married couple. What is significant in its absence is any kind of physical interaction. While Armand and Albert may buck the trend of the straight woman/gay man model of parenting in favour of an actual gay couple as parents, this is achievable only by sticking closely to the “[o]ld swish stereotypes” of *La Cage Aux Folles*, with Armand and Albert continuing to embody the “queenly, asexual style of an older

²⁹⁸ Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (London: Cassell, 1997), 102.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

generation of gay men”.³⁰⁰ This anachronistic image ensures that physical intimacy is kept to a minimum, advancing a resolutely non-sexual image of two men parenting.

The desexualisation of Robert and George is not only a facet of their fatherhood, but a fundamental condition of it. After his break up with Joley, George is shown to have less than fulfilling interactions with other single men. He is quickly disillusioned after a blind date with the “ear, nose and throat guy”, who arrives on their date dressed in full leather. Gay male sex is swiftly tarnished by an association with fetishist elements, and this suggestion of an extreme sexual lifestyle is enough to deter George from pursuing another relationship. (He subsequently meets the same man at a school event, when he is revealed to be an uncle of one of the boys in George’s class – presumably this is exactly the kind of ‘uncle’ that Robert wishes to avoid being in *The Next Best Thing*.) The bedroom space afforded to George is also notable: while Nina’s room is large and light, with a double bed, George’s is a dark cell of a room into which a single bed is crammed against the wall. Though later George and Paul do end up sharing this bed (though it is not seen), there are few spaces less conducive to sex than the room George occupies.

Like Nina, George initially abandons his search for romantic fulfilment in favour of parental fulfilment. This decision is portrayed as the most logical one, indeed the only viable one. George can continue on a string of uncomfortable dates, or he can do the sensible, ‘grown-up’ thing and start a family. His relationship with Joley ends because, as Joley suggests, “we’re too young to settle for a twin-bedded friendship”. Joley is leaving to pursue a more fulfilling relationship with another man; George, meanwhile, swaps what is inferred to be a largely sexless relationship with Joley for a similarly sexless one with Nina. Joley is thus doomed to a mid-life crisis of sorts, complete with red sports car and a younger man,

³⁰⁰ David Ansen, “Gay films are a drag”, *Newsweek*, 18 Mar. 1996, 71.

while George is privileged with knowing what is really important. Joley has not yet had the epiphany that George has had, and as a result he loses both George—the ‘good’ romantic partner—and the chance at fatherhood that George, in his willingness to overlook sex, is rewarded with. The fact that Joley later tries to rekindle a relationship with George further suggests that he is the one who has been missing out.

In avoiding the “orgasmic” (as suggested above by Dreisinger), George eludes the *jouissance* associated with queerness or, to use Edelman’s term, *sinthomosexuality*.³⁰¹ Edelman draws on the Lacanian term “sinthome”, suggesting that which is beyond meaning, “the site at which meaning comes undone”.³⁰² The *sinthomosexual* (as distinct from homosexual) is associated with the drive not towards the future, but towards the blurred pleasure/pain of death and eradication of the self through an erasure of the status quo.³⁰³ Turning away from the pleasure associated with sex becomes an extreme rejection of this erasure, in favour of the continuation of the self through reproductive futurism.

The opposition of frivolity and fatherhood is further advanced in *The Next Best Thing*, notably in a scene that takes place between Robert and David, who discuss Robert’s decision to be involved with the raising of his and Abbie’s child. David is sceptical, but David is also surrounded by various pill bottles, suggesting, after Joe’s death, his own battle with HIV. Robert argues, “I’m bored of it all. I’m bored of the parties, I’m bored of the drugs, I’m bored of the body obsession. It’s not a sacrifice, you know, it’s an opportunity”. This echoes Savage’s proclamation that “many of us have decided we want to fill our time with something more meaningful than sit-ups, circuit parties and designer drugs”.³⁰⁴ Not only is Robert on track for a future—and a survival—that David is not, but once again the

³⁰¹ Edelman, *No Future*, 34–5.

³⁰² Edelman, *No Future*, 35.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 44–6.

³⁰⁴ Savage, “Status Is...”.

only viable gay future is explicitly structured against that stereotypically narcissistic imagining of gay male life, those “self-centered being[s]” thus characterised as “a species set apart”.³⁰⁵

Once again, the dichotomy of recklessness and responsibility is deployed. Robert reduces gay identity to drug-fuelled body-building on the one hand, and holds up accidental fatherhood as its meaningful opposite on the other. In falling outside the first offensive stereotype, David offers up a third image of gay identity: death-tinged tragedy. The images of Robert’s other gay friends adhere to a similar lack of fulfilment. The older couple he works for, Vernon and Ashby, exists much in the mould of the “queenly, asexual” style of Armand and Albert, the two men’s enduring characterisation being as people who are, as Robert declares, “maniacs about their stuff”. In the absence of anything else to be “maniacs” about, Ashby and Vernon retain an obsession with their elaborate garden, lavish home, and the things housed inside. On the night of Robert and Abbie’s one night stand, Abbie uncovers a vast closet of glamorous evening wear, while the living room is full of antique furniture and expensive ornaments. Robert, in turning away from a non-reproducing, pleasure-seeking queer identity, is enshrined as a ‘good’ gay man and thus worthy of the fatherhood that will be bestowed upon him, avoiding the perceived emptiness of Vernon and Ashby’s lifestyle.

That Robert sees the “opportunity” that fatherhood provides is accurate; that he visualises this “opportunity” as being the opposite of “sacrifice” (as David believes) is erroneous. For Robert—as for George—fatherhood is an opportunity *based upon* sacrifice, something that extends in particular to his sexual identity. This emerges in the later construction of Robert’s relationship with an unnamed cardiologist (Mark Valley). Despite

³⁰⁵ Weston, *Families We Choose*, 154.

the implied seriousness of this relationship, Robert and his boyfriend are shown together only once, in a dark bedroom scene that serves as the site of their break up. In the scene, the two are in bed, but Robert rejects his partner's embrace and instead turns away, expressing his concern over Sam's impending first day at school. His boyfriend, exasperated, suggests that Robert's heart is no longer in the relationship. Here, Robert's fatherhood is in direct opposition to his capacity for a fulfilling relationship with the cardiologist. In contrast, Abbie embarks on a successful relationship with Ben, who is also shown interacting with Sam in a number of scenes, in a way that Robert's boyfriend was never permitted. The cardiologist's lack of name is compounded by a lack of familial involvement and, despite the garden overflowing with a myriad of guests at Sam's birthday party, he is the one guest conspicuously absent. Locating Robert and his boyfriend's break up in the darkened bedroom is also significant. As the site of their presumed sexual relationship, there is neither light nor warmth. This cements the association of gay male sex with darkness, again recalling the "suicidal ecstasy" that Bersani identifies.

George, too, is unable to have both the relationship and the child. In choosing Paul, George forfeits his position as father-to-be. Here, Keller's observation is particularly pertinent: *Object* "comes dangerously close to reinforcing the traditional homophobic view that gays and lesbians are too unstable and hedonistic to act as responsible parents", by suggesting that an active sexual relationship with Paul is essentially incompatible with fatherhood.³⁰⁶

This is not, as Abbie's successful relationship with Ben and Nina's later relationship with Louis demonstrates, a case of relationships being incompatible with parenthood, but rather relationships being incompatible with gay fatherhood in particular. In the previous

³⁰⁶ Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television*, 161–2.

chapter, a number of the films discussed (such as *The Santa Clause* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*) feature unmarried straight fathers who forgo romantic relationships in favour of presenting an image of dedicated fatherhood. Yet these relationships are always potentially available, and *The Santa Clause 2* (Michael Lembeck, 2002) focuses entirely on finding Scott a ‘Mrs Claus’. Thus the fundamental incompatibility of active gay men and active fatherhood moves beyond a simple dedication to parenting, and into more problematic territory, in which the future is explicitly tied to ‘life’ whilst reliant on the denial of sex.

The sacrifice required on the part of fathers is so much more comprehensive for these gay male characters than other fathers or fathers-to-be in Hollywood (in *Nine Months*, for example, the father-to-be’s level of sacrifice extends to giving up his sports car for a sensible SUV), suggesting that the future as visualised through a paternal framework is still based upon a heteronormative model. For gay men, this future becomes available only in the denial of any kind of active gay identity.

Conclusion: “None of the old rules apply”

Nina’s suggestion to George that “none of the old rules apply” is thus revealed as more fallacy than fact. There is an overarching dependence on the white, American, heteronormative family in these films. This is compounded by a reliance on the sacrifice of the self (over and above the kind of self-sacrifice anticipated by parenthood) that predicates entry into the family upon an apolitical, asexual, ahistorical re-imagining of gay male identity.

This “entry” into the family presupposes a former status as outside the family, whereby being gay necessitates “a departure from kinship”.³⁰⁷ By insisting on keeping gay

³⁰⁷ Weston, *Families We Choose*, 22.

relationships on the sidelines, and by erasing any sense of ‘community’ (whether political or social), these films uphold the notion that the family—that site of “salvation” that remains so potent—only exists with a heteronormative framework.³⁰⁸

Furthermore, the realisation of the role of fatherhood becomes, for these gay characters, the *only* form of salvation, meaning or, indeed, happiness: the one rule that does still apply is that of achieving access to the future through the child. These films, then, fit into the wider project in Hollywood that I have proposed, that of securing masculine survival (in an era of “crisis”) through reproductive futurism. However, what occurs here is something both more and less than masculine survival. Given that these films emerge at a time when AIDS had had a significant impact in the U.S., what is at stake is not so much a masculine survival but a physical, mortal survival as realised in the insertion into a linear, generational social order and so a survival through reproduction. Yet the fragility of this survival, reinforced by a reliance on the “masculinist pleasures” of fatherhood and the parallel denial of “real” masculinity to Robert, George and the Goldmans, denies such a concrete link to the future even as fatherhood and the family are constructed as the only possible way of accessing this future. Other gay characters, who exist merely on the periphery, come to signify the dead ends to be avoided, whether these be routes of promiscuity, narcissism, empty extravagance or death.

The linking of fatherhood to the future, then, becomes increasingly problematic when viewed through the lens of gay fatherhood in 1990s Hollywood. Though fatherhood is, technically, a role available to any man—this is, after all, the fundamental basis of its ability to “save” men in a period of masculine uncertainty—it becomes clear that certain constructions of fatherhood and of masculinity are still required in order for this survival to

³⁰⁸ Pomerance, *A Family Affair*, 2.

be realised. Gay men, who as Savage claims may have more of a conscious desire than most for such a survival, are offered a less-than-fatherhood that fractures their own identity. At the same time, it denies their ability to imagine an existence *outside* of the normative constraints of the nuclear family and outside of reproductive futurism, without regressing back to the equation of “homo=sex=unlife”.

CHAPTER 3: “KILL THE CHILD AND YOU KILL THE FUTURE”: CHILD DEATH AND THE END OF FATHERHOOD

“Kill the child and you kill the future”.³⁰⁹ This stark declaration, made by Vicky Lebeau, encapsulates the effect of the child’s death on the parent, the father and the future. If, as Edelman posits, “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child”, then the erasure of this child functions as an erasure of the future.³¹⁰ As a subversion of reproductive futurism, this erasure proposes an anti-future, an “anti-social” queer position that must be avoided, or repaired.³¹¹ Following this bereavement, the father must be rebuilt and reinserted into the reproductive order.

The previous two chapters focus on male survival through fatherhood, alongside the barriers to this survival that must be overcome. Death, however, presents the most fundamental barrier to survival, particularly when this death refers to the child, the vessel through which the future may be realised. I will examine the implications of the death of the child as fatherhood, and thus men, become threatened with erasure. The death of the child is able to render fathers as non-fathers. It is the negotiation of this relationship—between father and non-father, and between future and no future—that will be interrogated here.

The apocalyptic implications of non-reproduction are central to the 1992 novel *The Children of Men* by P.D. James, in which widespread infertility has rendered children obsolete and human extinction inevitable. The pregnancy of one woman is figured as salvific, cementing the link between child and future that is crucial in the films discussed

³⁰⁹ Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 149.

³¹⁰ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 11.

³¹¹ Judith Halberstam, “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies”, *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5:2 (2008), 140.

here. Films concerning the death of the child are rooted in a wider narrative of erasure in Hollywood during the 1990s, as envisaged in numerous big blockbusters charting the end of the world or the destruction of humankind. As Mick Broderick suggests, “[a]pocalyptic mythology [...] has seeped into the very *zeitgeist* of contemporary cinema, making some sort of reference or allusion virtually *de rigueur*”.³¹² The end of the world scenario in films such as *Deep Impact*, *Independence Day* and *Armageddon* may in fact be figured more accurately as the end of America, returning to the particularly American roots of the crisis of masculinity. In *Independence Day*, the first suggestion that an unidentified alien craft is communicating with Earth occurs as a young SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) technician sits in the lab as R.E.M.’s “It’s The End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” plays on the radio. This “we” remains resolutely American throughout. Though the alien attacks occur across the globe, from Russia to the Persian Gulf, it is the U.S. alone that has the resources and the impetus to save itself and, as an afterthought, the rest of the world. Reflecting an element of real-world ambivalence, any destruction caused to the Russians or Iraqis is inconsequential: the most devastation is reserved for Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. and New York City, three centres of U.S. population, politics and industry. In the film President Whitmore (Bill Pullman), a young president with little experience who (much like Bill Clinton) is considered ineffectual by the right-wing media, makes a rousing speech as a team of U.S. pilots prepares for one last-ditch mission to destroy the aliens. “We are fighting for our right to live, to exist”, he tells the crowd, suggesting that they are in a battle against “annihilation” and that “we’re going to live on. We’re going to survive”.

Whitmore’s speech echoes that of President Beck (Morgan Freeman) in *Deep Impact*. Faced with a meteor on a collision course with Earth, its greatest impact reserved for North

³¹² Mick Broderick, “Heroic Apocalypse: *Mad Max*, Mythology and the Millennium”, in Christopher Sharrett (ed.), *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film* (Washington D.C.: Maitsonneuve Press, 1993), 256. Emphasis in original.

America, the President addresses the nation: “Life will go on. We will prevail”. Though the meteor is designated as an “extinction level event”, efforts to avoid obliteration continue. Announcing a plan to allow one million Americans to be held in a bunker in order to escape the devastation, Beck declares that the aim is to “preserve our way of life”.

In these apocalyptic films the onus is on saving the future and this emphasis on preservation and life “go[ing] on” is rooted firmly in the child. Journalist Jenny (Téa Leoni) gives up her place in the bunker to a friend and her friend’s young daughter. Jenny has no children and chooses to spend her final hours with her estranged father, giving precedence to the child who will live on in her place. Likewise, teenager Sarah’s (Leelee Sobieski) parents are resigned to their own deaths, but their last act is to give their baby son to Sarah, who rides off with her new husband Leo (Elijah Wood), forming a new nuclear unit and figuring the survival of the next generation even as destruction looms. These two events are augmented by a third instance of sacrifice for the child’s survival: the suicide mission of the astronauts who drive their ship into the meteor in order to divert its impact. Saying goodbye via video link, Oren Monash (Ron Eldard) is able to see his baby son for the first time. In sacrificing his own life, he is able to secure the life—and the future—of the next generation.

The death of the father will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Here I wish to consider this wider narrative of extinction and survival in terms of an alternative apocalyptic scenario, which I have referred to as the “domestic apocalypse”, after Faludi’s use of the term.³¹³ Taking the apocalyptic narrative prominent in Hollywood during the decade, the films discussed here relocate the apocalypse to within the family, focusing on the destruction signified by the death of the child. Just as the aliens must be defeated and the meteor diverted, the child’s death must be overcome in order for the man to survive through

³¹³ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), 6.

fatherhood. The threat of extinction levelled at a world without children in *The Children of Men* is rerouted to individual men, for whom the threat of ‘no future’ looms in the loss of the child.

This chapter is concerned with depictions of bereaved parents rather than with the child’s death itself, which generally occurs off-screen. Paternal and maternal grief are rendered distinct, as discussed in more detail below, and for the father there is a definite focus on moving beyond the death in order to renegotiate survival. In the process, he disavows the queer position that is revealed in the loss of a reproductive future. If “the queer subject stands between heterosexual optimism and its realization”, the father in these films is tasked with denying this position and regaining a hold on the future (and the optimism that accompanies it).³¹⁴

This chapter examines a number of films, including *Paradise*, *Lorenzo’s Oil*, *The Good Son*, *The Ice Storm* and *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. As discussed in the introduction, the changing nature of Hollywood in the 1990s saw smaller studios absorbed into larger companies. Many of these films, though not the large-scale blockbusters dominating the box office during this decade, were made by these smaller studios, while retaining well-known Hollywood stars and directors. These depictions of child death and the father’s experience echo many of the tropes established in two earlier cinematic considerations of parental bereavement: *Don’t Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973) and *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford, 1980). Both star Donald Sutherland as the grieving father and explore emotional responses of loss, bewilderment and a consuming desire to understand the child’s death, alongside a consideration of the effect the child’s death has on the parents’ relationship and the father’s own future survival.

³¹⁴ Halberstam, “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies”, 141.

This chapter will first consider how the death of the child has the power to disrupt the survival of the father, by erasing the promise of the future inherent in its very existence. The extent to which these films may be considered as apocalyptic narratives will also be discussed, given that the child's death portends the destruction of fatherhood, the very role charged with saving men in the same period. It will go on to examine the renegotiation of fatherhood, often through the development of a relationship with a surrogate son, and the limitations of such a renegotiation, taking into consideration the perceived importance of biology and reproduction. Films focusing on parental bereavement tend to address the effect that grief has on the relationship between mother and father. The importance of re-establishing this sexual relationship and thus a reproductive future will be considered later in this chapter. Finally, I will discuss the significance of a nostalgic temporal setting, employed in a number of these films, and the implications for the future of men and masculinity that arise from the persistent focus on the mortality of sons.

This chapter will draw on aspects of psychoanalysis, including Freud's work on the death drive, originally outlined in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle".³¹⁵ The death drive refers to the "*urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things*", that is, to return to "inertia" through death.³¹⁶ Such a drive emerges in apparent contradiction to "[t]he hypothesis of self-preservative instincts, such as we attribute to all living beings", yet the fact that the father seeks immortality not through himself, but through the child, goes some way to resolving, or at least illuminating, such a contradiction.³¹⁷ The father cannot deny his own impending death, but he can displace his survival onto the child, thus both acknowledging his own mortality and laying claim to the immortality offered by the

³¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 18* (London: Vintage, 2001), 34–43.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36. Emphasis in original.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

presence of the child. Though the son too will eventually become the father and face his own death, the chain may still continue indefinitely in the “generational continuum”.³¹⁸ Additionally, in his discussion of parental narcissism, Freud suggests that parents are conditioned to imagine that the child will not be afflicted by the same problems they have experienced: “he shall not be subject to the necessities which they have recognized as paramount in life. Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him”.³¹⁹ It becomes possible to obscure the knowledge of the child’s death even as it must one day be inevitable.

This drive towards an “*earlier state of things*”, therefore, is obscured by the focus on the future as imagined through the figure of the child. The death of the child, and its removal from this equation of future survival, brings this urge towards death back into focus, a negative space that must be denied or transferred away from the father. The violence inherent in Lebeau’s statement—that a child is being *killed*, to echo Serge Leclaire—is testament to the unnaturalness of this death.³²⁰ It disrupts the accepted logic of generational death and reflecting a culture in which children are not expected to die. Leclaire’s work is a direct reference to Freud’s “A Child Is Being Beaten”, which details the pervasive masochistic fantasy of the child being beaten by its father and watching another child being beaten by the same father, exploring the relationship between suffering and enjoyment in the same scenario.³²¹ Freud’s original work relates back to the Oedipus complex, in which the child both desires the parent, and knows that this desire is forbidden. The masochistic impulse revealed in “A Child Is Being Beaten” re-emerges in Leclaire’s work, in which he

³¹⁸ Peter Blos, *Son and Father: Before and Beyond the Oedipus Complex* (London: The Free Press, 1985), 6.

³¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), 91.

³²⁰ Serge Leclaire, *A Child Is Being Killed: On Primary Narcissism and the Death Drive*, trans. Marie-Claude Hays, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 2.

³²¹ Freud, “A Child Is Being Beaten”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 17* (London: Vintage, 2001), 177–204.

states: “A child’s death is unbearable: it fulfills our most secret and profound wishes”. Though horrific to comprehend, the death of the child also reveals an impulse towards death that both exists and must be denied. This denial is crucial to the opposite, negative perception of what Edelman has referred to as a “globally destructive, child-hating force”,³²² a force that Lebeau recalls here:

Who, after all, would want to kill a child? The *naïveté* of the question is part of its force, its simultaneous acknowledgement that children die at the hands of adults (and, sometimes, other children) and its commitment to the idea that no one could *wish* it to be so—as if a mind hostile towards the life of a child is more difficult to comprehend than the reality of her death.³²³

This hostile force is named by Edelman as queerness, the “*other* ‘side’” that stands against compulsory heteronormativity and the “pronatalism” of reproductive futurism.³²⁴ The relationship between the death drive, the ‘negative’ space of queerness and the death of the child will be explored during the course of this chapter, particularly with regard to the displacement of melancholia and anti-futurism onto the mother.

Freud’s work on “traumatic neurosis” in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” and his discussions of mourning and its effects on the ego in “Mourning and Melancholia” remain crucial to this discussion. Cathy Caruth suggests that in exploring traumatic neurosis, “Freud encounters [...] not the reaction to any horrible event but, rather, the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival”.³²⁵ This “experience of survival” is what drives the father in these films, as he must face survival (his own life going on) through the prism of non-survival (the

³²² Edelman, *No Future*, 112.

³²³ Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema*, 137–8. Emphasis in original.

³²⁴ Edelman, *No Future*, 3. Emphasis in original. Edelman discusses pronatalism in reference to P.D. James’ *Children of Men*, in *No Future*, 13.

³²⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 60.

death of the child). At the heart of this experience, as Caruth proposes, is an “urgent and unsettling question: *What does it mean to survive?*”³²⁶

“The sacred horror”: Confronting the unnatural

On-screen, and certainly outside of the horror genre,³²⁷ children are most often universal symbols of hope, innocence and renewal. Films about children (as distinct from films made *for* children) often employ a sentimental image of the child, “whereby they are offered as a symbol of the future and the hope of forthcoming generations”.³²⁸ The birth of a child is routinely used to signify the continuous, forward movement of life, often in the face of death. A scene in *Autumn In New York* (Joan Chen, 2000) juxtaposes the death of Will’s (Richard Gere) girlfriend Charlotte (Winona Ryder) in one hospital room with the birth of his daughter’s first child in another. The footsteps of the doctor walking down the corridor to break the news of Charlotte’s death mimic the sound of a baby’s heartbeat through a sonogram. The birth of the child, therefore, symbolises the continuation of life and the prospect of a future that retains the promise of being better than the present: “With each newborn child comes the possibility of future salvation and a better world”.³²⁹ The sting of Charlotte’s death is muted by the birth of Will’s granddaughter, whose arrival reinforces a belief in the essential good of the world.

The death of the child poses a fundamental rupturing of this “future salvation”. The future is only as secure as the children who fulfil its promise, and in presenting the death of the child, the films discussed here reveal a truth that must necessarily result from this

³²⁶ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

³²⁷ Julian Petley, “The Monstrous Child”, in Michele Aaron (ed.), *The Body’s Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desires and Contemporary Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 94–5.

³²⁸ Neil Sinyard, *Children in the Movies* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1992), 8–9.

³²⁹ Ellen Handler Spitz, *Illuminating Childhood: Portraits in Fiction, Film, and Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 176.

relationship: that “children, like the future, are fallible; thus, the future remains insecure”.³³⁰ In choosing to acknowledge the possibility of the child’s death, these films court such insecurity in the same way that *Deep Impact* courts the prospect of an “extinction level event”. This insecurity manifests as a symptom of the crisis of masculinity, particular when the disproportionate number of sons dying on-screen is taken into account. In feeding into this crisis and positing an end point of its own, the death of the child takes on apocalyptic overtones, in which the destruction of masculinity and of male identity is fundamentally threatened.

In previous chapters I have argued that it is through fatherhood that a future is opened up and survival is made possible for American men in the 1990s. If the death of a child results in the type of grief that is “the most painful, enduring and difficult to survive”, it is also the most comprehensive in its ability to rupture this survival.³³¹ Much of this stems from its disturbance of the natural order of human life, a perception that owes much to context. Child mortality in the U.S. is low; therefore, to construct such a death on-screen is to raise an uncomfortable and largely unfamiliar issue.³³²

Yet these films show that the child can, and does, die, and the impact of this arises in its violation of the ‘natural’. A child’s death is particularly difficult to accept because it is “against the order of nature”.³³³ As a result, our “reliance on the orderliness of the universe

³³⁰ Kathy Merlock Jackson, *Images of Children in American Film: A Socio-Cultural Analysis* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 173.

³³¹ Celia Hindmarch, *On The Death of a Child* (Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical Press, 2000), 5.

³³² In 1997, the infant mortality rate (deaths under 1 year per 1000 births) in the U.S. stood at 7.0, down from 7.2 in 1996 and 7.6 in 1995. See National Center for Health Statistics, “Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths for 1997”, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 46:12 (1998), 4.

³³³ Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London: The Cresset Press, 1965), 106.

has been undermined”.³³⁴ The life-cycle is effectively incomplete, as the child’s death interrupts the process of natural aging, whereby “maturity” remains unattained.³³⁵

The concept of reproductive futurism and its relation to paternal survival relies upon the linear, generational progression of a legacy that is passed from parent to child and onwards into the future, “in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—*as itself*—through time”.³³⁶ Disrupting this natural order causes a trauma that reaches far beyond the original death. In Celia Hindmarch’s exploration of parental bereavement, the death of the child is characterised as an assault on the very concept of possessing a future, suggesting that “[w]hen you lose your parents, you lose your past; when you lose a child, you lose your future”.³³⁷ Parents do not simply suffer the loss of a child, but rather “multiple losses” including “a sense of power and control”, “unfulfilled expectations and ambitions” and, crucially, “their connection to the future”.³³⁸

These “losses” recall Freud’s rationale for parental narcissism, in which the child allows for the “wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out” to be fulfilled, as “the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his [the child’s] favour”.³³⁹ That which the parents have lost to propriety and the pressures of reality is resurrected in the child. The generational implications are also crystallised. Losing a parent remains a traumatic experience, but it is one that the child is conditioned to expect. Indeed, “[t]he right is granted, at least to the imagination, to tear one’s mother to pieces and to kill one’s father”, as Leclaire suggests.³⁴⁰ In framing the Oedipal relationship, this statement legitimises not the

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ John O. Thompson, “Reflexions on Dead Children in the Cinema and Why There Are Not More of Them”, in Gillian Avery and Kimberley Reynolds (eds.), *Representations of Child Death* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 212.

³³⁶ Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

³³⁷ Hindmarch, *On the Death of a Child*, 50.

³³⁸ Ibid., 49–50.

³³⁹ Freud, “On Narcissism”, 91.

³⁴⁰ Leclaire, *A Child is Being Killed*, 2.

stated activity but the capacity to comprehend such a death. “But killing a child?” Leclaire continues. “No! We rediscover the sacred horror. It just can’t be. God himself stops the hand of Abraham”.³⁴¹ The “sacred horror” is unimaginable, a thing difficult to comprehend not only because it distorts the expected order of life, but because it opens up a chasm into which the future can disappear. For the parent to suffer the death of a child is to upend not only expectation, but a fundamental facet of identity. This is particularly true when ‘father’ or ‘mother’ is their primary identification, and during the 1990s, as I have argued, a primary identification with fatherhood is developed as crucial to masculine survival.³⁴² The child’s death not only imposes grief for the loss of the child, but for the potential loss of the future that signifies erasure on a larger scale.

Erasing the future: Child death and shattered fatherhood

The threat of paternal erasure is explored in *Lorenzo’s Oil*, a film that demonstrates the fight for a child’s life that becomes, simultaneously, the quest for a father’s own survival. The film documents the true story of Augusto (Nick Nolte) and Michaela Odone (Susan Sarandon) as they attempt to find a cure for the degenerative neurological condition adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD). Their son and only child Lorenzo develops the rare condition as a young boy, experiencing a rapid progression from isolated acts of clumsiness and violence to a condition in which he is largely immobile and unable to communicate. Augusto and Michaela are informed that the majority of boys with ALD die within two years of diagnosis. *Lorenzo’s Oil* charts their attempt to prove medical science wrong.

The Odone family exist in opposition to the medical profession for most of the film. The neoliberal ideology discussed in chapter 1, of the family being better able to protect itself as

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Gorer, *Death and Mourning*, 106.

a private entity while eschewing the involvement of public institutions, finds some common ground here. The family is reliant upon doctors for diagnosis and treatment, but the parents' aims are revealed to be incongruous with those of the medical professionals. Lorenzo's inclusion in various experimental medical trials does not promise effective treatment, and indeed survival, to him. Rather, it is hoped that his participation will be of benefit to boys who develop ALD in the future. When Augusto and Michaela deduce that one particular trial is not working, they request that the doctors try something else. The doctors, meanwhile, are keen for Lorenzo to continue with the trial in order that they can continue to gather data. Their disparate aims are summed up by Michaela during a conference debate over the value of parents' anecdotal evidence and lived experience as opposed to the methodical, data-based approach of medical professionals. "So what you're saying is that our children are in the service of medical science", she suggests. "How very foolish of me. I always assumed that medical science was in the service of the sufferers". Like the law, the institutions of medical science and healthcare work on the one hand to protect the family, and yet on the other hand undermine the family's autonomy by disrupting the link between parent and child, in this case by subsuming the personal fight for Lorenzo's survival (by medical reckoning a hopeless case) beneath a broader quest to understand ALD.

Although the doctors hope to gather enough information about ALD to help other children in the future, this approach does not offer any consolation to the Odone, who are concerned primarily with Lorenzo's individual survival. "I am not a scientist", Augusto states, as he and Michaela attempt to source an effective treatment. "I am a father". Later, he meets with other members of the ALD Foundation, who are sceptical of publicising "false hopes" in the form of the Odone's own tentatively positive research. Augusto is unequivocal in his condemnation of their stance: "I claim the right to fight for my kid's life. And no

doctor, no researcher, no bloody foundation, has the right to stop me from asking questions which might help me save him!” Augusto is not fighting for *all* the children; he is fighting for his own child, and therefore himself.

These outbursts on Augusto’s part reflect the desperation of a father who is doomed to watch his son die. Yet there remains a desperation borne of the fact that, for Augusto, Lorenzo is his only chance at fatherhood and thus his only chance at survival beyond himself. ALD is revealed to have genetic origins, as the doctor informs the Odone: “It goes from mother to son. [...] The woman is the only carrier”. Such a diagnosis emphasises the erasure of fatherhood and future facing Augusto, certainly within his marriage to Michaela. At a conference for “ALD parents”, a number of the women in attendance become involved in a discussion over the men who have left them following the ALD diagnosis and the realisation that the mother carries the faulty gene. One woman confesses that her husband left specifically because he wanted more sons. Though Augusto does not at any point suggest leaving Michaela, he does later erupt in a vicious outburst directed at her, in which he castigates her for her “poisoned blood”. This explicit rendering of ALD as a disease that prevents the link between father and son adds another dimension to Augusto’s quest for a cure, in which to cure Lorenzo is to secure his own survival in kind.

This is emphasised in the contrast between Augusto and Michaela as parents facing the same fate of bereavement. It is Augusto who suggests that they should begin to “treat Lorenzo’s illness like another country”, advocating the same kind of research as they did before moving to Comoros, where Lorenzo spent his childhood. “We take responsibility”, he tells her, with a view to arming themselves with knowledge in the hope of shielding them from the hopelessness of Lorenzo’s diagnosis. Michaela, meanwhile, is concerned that time invested in amateur medical research will take away from time that they could be spending

with Lorenzo while he still has the ability to communicate. Here their differing approaches are made clear: Michaela wants to capitalise on the time they have left with their son, while Augusto is focused on reversing the death sentence they have been given.

The differences between paternal and maternal grief are explored by Simonds and Rothman, in which they characterise maternal grief as “timeless”, using the rationale that “[f]ew relationships are as defining of self as motherhood, and few relationships as demanding as early motherhood”.³⁴³ This echoes Hindmarch’s suggestion that maternal grief involves the loss of “a vital sense of self”, in which “[f]or many mothers there is a particular threat to identity when a child dies”.³⁴⁴ In comparison, paternal grief is focused on a more tangible loss, that of “their essential role as provider and protector”.³⁴⁵ This distinction recalls Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”, in which Freud characterises mourning as a process that, in time, can expect to be “completed”, while melancholia has no such tangible end point.³⁴⁶ Freud goes on to determine the difference between the two states as being the difference in the object of diminishment: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself”.³⁴⁷ This distinction has profound implications for the difference in portrayals of paternal and maternal grief in these films, whereby the mother’s grief may be more closely associated with melancholia, through which she may be rendered as a figure of anti-futurism, occupying the queer space opposite the father’s desire to live on into the future.

This demarcation of a mother’s grief as being more fundamental and deeply rooted, while the father’s grief is anchored in a sense of “failed... responsibility”, finds support in

³⁴³ Wendy Simonds and Barbara Katz Rothman, *Centuries of Solace: Expressions of Maternal Grief in Popular Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 2; 26.

³⁴⁴ Hindmarch, *On the Death of a Child*, 50–1.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Completed Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), 245.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

Lorenzo's Oil.³⁴⁸ Augusto's desire to claw back some responsibility by subsuming loss into a research project contrasts with Michaela's initial desire to stay by Lorenzo's side as much as possible. As discussed below, there is a persistent focus on fathers moving on in these films, of putting the past behind them and focusing on the possibility of new life. The mothers, however, are less inclined towards this future vision. What *Lorenzo's Oil* reveals is the gendering of parental grief and the privileging of survival by the bereaved father, for whom mourning retains a necessarily temporary quality.

Survival through another child

Lorenzo's Oil is uncharacteristic insofar as it deals with the imminent death of the child, ending with a reversal of this fate in a montage of clips showing the progress of Lorenzo and other young boys with ALD. It does, however, illuminate the way in which the father's own survival is tied up in the survival of the son. The threat to his own future that Augusto is battling against is realised in those films discussed below, in which the status of 'non-father' is constructed as one capable of shattering both meaning and identity, echoing the notion of "self-shattering" addressed by Bersani.³⁴⁹ For Bersani, it is queer sexuality that has the potential to be "self-shattering"; here, it is the queerness of 'unparenthood' that threatens the same break. Lebeau asks, "Is it that, beyond a certain level of violence, the child is no longer a child; the future is no longer the future? At least, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a future".³⁵⁰ The violence of erasing the child from the screen is an act of eradication; the future thus becomes a non-future. It is the apparent "impossibil[ity]" of being able to "imagine a future" that is being fought against in these films.

³⁴⁸ Hindmarch, *On the Death of a Child*, 52.

³⁴⁹ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 25.

³⁵⁰ Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema*, 179.

In allowing the dying child to survive, *Lorenzo's Oil* is unusual amidst these other films. Yet its broadly optimistic ending remains typical of those films that do depict the child's death. There occurs a perpetual drive towards meaning bound up in an envisioning of the future through another child. In *The Mighty*, this is achieved by collapsing the death of Kevin (Kieran Culkin) into the survival of Max (Elden Henson). Max is an awkward, overweight, dyslexic child who is bullied by a group of boys in his class (the Doghouse Gang). He remains terrified of taking after his father, "Killer Kane", imprisoned for murdering Max's mother. Kevin, who has recently moved to the city with his mother Gwen (Sharon Stone), suffers from the degenerative condition Morquio's Syndrome. Max and Kevin become a mutually beneficial unit, with Max providing the physical strength and Kevin providing the intellect. Between them they are able to subdue the Doghouse Gang, evade Max's recently paroled father, and in the process boost Max's confidence and plot out an alternative future for him. Kevin eventually dies, but not before the death can be inscribed with meaning. This is symbolised by Max beginning to write in the blank notebook gifted to him by Kevin, a literal writing of the future that is made possible by their friendship.

Significantly, included in this future is Max's ability to uncouple himself from the violent legacy of his father. Here, the use of the 'bad' father emphasises the type of father that will not be permitted a future through the child. Max's fear that he will turn into his father acknowledges the link between father and son—the very link that is central to the father's survival—and yet here the inevitability of this link must be severed. In denying the survival of Max's father, *The Mighty* passes judgement on the type of men who may be permitted a future, just as discussed in chapter 1 with regard to *Falling Down*. Max's father is not a desirable paternal figure, and so Max must be placed on another path, so that he may envisage a positive future for himself. The final chapter of *The Mighty* is entitled "The Once

and Future King”, in reference to King Arthur. It also reflects the underlying theme of survival: the boy becomes the king (father) and, after death, is destined to become king again (through the son). The book that bears the same title, written by T. H. White, is the one that Michaela reads to Lorenzo at the end of *Lorenzo’s Oil*, emphasising the function of the son that lives: to one day become father to the next generation.

Kevin’s death becomes an act of necessary sacrifice. John Thompson observes that “[t]o be a child on screen is to be *not anonymous enough* to die just for the sake of the explosion”.³⁵¹ Instead, the child’s death must be imbued with meaning in order for it to be justified. Kevin does not die apropos of nothing. His life—already threatened by his incurable medical condition—becomes a force for good. The death of one child becomes the survival of another. This fits into a wider requirement within Hollywood, that death always be ultimately an act of triumph, justified by being heroic and “meaningful”.³⁵² In *Deep Impact*, Jenny’s decision to sacrifice her own life for that of a child is made more poignant—and more heroic—by the fact that in this scenario, Jenny is once again configured as a child herself. Reuniting with her father for their final hours together, one child’s death unlocks the future potential of another.

My Girl continues this trope of sacrifice, as the death of Thomas J. (Macaulay Culkin) becomes a catalyst for Vada’s (Anna Chlumsky) entry into adolescence. His death also restores the relationship between Vada and her father. Though Thomas J.’s death from an allergic reaction to a bee sting is one of the more memorable moments of the film, it is superseded in the narrative by Vada’s coming-of-age. Vada lives with her mortician father, Harry (Dan Ackroyd), a well-meaning man who appears baffled by the emotions of his young daughter. Vada harbours a secret belief that she is responsible for her mother’s death,

³⁵¹ Thompson, “Reflexions on Dead Children”, 211. Emphasis in original.

³⁵² Boaz Hagin, *Death in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 7.

and Harry is dismissive of both this and her chronic hypochondria, leading his girlfriend Shelly (Jamie Lee Curtis) to suggest that “I think she’s confused about death”. An oblivious Harry reminds Shelly that “she [Vada] grew up in a funeral parlour. I think she knows a thing or two about death”.

Thomas J.’s death exposes Vada to grief and a better understanding of death, beyond the dead bodies in the basement. From this point onwards, Vada begins to embrace her adolescence, trading days roaming through the woods in dirty jeans for dresses and afternoons spent riding her bike with her new friend Judy. Crucially, Vada and Harry also begin to rebuild their relationship after Vada finally confesses her unfounded fears regarding her mother’s death. One of the final scenes sees the two of them go out for ice cream together, breaking off when they see Thomas J.’s mother, Mrs Sennett, in the street. Like *The Mighty*, parental, and particularly paternal, grief is largely unseen. Mrs Sennett tells Vada “you were such a good friend to him”, a statement that relegates Thomas J., and his friendship with Vada, firmly to the past. Instead, the future is marked by Vada’s improved relationship with her father and a rejection of her tomboy past. She embraces her femininity and can transfer her affections to boys her own age (previously, she hoped to marry her teacher, Mr. Bixler). Thomas J.’s sacrificial death, therefore, not only allows Harry and Vada to strengthen their relationship; it paves the way for Vada to, eventually, embrace the beginnings of a reproductive future of her own.

In consigning the Sennetts to the edges of the narrative, *My Girl*, like *The Mighty*, denies a space in which to explore parental grief. In particular, bereaved fathers are eliminated. This omission in itself is revealing. In focusing on the fates of Vada and Max, the films themselves focus on the child and the future rather than the future that the child’s death has erased—that is, the (non-) future of the bereaved father. The removal of Kevin and

Thomas J.'s fathers from the screen both acknowledges the erasure that they, as fathers, are facing after the deaths of their sons, and denies such an erasure by disavowing their grief and their presence.

Elsewhere, this focus on imagining the future through another child takes on a more overt paternal angle, and returns to the notion discussed above of the father's desire to move on and envisage a future beyond the death of his child. In *The Good Son*, Mark (Elijah Wood) is sent by his grieving father to live with his Aunt Susan (Wendy Crewson) and Uncle Wallace (Daniel Hugh Kelly) after the death of his mother. Susan and Wallace are enveloped in their own grief for their younger son Richard, who drowned in the bath some months earlier. Susan and Wallace have two other children, Connie (Quinn Culkin) and Henry (Macaulay Culkin). Henry's increasingly sadistic behaviour—he causes a traffic accident by throwing a lifelike dummy from a bridge, kills a dog, and pushes his sister through the ice whilst ice skating—is the focus of the film, culminating in the revelation that he deliberately drowned Richard.

Though the portrayal of Henry raises interesting questions regarding the notion of children as symbols of innocence, and the ways in which this characterisation is manipulated in *The Good Son*, I will focus here on the subplot of Wallace and Susan's grief. Susan is shown repeatedly visiting a cliff-top location near their home. This daily pilgrimage is an act of remembrance, in which Susan leaves her family to participate in a private act of mourning for her dead son. In contrast, Wallace adopts a more pragmatic outlook. An argument over the use of Richard's old bedroom reveals the differing opinions Susan and Wallace have on moving beyond Richard's death. Wallace suggests that Mark use the bedroom, while Susan is adamant that it should be left as it is. "We have to face it", Wallace argues, but Susan will not be moved on the issue. "I do face it. I face it every day", she counters.

Here, “facing it” takes on two different meanings and so returns to the gendering of grief, in which the mother tends towards reliving memory while the father looks towards a renewal of living in the future. For Susan, “facing it” is the daily act of solitary mourning; for Wallace, the act of accepting Richard’s death and moving on. Later, Susan is shown sitting amongst the untouched toys in Richard’s bedroom, crying. This image of a mother revisiting the dead child’s bedroom and going through old belongings is replicated in *Paradise* and finds a precedent in *Ordinary People*, in which the bedroom is left as a shrine to the dead son’s achievements. The image of the untouched bedroom, in which the mother finds comfort, emphasises a melancholic desire to keep a part of their parenthood frozen in time, echoing the designation of melancholia as “mourning without end”.³⁵³ In comparison, the father desires the opposite. The anti-futurism of melancholia is displaced onto the mother, while the father remains beholden to the future. Wallace is keen to focus on Mark’s needs and make him feel like part of the family. In doing so, Wallace aims to help Mark deal with his own grief, a process that denotes healing for both father and (surrogate) son. For Wallace, Mark represents another chance to get fatherhood right. In saving Mark, Wallace can also save himself. This focus on Mark is made doubly necessary by Henry’s pathological tendencies, which threaten Wallace’s survival just as Richard’s death did: Henry, as the ‘bad’ son, is unlikely to continue Wallace’s legacy into the future. In the end, Mark is literally saved at the expense of Henry. Henry attempts to push Susan off the edge of the cliff after admitting his part in Richard’s death. Mark, in trying to save Susan, falls at the same time as Henry. Faced with a choice, Susan lets go of Henry and pulls Mark to safety. Here, the film acknowledges the threat to the family posed by Henry, as opposed to the potential future offered by Mark.

³⁵³ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

The Good Son prescribes the care of another child as the solution to backward-looking grief and the threat posed by the mother's tendency towards melancholia. Likewise, *Paradise* follows a similar narrative. Ben (Don Johnson) and Lily Reed (Melanie Griffith) have lost their son James some time before the film begins after a choking accident. Willard (Elijah Wood), the son of Lily's friend, is sent to live with the Reeds during his mother's pregnancy. Willard's father has recently left them, although Willard believes he is simply "on sea duty".

Willard's arrival is initially welcomed by Lily, while Ben remains hostile to his presence. Asking directions to the Reeds' house in the local diner, Willard is told by one customer, "if you're lucky, your visit will be a short one". When Willard enquires further, the same man tells him, "they've changed". It is not until Willard has moved in that he realises this man is Ben. Ben's assessment that he and Lily have "changed" since the death of their son is perhaps inevitable, but from the outset *Paradise* occupies itself with reversing this change and restoring the family, particularly Ben, to its previous state. In doing so it both reveals a reliance on re-asserting the future through another child, and addresses the extent to which a non-biological child can legitimately guarantee the father's survival.

This first encounter sets the tone for Willard and Ben's initial relationship. Lily, meanwhile, is eager to spend time with Willard. Yet when Willard unintentionally begins to encroach on the memory of James it is Lily who becomes withdrawn, while Ben gradually begins to warm towards him. This shift occurs in a scene in which Willard discovers a model plane hidden away at the back of a cupboard. Lily is uneasy and refuses to let Willard play with it, telling him nothing more than "Ben built it". Yet Ben lets Willard take out the plane and teaches him to fly it. Observing the boy's delight at the plane, Ben suggests that he keep it.

The battle over the model plane reveals the differing approaches to James' death taken by Ben and Lily. Lily balks at the idea of Willard playing with something that once belonged to James, preferring instead to leave his belongings untouched. Like Susan in *The Good Son*, Lily is shown in one scene sitting alone amongst boxes filled with her son's old clothes. Conversely Ben, in passing the plane onto Willard, suggests that he would rather another boy get some pleasure from a toy that took so long to make, rather than leaving it shut away and unused, observing that the plane was made to be played with. It is through Willard that Ben begins to piece together his own future, by starting to once again take an interest in his own life, as well as someone else's. The plane becomes a metaphor for his fatherhood: shut away, it is no good to anyone, but rediscovery allows Ben, and Willard, to move forward.

This conflict between Ben's desire to move forward and Lily's desire to remain with past memories of their son is encapsulated in a scene in which the two of them and Willard attend a service at the small community church. The camera isolates the three characters from the rest of the congregation, and neither Ben nor Lily takes part when asked by the pastor to join hands with their neighbours. The scene highlights the disconnection not only between the couple and the rest of the community, none of whom have suffered the same loss as Ben and Lily, but between each other. Ben is at the church under duress, while Lily has turned to it in a bid to find solace.

Ben: We used to laugh at these phonies. And now you want me to hold hands with them on a Sunday. Where'd your spirit go, Lily? Why are you buying all this sanctimonious crap?

Lily: It comforts me.

Ben: Well, there's more to life than being comforted.

Lily: Like what?

Ben: Like living.

The presence of Willard has turned Ben towards the promise of “living” once again, while Lily remains beholden to her grief, echoing the tendency towards melancholia demonstrated by Susan in *The Good Son*. One of the conditions of melancholia, Freud suggests, is “an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life”, and it is this instinct towards survival that Lily appears to be lacking since James’ death.³⁵⁴

Paradise does not attempt to deny Ben’s own grief, but rather channels it in a different way. While grief continues to dominate Lily’s life, to the point that Ben believes her “spirit” is gone, Ben’s grief is tempered by the prospect of there being something beyond this period of mourning. This reference to Lily’s “spirit” again suggests the effect of melancholia as ultimately destructive, erasing as it has done Lily’s desire to live on. Lily is not suicidal—she does not want to end her own life—but she is unwilling to imagine a life beyond her own. It is this that places her in a queer, anti-futuristic space, a space that in these films is only ever configured as negative. Conversely, in turning towards Willard, Ben begins his attempt to re-fill the “poor and empty” world established in grief. Freud suggests that “when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again”, and it is this freedom that Willard promises.³⁵⁵ The promise of ‘completion’ is crucial to the concept of being able to envisage a world beyond the child’s death, while for Lily mourning threatens an indefinite removal from the reproductive futurism at the heart of the social order. In freeing the ego, the child is also able to promise the “immortality of the ego” that remains central to the narcissistic appeal of reproductive futurism.³⁵⁶

Ben’s recovery thus becomes Willard’s, and vice versa, mirroring the relationship between Wallace and Mark in *The Good Son*. Ben fills the space left by Willard’s absent father, taking him fishing and teaching him to play poker. Willard, meanwhile, gives Ben a

³⁵⁴ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, 246.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

³⁵⁶ Freud, “On Narcissism”, 91.

renewed sense of purpose, offering him an outlet for all those things he would have expected to teach James had he lived. The film's climactic scenes cement their mutually beneficial relationship. After Willard argues with his friend Billie (Thora Birch), who suggests that Willard's father has met someone else, he runs away, traumatised by this assault on his father's idealised image. Ben mounts a desperate hunt that ends at a wooden water tower. Willard has scaled the structure and is attempting to balance on the rail around the edge. His shaky completion of the circuit and his triumphant cry of "I did it!" mark a watershed for Willard, an ability to face his fears as he conquers both the water tower and his dread over his father's disappearance. Ben's watchful yet hands-off approach suggests that he recognises how important it is that Willard achieves this by himself. When Willard stumbles at the end, Ben grabs him and lifts him to safety. In letting go of one father—back on the ground, Willard calls his mother and asks her to tell him the truth about his dad's "sea duty"—Willard is caught by another.

This incident charts a successful move towards adolescence for Willard. More importantly, it re-establishes Ben as a father. As a father, he may be granted another chance at a meaningful future, as well as the opportunity to grant that of the next generation. A recurrent theme in *Paradise* is the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' fathers. Through Willard, Ben's taciturn nature is revealed as little more than a defence mechanism. Gradually, he reverts back to being supportive, attentive and perpetually concerned with Willard's welfare. When Willard claims that "it doesn't matter" whether his father is coming home or not, Ben is adamant that this is not the case: "It does matter. Don't run away from things just because they scare you. If you do, you'll always be afraid". This further reveals Ben's relationship with Willard as being beneficial to both parties, as the advice Ben dispenses to Willard has equal resonance for him. It also sets Ben up in opposition to

Willard's own father. Ben counsels Willard that running away is not the solution, yet Ben, like Willard's dad, is on the verge of doing just that by leaving Lily. As the 'good' father, Ben must realise his mistake before it is too late. In rectifying this, Ben is permitted access to his future survival.

Ben aside, the other examples of fatherhood in *Paradise* are much less edifying. Billie is particularly disillusioned by her experiences with paternal figures. When Billie suggests Willard's father has abandoned him, paternal disillusionment becomes a tool with which it is possible to hurt each other. Perhaps more so than the adults, the children recognise the longing for a stable father figure that constructs an absence at the heart of their childhood: the very absence that men like Ben can find meaning in filling. Billie's father, and her sister Darlene's father before him, both left when their daughters were young. Darlene's promiscuity becomes suggestive of the damage an absent father can wreak, while Billie harbours a fantasy of visiting her dad at his ice rink and impressing him with her ice skating skills. Envisioning such a perfect and long-awaited reunion ends, inevitably, in disappointment. Billie is eager for Willard to remark on the family resemblance as she poses next to a poster of her father outside the ice rink: "Do I look like him?" Yet on coming face to face with her father and announcing that she is his daughter, he simply tells her to get off the ice and walks away. Billie's mother Sally (Sheila McCarthy), meanwhile, is set to marry a man she admits to finding odious. She is unable to kiss him even as they announce their engagement, but remains adamant in her desire to bring stability and financial security to the family. Billie is upset at the news of the engagement; observing this, her stepfather-to-be is openly threatening towards her. His ominous declaration of "once I'm your father..." is followed by an assurance that in future, she will be beaten if she misbehaves.

Against these failed father figures, whether absent, uninterested, or violent, Ben is a welcome anomaly. With the death of a child, there is a certain element of failure attributed to the parent, particularly the father, as discussed above in relation to Hindmarch's observations regarding the loss of the protector role. Simonds and Rothman suggest that "[t]o succeed [as a parent] just means dying before they do".³⁵⁷ While such a statement reduces successful parenthood—perhaps uncomfortably—to the art of ensuring the child outlives the parent, it also crystallises the parameters of success and failure in terms of reproductive futurism. To succeed is to survive, and survival is achieved through the child; to fail is to see this child removed from the fantasy of the future ("the one true access to social security") that its existence promises to the father.³⁵⁸ Yet Ben demonstrates that this is a failure that can potentially be reversed, first in his positive involvement in Willard's development, and secondly in a sexual reunion between Lily and Ben, which opens up the possibility of a future biological child. Constructed as a good father against a litany of failed fathers, Ben is exactly the kind of father that *should* exist. Survival may be increasingly linked to fatherhood in Hollywood during this period, but this is not exempt from a model of preferable fatherhood that favours men such as Ben. The inclusion of a number of 'bad' fathers in *Paradise*—a theme also apparent in *The Mighty*, with Kevin's absent father and Max's murderous father—only heightens the need for Ben (and Lily) to emerge from mourning and be prepared to (re-)invest in the next generation.

As a result, *Paradise* does not simply offer up Willard as a replacement son. This becomes merely the first stage of Ben's renewed survival. Ultimately, a state of reconciliation must occur between Ben and Lily, for which Willard is merely the catalyst. One scene shows Ben and Lily fighting passive-aggressively, using the noise of the

³⁵⁷ Simonds and Rothman, *Centuries of Solace*, 172.

³⁵⁸ Edelman, *No Future*, 75.

television and the sewing machine to aggravate one another. Enveloped in a cacophony of noise, Willard puts on his headphones and continues to play cards. His silence frames him as the calm centre in a house full of tension; without him, Lily and Ben may remain in separate rooms forever. It is after Ben notices Willard sitting alone, ignoring the fighting couple, that he offers to let him play with the model plane. Willard's presence reveals to Ben the destructive nature of his current relationship with Lily; handing over the plane suggests that Ben is looking to carve a way out through renewed parenthood. The challenge then becomes convincing Lily to adopt the same salvific outlook.

Later, Willard chastises Ben for neglecting his duties around the house, asking him why he has failed to fix the garage, "like you said you would". Here, Willard reminds Ben of his familial obligations, challenging him to complete the jobs expected of a father and husband. Willard further inspires détente by relaying to Lily Ben's declaration that she is "beautiful". Yet Willard's efforts can only go so far in bringing the couple back together. Tentative scenes of familial harmony are soon shattered by Ben's attempt to kiss Lily one night as they sit on the porch. "I can't! I said I can't!" Lily sobs as she breaks away from him. Willard's presence has presented to Ben the possibility of a future beyond James' death. The surrogate fatherhood offered to Ben, however, is only the first step towards this future. What *Paradise* ultimately remains concerned with is the reintroduction of the sexual relationship, and thus a reproductive future for Ben.

Reproductive futurism and parental bereavement

One of the enduring tropes of films dealing with parental bereavement is the breakdown of the intimate relationship between parents, both emotional and sexual. In *Don't Look Now* the extended sex scene between John (Sutherland) and Laura (Julie Christie) "contribute[s] to

the atmosphere of warm, fond and long-established intimacy”, a reading that corresponds with Roeg’s own stated directorial intent.³⁵⁹ Roeg maintained that the scene “comes at a point in the movie where it is important to confirm that they are a happily married couple, that they have a good overall relationship”.³⁶⁰ Mark Sanderson’s own reading of this scene, as suggestive of a future child for John and Laura (“after the love-making of the previous evening, she may already be pregnant”), suggests a further purpose for depicting sex between the couple.³⁶¹ Not only does it demonstrate their positive relationship, despite their loss, but it keeps open the possibility of a future through another child.

Don’t Look Now is unusual in this regard. More often, a lack of sex becomes the focal point of the parental relationship. John Cameron Mitchell’s *Rabbit Hole* (2010) takes this lack as a barometer not only of parental relations but of mourning, in which Howie (Aaron Eckhart) is rebuffed in his attempts to “seduce” his wife Becca (Nicole Kidman). “It’s been eight months”, he protests, yet Becca makes it clear that she is “not ready”, adding, “I’m sorry if you think that’s abnormal”. This reference to abnormality, and the suggestion that sex would re-establish a sense of “normal”, hints at the queerness that exists in opposition to reproductive futurism, further cemented by Howie’s reference to the “eight months” (almost the length of a full-term pregnancy) that they have spent not having sex. Turning away from this reproductive future—one in which re-establishing a sexual relationship would not only reflect a repaired relationship after the “lonely experience”³⁶² of parental grief, but the possibility of another child—threatens the nuclear family and the father with the denial of future survival. That it is the father that desires this sexual

³⁵⁹ Mark Sanderson, *Don’t Look Now* (London: BFI, 1996), 44.

³⁶⁰ Interview with Nicolas Roeg, in Sanderson, *Don’t Look Now*, 64.

³⁶¹ Sanderson, *Don’t Look Now*, 56.

³⁶² Hindmarch, *On the Death of a Child*, 52.

reconciliation further highlights the man's desire for paternal survival in the face of his child's death, whilst cementing the association of anti-futurism with the mother.

Paradise follows a similar trajectory, focusing on Ben and Lily's continued lack of sexual intimacy and Ben's desire to rectify this. In an early scene they are shown lying in bed, not speaking, reinforcing the triumph of distance over intimacy. Later in the film, after Lily rejects his attempt to kiss her, Ben returns home drunk to confront his wife and in the process almost assaults her. "Are you sick of me?" he asks Lily. "Or are you just dead inside?" The reference to being "dead inside" infers sterility and the threat of an unrealised reproductive future. The scene takes place in their bedroom, occurring in almost complete darkness as Ben takes out his rage on the contents of the room, and then on Lily herself:

You're not the only one who lost a child, Lily. So did I! So did I! And that pain is going to stay with me for the rest of my life. Jimmy's dead, Lily. Jimmy's dead, goddamn it! And you can't bring him back by turning this house into a graveyard. He's dead, goddamn it! But I'm alive. And I'm not going to pretend to be dead any more, just to keep you company.

Ben shakes Lily and attempts to tear off her nightshirt as she asks him to let her go. "Why should I? I'm your husband, aren't I?" he demands. "I'm just playing by your rules, Lily. My heart's not in this any more than yours is". This air of obligation suggests that Ben is being propelled by something other than desire. Instead, a compulsion to "play by the rules" suggests a recognition that the continued adherence to reproduction and the heteronormative family is crucial to Ben's survival.

In the same scene, Lily admits that she is consumed by guilt for not checking on James the day he died, confessing that "I heard him cry and I didn't go. [...] When I went in to get him from his nap, he was dead". This prompts a second confession: "I can't stand to

be touched. I can't stand to feel anything. All I can stand is to just be numb inside". Though Ben absolves Lily of blame for James' death, he remains unable to reconcile himself to the life that Lily has constructed for herself. Her existence is now one of perpetual guilt and solitary numbness: exactly the melancholic state of anti-futurism that Ben must avoid in order to access his own survival. After hearing Lily's confession, he tells her that he cannot carry on as they are now and announces that he is leaving. In remaining vigilant over James' memory, in lieu of James himself, Lily forgoes a sexual relationship with Ben, and thus curtails his reproductive future along with her own.

For the father, death becomes a form of impotence. They are unable to prevent the child's death from occurring, rendering one of the fundamental aspects of good fatherhood—protection—unsuccessful. In his drive towards restoring the sexual relationship, Ben attempts to return to that state that Roeg identifies, of a couple who have a fundamentally happy marriage, despite their loss. However, his desire to have sex with Lily, to the point at which it seems he might rape her, also stems from a desire to re-enter the "generational continuum". Ben acknowledges his own pain at losing James, but follows this with a blunt declaration: "Jimmy's dead". His statement—"but I'm alive"—draws a link between this assertion of life and his desire to have sex with Lily. That this scene is fuelled by anger and desperation rather than romance or intimacy reinforces the notion that Ben's behaviour is prompted by a desire to reclaim what he has lost; in this case, not his son, but the future his son promised to him. Ben does not state his conscious intention as being one of *reproductive* sex, yet it remains that "the biological fact of heterosexual procreation bestows the imprimatur of meaning-production on heterogenital relations", whereby "the Child [...] [impregnates] heterosexuality, as it were, with the future of signification by conferring upon

it the cultural burden of signifying futurity”.³⁶³ In this light, and particularly in the context of mourning for a lost child, Ben’s desire for sex cannot be decoupled from his desire to procreate, whether this desire is conscious or not.

The restoration of an intimate relationship between parents marks a step forward. In Simonds and Rothman’s work on parental bereavement, the authors provide a ‘checklist’ entitled “Am I Grieving Normally?”, in which one of the questions for consideration is, “Am I feeling pleasure in sexual experiences?” The implication here is that sexual pleasure and mourning are incompatible; only once grieving has been ‘completed’ can a sexual relationship resume.³⁶⁴ The fact that Lily rebuffs Ben disrupts this move forward, again illuminating the differences in paternal and maternal grief, and between mourning and melancholia.

However, Lily and Ben do finally reconcile after Ben successfully rescues Willard from the water tower. This is followed by the arrival of Willard’s mother with her new baby, to take her son home. Having said goodbye to Willard, Ben drives Lily home in the rain. Running for shelter, neither of them is able to open the door to the house. The film ends with the two of them kissing outside in the rain, strongly suggestive of their imminent reconciliation. The fact that this scene takes place outside is significant; in *Paradise*, nature and the outdoors are associated perpetually with children and represent innocence and renewal. Significantly, it is outside that Ben and Willard begin to cultivate a relationship, flying the model plane on the field behind the Reeds’ house. Throughout the film the two continue to share outdoor activities while Lily remains cloistered in the house, the site of James’ death. The argument over church attendance similarly draws on this distinction between inside and outside as symbolic of the past and the future: Lily is eager to spend time

³⁶³ Edelman, *No Future*, 13.

³⁶⁴ Simonds and Rothman, *Centuries of Solace*, 222–4.

inside the small church building, while Ben is desirous of escape. That Ben and Lily's eventual reunion occurs outside locates them in this place of hope and renewal in which the possibility of a future can be imagined. The fact that they are unable to enter the house further emphasises a compartmentalising of their grief that allows for remembrance alongside renewal.

To refuse this reinvestment permanently, as Lily threatens, is to reject the logic of reproductive futurism and to adopt the queer position outside of it. Edelman sums up the attitude towards parenthood and reproduction as being one of a refusal to imagine any viable alternative: "And the trump card of affirmation? Always the question: *If not this, what?*"³⁶⁵ The same attitude is applied in these films to the father. I have argued that the death of the child has the power to turn fathers into non-fathers. Yet this position of 'non-father' must be rendered temporary. This is the rhetorical "*what?*" of Edelman's question, and by insisting that these men return to the safe parameters of fatherhood, these films disavow the potential queering of the family that the death of the child threatens. In doing so, they also turn away from any potential positivity or creativity that may arise from loss and melancholia.³⁶⁶ Rather than acknowledging the "alternative meanings" that may be possible through an engagement with loss and an acceptance of the queer space that loss opens up, there is a resolute movement forward and movement towards a reproductive future as the only potential site of survival.³⁶⁷

When Leclair declares that "[a] child's death is unbearable: it fulfills our most secret and profound wishes", he recalls the desire at the heart of the death drive to return to a state of "inertia".³⁶⁸ It is this drive towards death that must be disavowed, and it is

³⁶⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 4. Emphasis added.

³⁶⁶ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 89–110.

³⁶⁷ Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, 5.

³⁶⁸ Leclair, *A Child is Being Killed*, 2.

overwhelmingly through the father that this disavowal occurs. The death of the child marks a potential end point for the father, echoing the perceived end of masculinity that underlies these films. This end point, and the negative space that it creates around the father and the family, is subsumed beneath this drive towards reproduction. Yet in allowing this drive towards death to be glimpsed between the lines of the narrative, there occurs a recognition of the fragility of fatherhood, and thus the fragility of the masculinity it is meant to save.

The end of fatherhood as an apocalyptic scenario

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the death of the child raises the issue of these films as apocalyptic narratives. If not apocalyptic in the sense of meteor attack, environmental disaster or what Broderick terms the “terminal nuclear metaphor”, they nevertheless reflect a sense of wider crisis.³⁶⁹ Marita Sturken links apocalyptic scenarios with “paranoid narratives”, arguing that “[t]his new version of paranoia [...] is inextricably tied to contemporary discourses about race and identity, and the emergence of the white male as a figure in crisis”.³⁷⁰ Elsewhere, Sturken links this sense of paranoia and trauma to AIDS, “a global pandemic” that has been “represented primarily as national phenomenon” in the U.S., “one often perceived to have infected the nation as a whole”.³⁷¹ Much like the death of the child, AIDS disrupts the expected timeline of death. Furthermore, though most often linked to “deviant” practices and thus “certain ‘categories’ of Americans whose relationship to the mainstream is tenuous”, from the late 1980s onwards AIDS was also perceived to pose a threat to “heterosexual sex”, including those straight, white men once ostensibly

³⁶⁹ Broderick, “Heroic Apocalypse”, 256.

³⁷⁰ Marita Sturken, “Affliction: When Paranoid Male Narratives Fail”, in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 203–4.

³⁷¹ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 147.

represented by a figure such as Rock Hudson.³⁷² It is these same men that, in these films, are threatened by the death of the child as it pertains to their own masculine survival in the face of crisis.

The erasure inherent in the notion of apocalypse underlies these films, highlighting their place at the end of the millennium, in production if not always in temporal setting. In *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999) the unseen narrators state that “everyone dates the demise of our neighbourhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls”. The “demise of [the] neighbourhood” suggests a wider sense of breakdown; the fact that this demise is linked to the girls’ suicides and thus to the end of one man’s fatherhood draws a line between fears of loss and fragmentation and a failure of fatherhood. In the film, this erasure comes to fruition, as Mr. Lisbon (James Woods) is removed from the landscape of Grosse Pointe, from the screen, and from the narrative following the deaths of his daughters.

The Ice Storm also harnesses this sense of apocalypse, both in its use of meteorological phenomenon and through a narrative that drives towards tragedy from the outset, gathering speed as it examines the breakdown and collision of two families. The film builds to a conclusion in which a huge storm hits New England, killing teenager Mikey Carver (Elijah Wood) in the process. The family is a site of disappointment and disillusion for much of the film, from the affair that Ben Hood (Kevin Kline) is having with Mikey’s mother Janey (Sigourney Weaver), to the shoplifting habit of Ben’s wife Elena (Joan Allen) and the entangled sexual experimentation that occurs between Wendy Hood (Christina Ricci) and the Carver brothers, Mikey and Sandy (Adam Hann-Byrd). Emma Wilson argues that the death of a child disrupts the “space of safety” that childhood and the family symbolises on-screen.³⁷³ *The Ice Storm* subverts this “space of safety” from the outset, with

³⁷² Ibid., 145–51.

³⁷³ Emma Wilson, *Cinema’s Missing Children* (London: Wallflower, 2003), 2.

the two families at its centre plagued with amorality and a general sense of malaise. Here, the spectre of the child's death works to restore the family not simply to its previous form, but to a better form. The two fathers, Ben and Jim Carver (Jamey Sheridan), in particular are far from idealised. Ben is disconnected from his children, riled by Wendy's interest in the Watergate scandal and out of touch with his son Paul (Tobey Maguire), whom he attempts to advise on masturbation despite the fact that Paul is now in college. The affair with Janey only serves to highlight his inadequacies, as she rejects his attempts at non-sexual intimacy ("I have a husband, I have no need for another"), adding that he is "boring" her. Jim, meanwhile, is largely invisible for most of the film. In one scene, in which he remains only partially visible in the door frame, he returns home from work, announcing to Mikey and Sandy, "I'm back!" only to get the response: "You were gone?" The non-father status that Mr. Lisbon, in *The Virgin Suicides*, falls into after the death of his children is already threatening to take place here. The fathers here are largely useless figures, reflecting a wider disillusionment with paternal authority, both from the children who reject it and the men unable to harness it.

This attitude of disenchantment and dysfunction infiltrates the whole film. It is Mikey's death, in which he is electrocuted after becoming stuck to the icy railway tracks, that begins a reversal. The final moments of the film reveal that the opening scene, in which Paul is travelling home by train, is in fact the final scene. In this scene, Mikey is already dead, and Paul's family, so fractured throughout the film, has come together to meet him at the station. As *The Ice Storm* begins, this scene is overlaid with Paul's narration, as he muses on the meaning of his favourite comic books:

That was the meaning of the Fantastic Four, that a family is like your own personal anti-matter, your family is the void you

emerge from, and the place you return to when you die. And that's the paradox. The closer you're drawn back in, the deeper into the void you go.

At the beginning of the film, these words appear to sum up Paul's feelings towards going home for Thanksgiving. Being "drawn back in... deeper into the void" has negative connotations, reinforced by both Paul's awkward relationship with his father and the family members' inability to connect with each other. Yet at the end of the film, this statement takes on a different meaning, highlighting the form of survival that the child and the family as an entity offer to the father. For Ben, Mikey's death is the catalyst for realising the significance of his relationship with his own son. If the family is "the place you return to when you die", as Paul states, this ties Ben's mortality as a father to his son. In "returning" to Paul, in the future Ben will be able to die and not die at the same time, demonstrating both the contradiction of self-preservation and the death drive, and providing a solution. In this opening/final scene, it is not only Paul returning to his family, but Ben returning to his. The family finally becomes a "space of safety" in which death is both possible and not possible, a reassurance (and realisation) that overrides the tragedy of Mikey's own death.

The future of reproduction and the importance of biology

If these films featuring the death of a child and the potential termination of fatherhood can be considered apocalyptic, then *A.I.* presents the same concerns within a post-apocalyptic, post-climate change landscape in which displacement and starvation are rife and reproduction requires a licence. Here, even as the future appears guaranteed through the existence of humanoid "mechas" that have the potential to live forever, fatherhood is threatened by a lack of biological reproduction, as in *Paradise* and *Lorenzo's Oil*. In *Paradise*, Ben and Willard's surrogate father/son relationship lays the groundwork for the future by reconstructing Ben as

a father, yet the film must end on the promise of a *reproductive* future for the bereaved father. As discussed in the previous chapter, the biological link between father and child remains a crucial marker of the potential for survival, and here the distinction remains. This is the underlying tension between the mothers and fathers in *Lorenzo's Oil*, in which the father's departure is a common occurrence in ALD families, based upon a desire for biological progeny that the mothers, as carriers of the regressive gene, cannot give them. Likewise, *A.I.* provides an interesting example when considering the importance of a biological relationship in securing the father's survival, as well as the implications such a relationship has for the future beyond this particular father and son.

The film centres on a couple, Monica (Frances O'Connor) and Henry (Sam Robards), whose son Martin (Jake Thomas) has been in a coma for some time. Martin exists in a "pending" state, where "pending" names the state between life and death that Martin occupies in the depths of an isolated medical facility. In Martin's absence Henry and Monica are compelled to adopt a mecha, David (Haley Joel Osment).

David himself is constructed—along with innumerable others—in the image of the dead son of his inventor, Professor Hobby (William Hurt), essentially a "facsimile of a real deceased boy".³⁷⁴ Immediately, David is inextricably linked to the desire for a future beyond the lost child, a testament to the father's need to see himself survive indefinitely. His creation as an immortal robot child—literally the child who "death... shall not touch"—speaks to the desire of the father to anchor his survival to the immortality promised in the figure of the child.³⁷⁵ David recalls the analysis patient of Leclair, a boy named Pierre-Marie, who is born following the death of his older brother and partial namesake, Pierre. "Pierre-Marie-the-perfect-child" stands in for the lost brother; David, likewise, is created in

³⁷⁴ Nigel Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 302.

³⁷⁵ Freud, "On Narcissism", 91.

much the same vein of infallible perfection as Pierre-Marie, who is “vowed immortal by his mother even before he was born”.³⁷⁶ In this case, this immortality is not an illusion borne of parental narcissism, but a fundamental fact of David’s construction that appeals to Henry and Monica as they face losing Martin.

Leclaire states that as a replacement for Pierre, Pierre-Marie “cancels out his death”.³⁷⁷ In much the same way, David’s presence can be seen as an attempt to disavow Martin’s “pending” status. Scenes in which David observes a collection of family photographs, his reflection overlaying the photographic image of Martin, are testament to his desired function: not to erase Martin, but to fill the space left by him, thus negating the need to grieve. Nigel Morris suggests that the introduction of David into the family home is an attempt to “normalise domesticity in the absence of ‘digested’ grief”, given Henry and Monica’s inability to grieve for a son who remains technically alive in the face of a seemingly inevitable death.³⁷⁸ David thus provides an outlet for Monica and Henry to be ‘mother’ and ‘father’ and to reintroduce some sort of order to their home and to their lives. Much as Willard enables Ben to envisage fatherhood once again, through David’s arrival Henry “reclaims paternity”, previously lost in the helplessness and open-endedness of Martin’s illness.³⁷⁹

It is Henry who first brings David home, much to Monica’s unease. Her statement—“there’s no substitute for your own child”—echoes the weighting given to biological relation in the pursuit of genealogical survival in these films. Henry’s act of bringing David into the home, meanwhile, channels the common desire of the father to experience fatherhood once again, thus the suggestion of “reclaim[ed] paternity” from Morris.

³⁷⁶ Leclaire, *A Child is Being Killed*, 11.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁷⁸ Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg*, 302.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

David's perpetual existence as a child, however, disrupts his ability to guarantee survival for Henry. As the film progresses, it is Monica who becomes emotionally invested in David, and she who chooses to "imprint" him. "Imprinting" is the process by which the human effectively formalises the relationship with the mecha, ensuring that the mecha will love them unconditionally forever. At the point that Monica "imprints" David, he can no longer be returned to the laboratory (a form of mecha death), thereby granting him eternal life. For Hoberman, the existence of David raises the uncomfortable question of whether children exist primarily for the satisfaction of their parents.³⁸⁰ Certainly, this scene of imprinting plays on issues of parental narcissism. In imprinting David, Monica effectively grants him the ability to live forever *as her son*, the very desire inherent in the parent-child relationship.

Despite having brought David home, Henry is the one who is less at ease with his presence. He admits to Monica that David makes him feel "helpless". This feeling stems ostensibly from David's propensity for completing household tasks, including making the beds and serving Monica coffee. However, on another level this helplessness refers back to the survival that Henry, as a father, seeks, and the immortality that David represents. If the motivation for reproduction is survival, which in turn suggests a life extended through future generations, David disrupts this in two ways. Firstly, his lack of reproductive facility stalls the linearity of this generational, genetic progression. As discussed in more detail in the following chapter, the father's power does not stem simply from the child's existence, but from the act of 'passing on' a legacy to the next generation, a part of the father that can then be preserved and passed on indefinitely. No child will follow David, thus rendering Henry "helpless" in the sense that he can envisage no future beyond David, even if on the surface

³⁸⁰ J. Hoberman, "The Dreamlife of Androids", *Sight and Sound* 11:9 (September 2001), 16–18.

David is able to function as a replacement ‘son’. In essence, David disrupts the function of the child within the paradigm of reproductive futurism, as suggested by Edelman:

Those children, as realizations themselves of reproductive futurism—into which, as surely as night follows day, they are doomed to be railroaded too—image the only answer permitted to the question of desire by a signifying chain whose closure arrives in a future definitionally deferred: a future they, as children, may serve to figure for a time, but one they will have to figure out how to sustain in time to come.³⁸¹

David can only sustain this future as himself, and this does not sufficiently promise Henry the indefinite future not only spanning, but passed down and through, subsequent generations. Secondly, Henry’s feeling of being “helpless” is further reinforced by David’s ability to live forever, a state that only serves to emphasise the fact that Henry—like all other humans—has a limited life span and must face death in a way David need not. David exposes the drive towards death even as, paradoxically, he is brought into the family to obscure it.

When Martin makes a recovery and returns home, the friction between him and David highlights the tension between the child that ‘belongs’, biologically, to the parents, and the child whose existence and bond with the family is entirely fabricated. Framed as sibling rivalry, Martin’s attempts to outshine David, or mercilessly draw attention to his status as a mecha, further reveal the inadequacy of David to promise any kind of future to Henry. In one scene, Martin requests that Monica read the boys “Pinocchio”, hoping to humiliate David with the story of a toy who became a “real boy”, underlining David’s exclusion from the “generational continuum” that will guarantee the survival of father and son after him.

³⁸¹ Edelman, *No Future*, 100.

Another notable example of this rivalry, which has wider implications for David's ability to guarantee survival for Henry, is the scene in which Martin celebrates his birthday at a pool party with his friends. David is already rendered 'other' by the simple fact that he does not have a birthday. Martin's friends quickly move on to taunting David about his lack of a penis: "Can you pee?" they enquire, to which David replies placidly, "I cannot". This prompts the other boys to grab David, yelling, "Let's see what he can't pee with!" As young boys, Martin and his friends are most concerned with the urinary function of David's non-existent penis, but this exchange also raises the questions of how David might reproduce. As a robot with no capacity to age and become an adult, this reproductive function is rendered obsolete and unnecessary to David. While David's survival is not under threat from this removal of reproductive ability, as he is destined to live forever, it does render him incapable of offering any kind of long term survival inherent in the notion of the "generational continuum". Henry experiences short term distraction from the potential loss of Martin through David's presence, but his future is no more secure for it. David can replace Martin in a physical sense, but is unable to restore the lost psychic connection between father and son. If anything, David is a way of clinging to the past, rather than moving forward, and in this sense it is telling that once again, it is the mother who seeks comfort in this past. Despite his ostensibly futuristic implications, David remains at heart a reproduction of another dead child, and this coupled with his lack of reproductive function renders him more anti-future than future. As such, David does not so much aid mourning as he does instigate a state of melancholia that queers Monica's parenthood and consequently puts Henry's own future under threat.

The final section of *A.I.* consolidates this lack of a future that David represents, paradoxically by placing him in the distant future, beyond the point at which human life has

disappeared from the planet. David remains as a child, sentient and alone, keeping watch over the statue of the Blue Fairy that he believes can turn him into a “real boy”, like Pinocchio. David may be “the most lasting proof of [human] genius”, as one of the alien creatures at the end of the film tells him, but ultimately the generational legacy stalls with David, with no hope of passing it on to future generations. In ending on a vision of the world in which humans are obsolete, the limits of David’s capacity to signify paternal survival become unavoidable.

A thing of the past: child death and nostalgia

The futuristic setting of *A.I.* raises questions regarding the importance of securing the right kind of future for the father, and the lack of viability offered by an indefinite future in which a legacy can only stall, rather than survive through the generations. This setting, in a world both like and not like a contemporary America, imaginable and yet distant, also serves to distance the death of the child (or, in this case, his near-death) from the experience of an audience watching in 2001. In its futuristic temporality, *A.I.* is something of an anomaly amongst the films discussed in this chapter. Yet one of the functions of this setting, as resolutely “not-now”, is to obfuscate the death of the child, to place it in a time other to the experience of the audience.

Much more common is the placement of these films concerning child death and parental bereavement in a period of the past. In discussing these films as being of the 1990s, it must be acknowledged that a significant proportion of them take place at another point in time. *Lorenzo’s Oil* takes place in the early 1980s, while *The Ice Storm*, *My Girl* and *The Virgin Suicides* all take place in the first half of the 1970s. A glimpse of James’ gravestone in *Paradise* places his death in the late 1980s, yet the carefully constructed rural setting in a

sleepy Southern town that appears removed from the fast-paced world beyond hints at its own project in creating a nostalgic atmosphere.

Pam Cook defines nostalgia as that which

can be defined as a state of longing for something that is known to be irretrievable, but is sought anyway. In so far as it is rooted in disavowal, or suspension of disbelief, nostalgia is generally associated with fantasy and regarded as even more inauthentic than memory.³⁸²

This is not to suggest that these films are nostalgic for the death of the child. Rather, the “state of longing” may refer to the innocence encapsulated in the figure of the child. Expanding on this notion, Alan Nadel characterises *My Girl*, *Paradise* and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Café* (Jon Avnet, 1991), in which the death of the protagonist’s brother Buddy features early in the film, as “‘Death-as-a-loss-of-innocence’ AIDS pastoral films”.³⁸³ Nadel suggests that, although these films do not explicitly reference AIDS, they cannot help but be informed by the period and the contemporary threat that AIDS poses. Nadel identifies a “cultural anxiety about the breakdown in protective mechanisms, such that the fallibility of the immune system becomes associated with any aberrations from the standard practices of the anecdotal American family to which Reaganism ascribed paradigmatic status”.³⁸⁴

In confining the death of the child to a previous decade, contemporary concerns are still expressed in the narrative. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the 1990s AIDS presents a formidable barrier to survival. The nostalgic setting of these films both disavows AIDS at the same time as it emphasises its destructive nature and the threat it poses to the

³⁸² Pam Cook, *Screening The Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3.

³⁸³ Alan Nadel, *Flatlining of the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan’s America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 176.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

American family, rendered here in the death of the child as the innocent being. In doing so, these films can “give rise to feelings of nostalgia for a lost idyllic past” whilst at the same time “fight[ing] to undercut nostalgia”.³⁸⁵ This apparent dichotomy is discussed by Dika in reference specifically to *Badlands*, a film made in the 1970s that looks back at the 1950s, yet the function of this double-edged nostalgia remains relevant in its ability to conjure up “an era in which the dreams of innocence can no longer exist”.³⁸⁶ If, as Cook suggests, nostalgia is largely rooted in fantasy, these films are structured around the fantasy of renewal and survival, a fantasy dealt a blow latterly by AIDS. Yet the fact that such a fantasy must exist in the past at the same time highlights its fragility, a plea for innocence that can only find purchase in another time.

Cook goes on to suggest that

[t]he sense of loss in nostalgic encounters is all the more powerful because it is predicated on the acknowledgement that the past is gone forever. Nostalgia plays on the gap between representations of the past and actual past events, and the desire to overcome that gap and recover what has been lost.³⁸⁷

This supports Nadel’s observation that these films are, at their core, dealing with a death of innocence and a desire for recovery. The drive to “recover what has been lost” becomes more pertinent when considering the fact that, overwhelmingly, these films deal with the death of a son, and the implications that such a death has when considered in light of the crisis of masculinity.

Cook argues that nostalgia should not simply be viewed as “a reactionary, regressive condition imbued with sentimentality”, but rather “as a way of coming to terms with the

³⁸⁵ Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 63.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Cook, *Screening the Past*, 4.

past, as enabling it to be exorcised, in order that society, and individuals, can move on”.³⁸⁸ I would suggest further that it allows for an illusion of distance, whereby the loss of a child is faced as a condition of the past. The 1980s setting of *Lorenzo’s Oil* is ultimately determined by the true event that it depicts. There are brief references made to Reaganomics, and more substantial parallels drawn between the quest of people with HIV/AIDS to access treatment and the need for greater transparency and availability of ALD treatment. However, though the factual nature of *Lorenzo’s Oil* dictates its timeline to a large extent, the fact that the film is produced and released in the 1990s again allows for distance; it also allows for a rejection of child death in its closing scenes. Enough time has passed since the events of *Lorenzo’s Oil* that a success story can be woven over the credits, the “fight for the future” being one that has triumphed, as evidenced in the images of the boys with ALD who are surviving thanks to the medical success of Lorenzo’s oil.³⁸⁹ Such images are testament to the father’s continued survival as much as they are the sons’.

The rationale behind the persistent 1970s setting of a number of the films discussed here—*The Ice Storm*, *My Girl* and *The Virgin Suicides*—is less immediately obvious. Like *Lorenzo’s Oil*, the timelines of these films are easily established through various historical references. *My Girl* uses Richard Nixon’s presidency to establish the time period. Vada’s final narration details the ways in which her life is starting to look up after the death of Thomas J., ending with, “and the Republican Party just re-nominated Mr. Nixon”. While Vada, in 1972, expresses optimism at Nixon’s re-nomination, *The Ice Storm* encapsulates the opposite atmosphere just a year later, observed in Wendy’s commitment to following the Watergate case on the television. *The Virgin Suicides*, meanwhile, exists as an act of constant flashback, in which the narrators relive their childhoods in 1970s Michigan.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

In returning to this time period, these films revisit the site of a prior gender crisis. In the 1960s and 1970s, the women's liberation movement campaigned for equal rights in a variety of arenas, from the workplace to reproductive choice. This became the catalyst for a significant crisis of masculinity—not unlike that occurring in the 1990s—as men struggled “to free themselves from the prison of the male sex role”.³⁹⁰ Disillusionment with the rewards of work mingled with the failure of the Vietnam War and anxieties over the place of the U.S. in the world.³⁹¹ “[F]ears of feminization” led to a call for more ‘traditional’ masculinity to re-emerge.³⁹² In returning to the 1970s, these films revisit the previous cycle of the masculine crisis, revealing in the process the recurrent threads of anxiety and disillusion facing American men who perceived their influence was diminishing. Yet at the same time, the crisis is displaced to this earlier period, marking an attempt to disavow the contemporariness of these anxieties.

Dika discusses the tendency to “[skip] a generation” when dealing in nostalgic images, in doing so creating a sense of “discontinuity” that “imparts an indelible connotation of pastness”.³⁹³ On the surface, this may be a simple act of displacement, as suggested above with regard to *A.I.* By confining the child's death to another time, distance is achieved. The death of the child is not happening now; rather, it is confined to a time gone before, as something that once occurred, but does so no longer. As a traumatic event, a desire to distance oneself from the child's death seems understandable, particularly when this particular traumatic event is the thing that “just can't be”.³⁹⁴ In *The Virgin Suicides*, a removal from reality characterises the reaction of Mr. Lisbon to the death of his youngest daughter Cecilia (Hanna Hall). The narrators recall him becoming uncommunicative and

³⁹⁰ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 204.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 191–5.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 201.

³⁹³ Dika, *Recycled Culture*, 56. Emphasis in original.

³⁹⁴ Leclaire, *A Child is Being Killed*, 2.

transfixed by endless television sports, and talking to plants in the school halls (“Have we photosynthesised our lunch today?”). The removal of the film to a period in the past further augments this removal from reality, placing the death of the child in a time and place that is no longer reachable. The inaccessible nature of the Lisbon girls’ lives and deaths is captured in the frustration of the boys who try and unravel the enduring mysteries and unanswered questions, but this distance also acts as a form of relief. Death becomes an old wound to be picked at, rather than a fresh memory.

This desire for distance, however, does not adequately explain the persistent rooting of the child’s death in the past. Rather than simply adhering to a rule of inserting decades between the depiction of a child’s death and its temporal location, I wish to consider the use of the past specifically in relation to the contemporary crisis of masculinity. *The Virgin Suicides* aside, the films discussed here all depict the death of a young son. If, as in *My Girl*, *Paradise*, *Lorenzo’s Oil* and *The Ice Storm*, the death (or near death) of the son occurs in the previous two decades, then these sons may be viewed as being the men of the 1990s that never were. An eleven-year-old boy (Thomas J.) who dies in 1972 would be 30 in 1991, the year of *My Girl*’s release, making him precisely one of those white American men currently facing crisis. His death, and the deaths of numerous other young boys in these films, reflects the persistent threat of erasure at the heart of the masculine crisis. The repeated death of the son in these films recalls Freud’s theory of trauma and repetition in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”. Freud discusses the condition of “traumatic neurosis”, a state of “disturbance of the mental capacities” caused specifically by “fright”; that is, “the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it”.³⁹⁵ Freud observes subsequently the “compulsion to repeat” that arises from such trauma.³⁹⁶ This compulsion becomes a

³⁹⁵ Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, 12.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

symptom of Hollywood more generally during this period, as it is compelled to revisit over and over again the death of the son. This repetition reinforces the anxiety surrounding these deaths and the implications for the future of masculinity. It also mimics the desire for repetition that the father realises in investing his legacy in the son. The “compulsion to repeat” also relates to a need for mastery, and in repeating the death of the son in Hollywood, there emerges a wish to conquer this death, to find the unassailable solution that will paradoxically erase this death.³⁹⁷ The question posed at the beginning of this chapter—“*What does it mean to survive?*”—finds its answer in this drive towards renewed power and a survival through the child; a survival that is otherwise rendered meaningless.

Conclusion: Conquering the death of the son

In a decade that is preoccupied culturally with a crisis amongst men and a persistent anxiety surrounding the future of both masculinity and men themselves, films that focus on the death of the sons who would be men in the 1990s serve to reinforce this anxiety. If a turn towards fatherhood is a concerted effort to avoid the erasure and finality that comes with death, these films do not simply demonstrate the threat posed to those fathers who lose their children, and thus the foundation of their fatherhood. Rather, they demonstrate the overarching threat of erasure that underlies both the reliance on fatherhood and the crisis of masculinity that fuels it. If men in the 1990s are suffering from a crisis of meaning and a fear of non-survival, films depicting the deaths of young boys ten or twenty years previously crystallises this fear of non-existence by erasing the boys that these 1990s men once were.

Much like those apocalyptic films of the 1990s that flirt with the possibility of the end of the world, only to end with its restoration, these films confront the devastating effects

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 35.

of the loss of the child only to posit survival in the form of restored reproduction. Just as in *Deep Impact* a part of the meteor does strike the U.S., revealing the very real severity of the threat, in allowing the child's death to happen these films expose the anxieties around masculine erasure as legitimate, while providing a solution that restores the man to a position of power through the renewal of paternity.

In doing so, the trauma of the child's death must be negotiated and eventually neutralised in favour of a forward-facing survival. The state of being 'unparented' is potentially queer, a space in which expectation is subverted and meaning—through parenthood—is lost. If “[q]ueerness names the other possibilities, the other potential outcomes, the non-linear and non-inevitable trajectories that fan out from any given event and lead to unpredictable futures”, the loss of parenthood becomes just such an event that “other potential outcomes” can stem from.³⁹⁸ Yet any conceivable positivity in this position is vigorously denied in these films. In order to remove the father from this queer space in which survival and reproductive futurism do not demand recognition, queerness is displaced onto the mother in the form of melancholia. Her desire to remember and recreate the past interferes with the project of reproductive futurism that will guarantee the man's survival through fatherhood. In exploring the aftermath of the child's death, these films recognise the fear of erasure and yet propel singularly towards a future that only the child can save. Fatherhood resolutely remains the one guarantee of accessing the future and forging survival from the threat of apocalypse.

³⁹⁸ Halberstam, “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies”, 153.

CHAPTER 4: “THE KING HAS RETURNED”: THE SURVIVAL OF THE FATHER BEYOND DEATH

If the death of the child echoes the apocalyptic fears at the end of the (American) century, then the death of the father continues to play on this dread of obliteration. In *Independence Day*, the death of new father Monash is configured as heroic, but only once he has been introduced to his son can the death be permitted. His wife reveals that she has given their son the same name as his father (Oren), a continuation of the father’s legacy that offers a glimpse of immortality even as death looms. It is this effort to live on through the son, enacting the father’s survival even as he must die, that I will discuss in this chapter.

The notion of the father living on through the son, thus confirming the promise at the heart of reproductive futurism, is explored in one of the decade’s most successful films, *The Lion King*. It is upon the death of Mufasa (James Earl Jones) that the whole narrative of *The Lion King* hinges. Attempting to climb to safety after rescuing his son Simba (Jonathan Taylor Thomas; later Matthew Broderick) from a wildebeest stampede, Mufasa is thrown to his death by his vengeful brother, Scar (Jeremy Irons). Simba finds his father’s body, and his cries for help echo around the deserted gorge as he realises, for the first time, that he is alone. Tugging at his father’s lifeless paw, Simba’s distress is compounded by a false sense of guilt, instilled in him by Scar: “if it wasn’t for you, he’d still be alive”. Running away, Simba collapses in the desert, shattered by his father’s death and no longer interested in surviving to reign over the very kingdom he once coveted.

While *The Lion King* goes on to engage with the survival of both Simba and Mufasa, it must first establish the unique trauma that comes with the death of the father, a figure of both benevolence and authority, of “love and fear”, that structures the development of the

son's sense of self.³⁹⁹ The perceived horror of Mufasa's death scene and the loss of the parent that, to a young audience, is "more real" than their own death, compounds the alienation that arises from the father's death.⁴⁰⁰ Simba rejects the pain associated with the memory of his father and the reality of his place as his father's successor. Yet this is only a temporary fix. He must eventually face up to this reality in order to realise his own future, and within this future immortalise his own father. When Mufasa's baboon shaman Rafiki (Robert Guillaume) announces that "the king has returned", he is referring to both the return of Simba and the return of Mufasa through him. The particular trauma of the father's death is acknowledged, but meaning must ultimately be determined and achieved through it, as with the death of the child. It is not enough to simply extract meaning from the father's death; above understanding, what is sought is a guarantee of paternal immortality, a reassurance that the father's death is not the end.

This chapter will examine a number of Hollywood films released in the 1990s, including two specifically aimed at children, *The Lion King* and *Jack Frost*. In addition, *Twister*, *Contact* and *Armageddon* all consider the father's death from the perspective of a daughter, and utilise elements of science fiction and apocalyptic scenarios. I will also consider *Field of Dreams*, which is often claimed as a Reagan-era film on the basis of the wholesome values it is deemed to project, in particular the way it "sentimentalizes the nuclear patriarchal family".⁴⁰¹ Beyond this nostalgia, however, lie many themes similar to those observed in *The Lion King*, and ones that root the film within a wider project of paternal rehabilitation and survival that persists throughout the 1990s. *Field of Dreams* was

³⁹⁹ Andrew Ryder, "Politics after the Death of the Father: Democracy in Freud and Derrida", *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 44:3 (September 2011), 116.

⁴⁰⁰ Matt Roth, "The Lion King: A Short history of Disney-fascism", *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 40 (1996), 15.

⁴⁰¹ Caroline M. Cooper, "Field of Dreams: A Favorite of President Clinton—But a Typical Reaganite Film?", *Literature/Film Quarterly* 23:3 (July 1995), 164.

reportedly a favourite film of Clinton's, something Caroline Cooper attributes to its theme of "a white male loner protagonist in conflict with his community", but which also echoes the overarching theme of Clinton's presidency, as discussed in the introduction: that of moulding the son into the image of the father.⁴⁰²

I will argue that the father's death is not the end of his patriarchal reign, but merely the beginning. As discussed in more detail below, the Oedipal break must occur and the son must follow the father, in keeping with the linear, generational nature of the nuclear family inherent in reproductive futurism. However, far from heralding a new era, the son is bound to follow in the father's footsteps. This, in turn, secures the survival of the father.

This continuation is not, however, always guaranteed at the moment of the death. As a result, a number of films follow the model of *Field of Dreams*, in which the dead father returns to the son. In doing so, he exerts his lingering authority in order to set the son on the 'right path'. There is a significant focus on the son carrying on the father's legacy in these films. Where the focus is on the father-daughter relationship, the continuation of the father's legacy tends towards securing future generations, and the narrative drive coalesces around a desire to insert the adult daughter into a reproductive future of her own.

Thus, this chapter will also consider the implications of this paternal survival with regard to the thread of reproductive futurism that has been explored in previous chapters. The recurring figure of the returning father ensures that the child accepts the responsibility necessary to progress in the father's image. The survival of father and child reinforces the importance of reproduction and generational progression, whilst negating any opposition to this model. The focus on a continuation of the father's legacy finally recalls the thread of apocalypse explored in the previous chapter. The death of the father reflects "paranoid"

⁴⁰² Ibid., 163.

anxieties regarding the threat of erasure, returning again to the overarching narrative of apocalypse in 1990s Hollywood, yet the desire to confirm his survival marks an attempt to deny such millennial fragmentation and crisis.⁴⁰³

Like father, like son: the myth of the “new régime”

In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, Freud discusses the concept of traumatic neurosis. The first element of traumatic neurosis is “fright”, as distinct from “fear” or “dread”, the defining quality of “fright” being surprise.⁴⁰⁴ This distinction informs Boaz Hagin’s contention that “[d]eath must have its sting”, not necessarily in its expectedness (or lack thereof) but in its impact.⁴⁰⁵ For Hagin, on-screen death must be both “meaningful” and “justified”.⁴⁰⁶ This “sting”, however, also relates to the sharp psychic pain that accompanies the death of a loved one. This trauma-through-fright is “a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli”.⁴⁰⁷

Though this “sting” might reasonably be assumed to be more prevalent in films depicting the child’s death, the removal of such a death from the screen denies such an impact. Instead, what is seen is the aftermath of trauma. Yet in these films that depict the father’s death, the impact is more immediate, bringing with it the full impact of the “fright” inherent in Freud’s rendering of trauma. The sense of loss and abandonment at the heart of the father’s death is brought into sharp relief, echoing the destabilisation of masculinity that permeates the decade’s cultural outlook, as a figure of male authority is lost.

⁴⁰³ Marita Sturken, “Affliction: When Paranoid Male Narratives Fail”, in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 203.

⁴⁰⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 18* (London: Vintage, 2001), 12.

⁴⁰⁵ Boaz Hagin, *Death in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 45.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁰⁷ Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, 31.

This sense of “fright” as the realisation of abandonment informs the scene in which Simba sits by Mufasa’s dead body. The feeling of being alone and overwhelmed overrides all other emotion, including the ability to see beyond Mufasa’s death to the reality of Scar’s succession plan. It is also captured in a scene towards the end of *High Fidelity* (Stephen Frears, 2000). Rob’s (John Cusack) ex-girlfriend Laura (Iben Hjejle) loses her father after an illness. After the funeral, Laura accosts Rob in his car and propositions him:

Laura: Listen, Rob. Would you have sex with me? Because I want to feel something else than this. It’s either that, or I go home and put my hand in the fire. Unless you want to stub cigarettes out on my arm.

Rob: No, I only have a few left. I’ve been saving them for later.

Laura: It’ll have to be sex, then.

Such is Laura’s reaction to the death of her father that the only salve is self-inflicted pain or else the momentary pleasure—and forgetting—that she will get from sex with Rob. There is a kind of weary comedy here, but underneath remains a comment on the impact of paternal death on the child. Teresa de Lauretis, discussing Freud’s traumatic neurosis, observes that the ego, “caught by surprise, is unprepared to master or control the impacting force”.⁴⁰⁸ Laura's resort to the extremes—whether pain or pleasure—demonstrates just such an attempt to control and somehow modify the overwhelming impact of her father's death, just as Simba chooses the pain of exile.

Despite this “sting”, parental death adheres to the supposed natural order, whereby the older generation is expected to die before its descendants. If, as Leclaire suggests, the

⁴⁰⁸ Teresa de Lauretis, *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

death of the child is the thing that “just can’t be”,⁴⁰⁹ Canetti states that, “[a] son finds it natural that his father should die before him”.⁴¹⁰ The death of the father not only *can* be, but *has* to be. The naturalness of the child outliving the parent relates not only to the logical progression of aging but, according to Freud's Oedipal theories of the psyche, to the unconscious, but undeniable, desire of the child to usurp the same-sex parent.

The Oedipus complex forms the basis of Freud's theory of psychoanalytic development, in which the son wishes to “possess [his mother] physically” whilst “[getting] rid of” his father, who has become his rival.⁴¹¹ The son, however, threatened with castration by the powerful patriarch, “falls into a passive attitude to his father” whilst simultaneously retaining a “defiant attitude” towards him.⁴¹² Canetti suggests that for the son faced with the father's death, “[o]ne who was once all-powerful is now impotent, his strength extinguished and his lifeless remains at the disposal of the very being who was for many years weak, helpless and entirely in his power”.⁴¹³ The death of the father becomes the son's moment for supremacy, a position of power that he has hitherto been unable to access. The desire to succeed the father—even though succession involves the latter's death—forms a crucial part of the unconscious in Oedipal terms.

Based on this notion of the Oedipal relationship between father and son, Canetti characterises the death of the patriarch as the moment that a “new régime” is established, whereby “the breach between the old and the new is immense and irreparable”.⁴¹⁴ For Canetti, the father's reign is over; the son, in his place, exerts his authority by creating a new

⁴⁰⁹ Serge Leclair, *A Child Is Being Killed: On Primary Narcissism and the Death Drive*, trans. Marie-Claude Hays, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 2.

⁴¹⁰ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (London: Penguin, 1992), 289.

⁴¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-analysis*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1979), 46.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴¹³ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 289–90.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 290.

order that departs from that of his predecessor. This “new régime” recalls Freud’s contention that civilisation itself stems from the death of the primal father.⁴¹⁵

However, it is exactly this “immense and irreparable” breach I wish to argue is denied in the films below. What occurs is not a *break* with the father, but a continuation of him through the child. The son killing the father—thus achieving supremacy—is only half of the story in “Totem and Taboo”, for “in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one acquired a portion of his strength”.⁴¹⁶ The father is therefore able to live on through the son, who internalises the father at the point of death. This notion of paternal continuation is encapsulated in *Phenomenon* (Jon Turteltaub, 1996), in which George (John Travolta) dies, but only once he has become “a happy father” to his girlfriend’s children.⁴¹⁷ Malin’s reading of *Phenomenon* highlights the attainment of meaning (in this case, through positive fatherhood) that is necessary before George—beleaguered by a freak acquisition of immense brainpower—can die. However, what is also necessary is George’s conviction that he has passed on enough of himself to the children, leaving him able to die in the knowledge that he is able to live on through them. He uses an apple to illustrate this point, instructing the two children to “take a bite” so that the apple, once gone, will still be a part of them.⁴¹⁸ This demonstration of reassurance in the face of death acts as a way of explaining, and mollifying, the reality; it also reveals the process by which the patriarch both dies and does not die, enabling him to attain a future without bodily form. George becomes a part of the children, and in doing so lives on.

⁴¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Totem and Taboo”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 13* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 161.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴¹⁷ Brenton J. Malin, *American Masculinity under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties “Crisis of Masculinity”* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 91.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In previous chapters, I have argued that in an era that is especially characterised by masculine uncertainty and the widely perceived destabilisation of patriarchal authority at the end of the millennium, fatherhood is the key to longevity and survival. As a definitively male role, fatherhood is deployed with a view to securing a future for men. The death of the patriarch, then, may at first seem counter-intuitive to this theory of survival and futurism. Death surely marks his demise, rather than his triumphant survival. If fatherhood paves the way to a future, the death of the father is logically a hindrance to its realisation.

However, I wish to suggest that the apparent demise of the patriarch is tempered by a persistent narrative impetus, one that resurrects the father morally, physically, and finally through the child. This resurrection confirms the father's power in the face of death. In filtering the male future through fatherhood, the reliance is on the promise of continuing to exist beyond the self through his progeny. Therefore, the death of the father on-screen simply puts this existence-beyond in motion, rather than eliminating the father at the point of his mortal demise.

In *Field of Dreams*, Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner), an Iowa farmer, is compelled to plough under his valuable corn crop to build a baseball diamond at the behest of a disembodied voice that comes to him as he works in the field. In deciding to obey the voice, Ray explains his motivations for the bizarre project to his wife Annie (Amy Madigan): “I’m 36 years old. I have a wife, a child and a mortgage, and I’m scared to death I’m turning into my father”.

Ray's first lament is one of being “36 years old”, which he believes foreshadows a state of stagnation, beyond which his aspirations will become untenable. Ray persistently equates old age with failure and repeatedly refers to his father John as an “old man”, no longer able to live up to his own—or Ray's—expectations in life. Ray’s desire to succeed

where he believes John failed appears to support the son's building of a "new régime" in opposition to that of the father. "By the time he was as old as I am now, he was ancient", Ray tells Annie. "I mean, he must've had dreams, but he never did anything about them". Mindful of this, Ray suggests that building the baseball field "may be my last chance". His enduring fear is one of "turning into" his dad, and on the surface his actions are those of the son establishing a new order in conscious opposition to that of his father.

Yet the conclusion of *Field of Dreams* does not bear out the rupture between old and new, between father and son. Indeed, the entire film is built around repair, not irreparability. When his father (Dwier Brown) returns at the end of the film as a ghostly young man in a baseball uniform, Ray's peace comes from a new-found understanding of his dad. "I only saw him years later when he was worn down by life", Ray tells Shoeless Joe Jackson (Ray Liotta), one of the resurrected players using Ray's field. The inference here is that Ray is only now seeing his father as "a young man possessing hopes and dreams" (John dreamed of playing professional baseball): a man exactly like Ray.⁴¹⁹ This belated reconciliation between father and son, sealed in a lingering close-up of their handshake, reverses the "irreparable" breach between the Kinsella men, and in the process re-establishes a link that not only brings Ray peace, but cements John's future.

This rendering of John's future is most obvious in his bodily return. Ray's father has heretofore existed as a shadowy memory, not least because Ray can barely bring himself to vocalise more than a few half-remembered thoughts about his dad. Yet at the end of the film, when Ray has successfully passed all of the 'tests' set by the mysterious voice from above, John achieves corporeality. This suggests strongly that he is now a tangible figure with renewed agency: Ray has brought his father back to life. However, it is not simply a physical

⁴¹⁹ Scott A. Winkler, "Is This Heaven? No, it's Iowa – or – The Avant Garde in a Cornfield Cures What Ails You", *Journal of Popular Culture* 37:4 (2004), 714.

future that Ray had granted John (the audience are by now used to seeing the players 'fade away' into the corn at the end of each practice, only to re-emerge in solid form the next day), but one of survival through renewed influence. Proposing that “[man] wants to live longer than anyone, and to *know* it”, Canetti goes on to state that “when he is no longer there himself, then his name must continue”.⁴²⁰ The continuation of the father’s name is acknowledged in the use of John Kinsella's name in a short story written by Terence Mann (James Earl Jones), something that Ray uses in a bid to convince Mann to join him on his quest. However, within this notion of the continuation of the father’s name lies a broader desire. Freud positions the father as “the mortal vehicle of a (possibly) immortal substance”.⁴²¹ While this “immortal substance” may not be quantifiable, it emerges in the father's beliefs, morals, convictions and behaviours, all of which grant him survival beyond death when taken up by the son. An understanding of his father and an acceptance of him as a man is the first step to Ray immortalising his father through his own self.

Therefore, while paternal death may appear to counteract the construction of fatherhood as a future-securing identity, by maintaining the father as the moral compass, the model of decent manhood, and internalising his values as ‘right’ (even in the face of popular opposition, as Ray does), his future is in fact secured. Human immortality is the dream, not the reality, and though this reality is tampered with it is never broken entirely. Desire to survive as oneself *indefinitely* is impossible, but to survive beyond oneself *through the child* is possible, and so becomes the desirable alternative. Hagin argues that

[d]eath, in order to be meaningful in relation to the future...
needs to be of interest not only to the dead persons but also to

⁴²⁰ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 265. Emphasis in original.

⁴²¹ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), 78.

the living. The world of the living needs to enable the dead to exert some kind of influence, to alter in some way the goals and obstacles of those who remain behind.⁴²²

It is this continued exertion of influence, a lasting ability to exist beyond the self, that characterises the death of the father in 1990s Hollywood cinema.

Resurrecting the father: Immortality through the child in *The Lion King*

The Lion King is particularly instructive in revealing how the father's future is secured through the child beyond death. Considered to be a central part of Disney's commercial revival in the 1990s, the animated film features a young lion cub, Simba, heir to the pridelands and the son of Mufasa, the current king.⁴²³ After the death of his father and Scar's charge that Simba is responsible, Simba begins a lengthy exile in the jungle, where he enjoys a carefree existence alongside the meerkat Timon (Nathan Lane) and the warthog Pumbaa (Ernie Sabella). Only as an adult is Simba convinced to return to his former home to battle Scar for the kingdom and save the other animals from starvation and tyranny, a return predicated on the father's renewed influence.

The Lion King enjoyed considerable commercial success as the second highest-grossing film of 1994 and the fifth of the decade overall, success that led to its later incarnation as a Broadway musical.⁴²⁴ It also attracted much critical consideration, often tending towards a focus on the contentious portrayal of the hyena characters, ghettoised and relegated to the fringes ("shadowlands") of the African landscape. Others have highlighted

⁴²² Hagin, *Death in Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 66.

⁴²³ Peter Krämer, "Entering the Magic Kingdom: The Walt Disney Company, *The Lion King* and the Limitations of Criticism", *Film Studies* 2 (Spring 2000), 45–6.

⁴²⁴ Box Office Mojo, "The Lion King", <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=lionking.htm> (16 Jul. 2012)

the fascistic elements of the film,⁴²⁵ as well as allusions to communism⁴²⁶ and anti-Islamism in the persistent imagery of the crescent moon.⁴²⁷ In addition, the construction of Scar as effeminate and “[stereotypically] gay”, as well as darker in colour than his ‘good’ brother, has been noted.⁴²⁸ Despite the African setting, Mufasa and Simba are coded as white. Their light colouring and golden manes stand in contrast to Scar in particular. Voiced by American actors, they must be read as anthropomorphised representatives of an American father and son despite their occupation of a different continent. Mufasa’s ultimate survival must be understood through the lens of a particular white, heterosexual American vision of the future that his legacy, through Simba, permits.

Mackey-Kallis analyses both *The Lion King* and *Field of Dreams* as “father quest” films, suggesting that Simba must “find the father inside of him” as part of this quest.⁴²⁹ This reading captures the drive towards continuation at the heart of *The Lion King*, while remaining ultimately concerned with Simba as a heroic figure. However, I wish to focus specifically on the death of Mufasa and the Oedipal underpinnings of Simba’s eventual rise to power. Dundes and Dundes argue that the “Oedipal plots” of the film have been consistently “overlooked” by critics, even those that point to the liberal borrowing from Hamlet.⁴³⁰ It is this element that I wish to concentrate on, particularly with regard to Mufasa’s continued existence through Simba.

⁴²⁵ Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 89; Krämer, “Entering the Magic Kingdom”, 48; Roth, “The Lion King”, 15–20.

⁴²⁶ Byrne and McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney*, 90.

⁴²⁷ Alfredo Michel Modenessi, “Disney’s ‘War Efforts’: *The Lion King* and *Education for Death*, or Shakespeare Made Easy for your Apocalyptic Convenience”, *Ilha do Desterro: A Journal of English Language, Literatures in English and Cultural Studies* 49 (July-Dec 2005), 408.

⁴²⁸ Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Animated Disney Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 28.

⁴²⁹ Susan Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 92.

⁴³⁰ Lauren Dundes and Alan Dundes, “Young hero Simba defeats old villain Scar: Oedipus wrecks the Lyin’ King”, *The Social Science Journal* 43 (2006), 482.

The relationship between Mufasa and a young Simba is established in the film's opening, when Simba is presented to the animals of the kingdom as the new heir, thus framing him immediately as Son to Mufasa's Father. Perri Klass suggests that Mufasa's characterisation is in keeping with the typical image of the "90s-style [...] involved dad", asserted when a sleepy Mufasa is convinced to take Simba out to play.⁴³¹ Such characterisation sits alongside an image of Mufasa as protector, as he fights off the hyenas after Simba and his best friend Nala (Niketa Calame) venture too far beyond the edges of the pridelands in a fit of bravado. Simba is by turns respectful of his dad and defiantly disobedient; fear tempered by a desire to push the limits of his father's authority, a manifestation of the Oedipal conflict between "affection and admiration" and a desire to overcome the patriarch.⁴³²

The death of Mufasa occurs at the end of the first half of the film. His death is sudden and unwelcome, even "disturbing".⁴³³ Matt Roth suggests that it amounts to an "obsessive plumbing of horrors" by Disney.⁴³⁴ Certainly, Mufasa's death has the "sting" that Hagin suggests, even if its foreshadowing is recognised in Mufasa's paternal lectures to his son. The entire first half of the film is forced to balance the knowledge of Mufasa's impending death with the conviction that he will not die. A belief in Mufasa's immortality as king must coincide with the reality of Simba's succession.

Early in the film, the song "I Just Can't Wait To Be King" exemplifies Simba's desire to succeed his father, without ever acknowledging the fact that for Simba to become king, Mufasa must die. If Simba truly is going to be "King Simba", as the song states, "free to run

⁴³¹ Perri Klass, "A Bambi for the 90s, via Shakespeare", *New York Times*, 19 Jun. 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/19/movies/film-view-a-bambi-for-the-90-s-via-shakespeare.html> (30 Nov. 2012)

⁴³² Freud, "Totem and Taboo", 129.

⁴³³ Janet Maslin, "The Hero Within The Child Within", *New York Times*, 15 Jun. 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/15/movies/review-film-the-hero-within-the-child-within.html> (30 Nov. 2012)

⁴³⁴ Roth, "The Lion King", 15.

around all day / free to do it all my way”, it can only be once his father is gone. At no point is Simba consciously wishing his father dead. His desire to be king is fuelled by a wish to be “free” and to have no one to answer to (“no one saying do this / no one saying be here”), not a conscious desire to commit patricide. Yet Mufasa’s death remains the condition of Simba’s transformation into King Simba. “I just can’t wait to be king” does not consciously translate into “I just can’t wait until my father’s dead”, but the unspoken implication remains, even as the audience is reminded of Mufasa’s superior strength and wisdom in his rescue of Simba from the hyenas.

Simba’s dual knowing and not-knowing what becoming king entails is established during two conversations between the young cub and his father. As the two of them survey the kingdom in the early morning sun, Mufasa explains the boundaries of his rule, telling Simba, “a king’s time as ruler rises and falls like the sun. One day Simba, the sun will set on my time here, and will rise with you as the new king”. Simba appears unperturbed by this statement, more eager to discover just what he will be king of (“everything?”) than what it means for him to become king and be responsible for the kingdom.

However, following Simba’s rescue by Mufasa from the elephant’s graveyard, father and son wrestle under the stars. Simba asks his father, “We’re pals, right? And we’ll always be together, right?” Simba’s uncertainty stems from his frightening experience with the hyenas, who are only stopped from attacking him by Mufasa. Here, Mufasa’s authority and ability to protect Simba are reinforced. This authority is compounded in the wrestling between father and son, good-natured but indicative of Simba’s current inability to overpower his father, the son “kept from fulfillment by physical immaturity”.⁴³⁵

⁴³⁵ Peter Blos, *Son and Father: Before and Beyond the Oedipus Complex* (London: The Free Press, 1985), 4.

Mufasa's response to Simba's plea for reassurance foregrounds a generational link not only between the two of them, but between Mufasa and his own father too, and all the fathers before him:

Simba, let me tell you something that my father told me. Look at the stars. The great kings of the past look down on us from those stars. So whenever you feel alone, just remember that those kings will always be there to guide you. And so will I.

Simba is made aware of his place in the familial order, between his father (and his father's father before him) and the son who will one day call *him* father. Mothers and daughters are tangential to this generational identification; what matters is Simba's place in the male line. In referring to the "generational continuum", Blos observes that "[e]very father has first been a son; arriving at fatherhood and having a son weaves his own sonship experience into the new context of a generational continuum".⁴³⁶

Such a "continuum" highlights the endless march of succession. *The Lion King* is heavily invested in the notion of the "Circle of Life". The title of the theme song, it also structures the film's beginning and end, bookending the film with almost identical images of baptism and renewal. This establishes a cycle of survival and inheritance that emphasises monarchy over democracy.⁴³⁷ Within this 'circle of life', Simba must survive Mufasa (and will eventually be survived by his own son).⁴³⁸ In the film, this survival is crucial to the concomitant survival of the pridelands, as only Simba is deemed able to continue his father's

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁴³⁷ Dundes and Dundes, "Young hero Simba", 480.

⁴³⁸ At the end of the film, when Simba and Nala's cub is presented to the other animals, the sex of the cub is not remarked upon, leaving it open to speculation. Though Mackey-Kallis claims the cub is Simba's daughter, such an inference appears to be based on the straight-to-video sequel, *The Lion King II: Simba's Pride* (Darrell Rooney and Rob LaDuca, 1998), which focuses on the adventures of a daughter of Simba. *The Lion King*, with its determined focus on the male line, makes no such distinction.

reign. However, it must also occur for Mufasa to survive, despite the fact that he is already dead. Mufasa must not only be remembered, but be projected into the future.

Such a projection is intimated by Mufasa himself, first in the suggestion that past kings remain to watch over the living, and again in his justification of the brutality of the food chain. When Mufasa preaches respect for all the animals, Simba challenges him. “But Dad, don’t we eat the antelope?” Mufasa’s explanation—that when the lions die, they turn into grass, which the antelope then eat—places them within a circle that situates life after death.⁴³⁹ A dead lion, in Mufasa’s telling of it, lives again through the antelope. Mufasa, however, must also be rehabilitated by his own son to solidify his future beyond death in a more fulfilling manner than simply becoming antelope fodder.

The erasure of Mufasa and the subsequent rehabilitation that ensures his indefinite survival is the primary concern of the second half of the film. With Simba in exile, Scar becomes king. In the jungle, Simba’s adolescence is structured by his friendship with Timon and Pumbaa, who adhere to a carefree lifestyle under the motto of “Hakuna matata” (“it means no worries”). Simba trades in the responsibility promised to him from birth for carefree fun alongside his new friends, where he is in fact “free to run around all day”, just as he previously desired when he dreamt of being king.

During this period, Simba feels only guilt towards his father. Mufasa remains an intangible figure, lost to time and memory. Not only has Mufasa’s legacy been abandoned by Simba, but alternative futures have been put in place. Simba is now following in the footsteps of the homosocial—or, in the opinion of Nathan Lane, who voices Timon, homosexual—duo of meerkat and warthog, rather than acknowledging his pre-ordained

⁴³⁹ Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero*, 95.

future as lion king, which included a betrothal to Nala.⁴⁴⁰ In tandem with this, the role of king has passed to Scar, doubly disrupting Mufasa's chances of survival. Edelman claims Scar as a "*sinthomosexual*", "the connotatively queer brother" of Mufasa whose reign coincides with a changing of the landscape from green and fertile to dry, grey and barren in which "morbidity persists".⁴⁴¹ It is the queerness of Scar, rendered in his opposition to family, fertility, and future, which poses the most substantial threat to Mufasa's future. In both of these scenarios, there is no obvious prospect of succession. Scar has no heir (and no lioness partner that would suggest an heir in the future), while the jungle appears free of the hierarchies of the pridelands. This lack of hierarchy is established in the first encounter between Simba, Timon and Pumbaa, where Timon and Pumbaa's initial trepidation of the lion is balanced with Simba's lack of knowledge about his surroundings. Mufasa's survival is thus jeopardised, as a pretender with no heir (and no regard for Mufasa's model of benevolent rule) has taken his throne, while his own son has forged an alternative existence in which his father's legacy does not figure and being king no longer has the appeal it once did. As discussed in previous chapters, the image of the 'good' father is shored up by the persistent use of the inadequate father, and here *The Lion King* demonstrates the use of queerness as an alternative against which the good father can be redeemed.

This dismissal of Mufasa's legacy becomes clear in a scene in which Timon and Pumbaa discuss the stars. Timon believes they are fireflies; Pumbaa suggests that they are "balls of gas burning millions of miles away". Simba offers his own interpretation: "Somebody once told me that the great kings of the past are up there, watching over us". He adds, "Pretty dumb, huh?" This disavowal of Mufasa's earlier reassurances further

⁴⁴⁰ Nathan Lane, quoted in S. M. Buhler, "Shakespeare and Company: *The Lion King* and the Disneyfication of *Hamlet*", in B. Ayres (ed.), *The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 125.

⁴⁴¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 170: n.51.

disassociates Simba from his father. The bridge between Simba and Mufasa has been broken, and it is this that the remainder of the film focuses on rectifying.

When an adult Nala (Moirira Kelly) and Rafiki discover that, contrary to Scar's reports, Simba is alive, they embark on a rescue mission. Nala's appearance disrupts the fraternal trio in the jungle, prompting Timon to note sadly to Pumbaa, with all the wistfulness of a despairing parent, "they'll fall in love and here's the bottom line / our trio's down to two". Nala, meanwhile, questions, "why won't he be the king I know he is / the king I see inside?" Simba's ascension to the throne, however, can only be realised once he has reconciled with his father's memory and accepted the responsibility bestowed on him by Mufasa. This is effected by Mufasa's image appearing in the clouds and smoke above a disbelieving Simba and a triumphant Rafiki. "You are more than what you have become", Mufasa intones. "You must take your place in the circle of life". As his image fades away, he implores Simba to, "remember who you are. Remember. Remember. Remember".

Simba, it turns out, cannot help but remember who he is. Rafiki, promising to show Simba his father, leads him to a pool of water where Simba sees only his reflection. The animation of adult Simba is already very close to that of Mufasa, but in this reflection, Simba literally morphs into the image of his father. Dundes and Dundes suggest that this metamorphosis of reflection "[indicates] that he is ready to replace his father".⁴⁴² I would suggest, however, that Simba is not *replacing* Mufasa, but *internalising* him, thus securing his father's survival. When Simba protests that "that's just my reflection", Rafiki disagrees. The baboon points to the transformed image and tells him, "See? He lives in you". Mufasa's death is negated by both his appearance in the smoke and this assertion that he "lives" as long as Simba is willing to acknowledge his father and their link to each other.

⁴⁴² Dundes and Dundes, "Young hero Simba", 483.

This doubling of Mufasa and Simba in the lake reflection has precedent. When confronted by the hyenas in the elephant's graveyard, Simba attempts to intimidate them with his roar, only to let out a pathetic squeak. If "[t]he 'evidentiality' of masculinity is often signified by a deep voice", Simba's squeak is a clear marker of immaturity and his current inability to overpower his father.⁴⁴³ Trying for a second time, he is gratified to find an immense roar issue from his mouth, until he realises that the roar actually comes from an unseen Mufasa, thundering to the rescue. The father's voice seeming to issue from the son's mouth captures the essence of *The Lion King*: the survival of the father through the son, and the necessity of Simba taking Mufasa's place in order to retain the balance of the kingdom. Rather than rebuilding the kingdom in his own image, Simba is bound to 'speak' as his father would have done. The end of the film sees Simba stand atop Pride Rock and roar, this time without the help of his father, yet the sound is an immediate reminder of Mufasa and his earlier display of power.

A further instance of misrecognition occurs when Simba returns to battle Scar and his uncle believes momentarily that Mufasa is back from the dead. On entering the lion's den, Simba is also greeted by his confused mother: "Mufasa?" she asks. Dundes and Dundes point to the "Oedipal implications" of this statement, an observation that is borne out in the scenes that follow.⁴⁴⁴ Scar strikes Simba's mother with his paw, recreating the primal scene and spurring Simba into action; later, when Simba has won the battle, "he first nuzzles his mother before his mate Nala".⁴⁴⁵ Here, the Oedipal structure of *The Lion King* successfully comes full circle. Simba desires the kingdom, but is unable to overpower his father; his

⁴⁴³ Gill Branston, "Viewer, I Listened to Him... Voices, Masculinity, *In The Line of Fire*", in Kirkham and Thumim (eds.), *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), 39.

⁴⁴⁴ Dundes and Dundes, "Young hero Simba", 483.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

father dies; Simba achieves the kingdom and gains power—including sexual power, as the head of the lion pride—over all the other lions, including his mother.

In Oedipal terms, Simba has usurped his father. Yet this usurpation retains the element of innocence, something Robert Paul deems vital to the framing of the son as a hero. This innocence is tantamount to Simba’s own survival as heroic king, rather than patricidal monster. Paul discusses the “succession scenario” that underlies numerous and otherwise unrelated narratives as a “cultural schema”.⁴⁴⁶ This succession scenario—which “presupposes a 'patriarchal' social organization”—originates in Oedipal theory, which states in its most basic form that the “junior” (son) must overcome the “senior” (father).⁴⁴⁷ Yet the conflict arises from the dual need for the junior to kill the senior at the same time that the junior *must not* kill the senior: that is, the senior must be killed, but the junior must retain his innocence in order to achieve hero status.⁴⁴⁸ With regard to *The Lion King* specifically, all the permutations of the succession scenario are played out: Scar (senior) tries but fails to kill Simba (junior) in the elephants' graveyard; likewise, Simba (junior) tries but fails to kill Scar (senior) when he throws him off the cliff at the end of the film. Scar (junior) successfully kills Mufasa (senior), so absolving Simba of the need to kill his own father, and ensuring that Simba remains as the innocent hero, yet one who is nevertheless still able to ascend the throne.⁴⁴⁹ In constructing this scenario, *The Lion King* offers a solution

to the enduring puzzle of how a junior male can succeed to senior status if, according [to] an underlying cultural logic, he must heroically kill a senior male to do so, be killed in the process, and nonetheless survive and remain innocent enough

⁴⁴⁶ Robert A. Paul, “Cultural narratives and the succession scenario: *Slumdog Millionaire* and other popular films and fictions”, *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 92:2 (2011), 454.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 454–5.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 457.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 465.

to deserve to live, attain senior status and authority, marry and reproduce.⁴⁵⁰

This ultimate aim of marriage and reproduction will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

Paul's theory highlights a partial subversion of the basic Oedipal structure—son kills father—even as it appears to come true. The same can be said more broadly of Simba's succession. Simba survives in the image of his father, and so the death of Mufasa does not preclude his future influence. Any “new régime” is dismissed: both Scar's reign of terror and apathy, and Simba's carefree, egalitarian jungle life. Simba cannot become king until he has accepted the ethos of responsibility passed down by Mufasa. Compelled by his father to “remember who you are”, this remembrance is not simply a call for Simba to return to the pridelands, but a reminder that Simba must take his place in the generational, familial order in order to preserve his father's heritage. The Simba of “hakuna matata” is no more permitted to be king than Scar is. While Timon and Pumbaa are seen briefly atop Pride Rock alongside Simba and Nala, this is less a concession to democracy, as Byrne and McQuillan suggest, than a reinforcement of Simba's benevolence, in itself another trait he has inherited from Mufasa.⁴⁵¹ It is Simba and Nala who dominate the frame, as it is only the mature, responsible Simba, on the brink of procreation with Nala, who can save both the kingdom and Mufasa from beyond the grave. The success of Mufasa's survival is captured in the final scene of the film, which replays the opening scene, thus confirming the “circle of life” and using doubling to suggest continuation. The replication of Mufasa in the figure of Simba reinforces the future as shaped by father, rather than son.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 467.

⁴⁵¹ Byrne and McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney*, 92.

The returning father: *Field of Dreams* and *Jack Frost*

The finality of Mufasa's death is undermined by his on-screen return, just as Simba's assumed death is subverted by the audience's knowledge that he is in the jungle. Cox et al suggest that Mufasa's return is a sign to children "that loved ones can always be part of them, even after death", in keeping with the trend of Disney protagonists who make a temporary on-screen comeback.⁴⁵² The returning father is also a feature of *Jack Frost*, to be discussed below, as well as *Ghost Dad* (Sidney Poitier, 1990). Here the already-widowed father, Elliot (Bill Cosby), is killed in a car crash yet remains 'alive' as a ghost for three more days until his life insurance policy becomes valid. Elliot's return from the dead ensures the economic future of his children. In this case, the father's presence 'after' death is both reassuring and practical, securing the survival of his offspring before permitting himself to die. Further to this, the father can be seen to return for his own benefit. Mufasa's return places Simba on the 'right path', allowing for the survival of the father through the son. Likewise, Elliot's return, which is based around the paternal duty of provision, secures a better future for his children. In doing so, Elliot's chances of surviving indefinitely by way of generational progression are strengthened. He will be remembered as a good father, and therefore is more likely to be replicated in his children's structuring of their own morals and behaviour.

The recurring theme of the father returning in resurrected or ghostly form reveals a preoccupation with paternal survival and the future of masculinity more generally. It also reflects a wider cultural desire for survival that in the 1990s is inseparable from AIDS. In the previous chapter, I discussed Nadel's suggestion that films such as *Paradise* and *My Girl* can be considered as AIDS narratives. These films focusing on the father's temporary return

⁴⁵² Meredith Cox, Erin Garrett and James A. Graham, "Death in Disney Films: Implications for Children's Understanding of Death", *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 50:4 (2004–5), 277.

from the dead may also be considered as such, drawing on Monica Pearl's discussion of "reincarnation films"; that is, those films in which the dead character returns as a ghost, inhabits a new body, or occupies an existing one.⁴⁵³ These acts of reincarnation "can be read as attempts to give meaning to what is experienced in our Western culture as the unbearable meaninglessness of the virus that causes AIDS".⁴⁵⁴ AIDS not only connotes "meaninglessness", but loss, (premature) death and "abandonment", and the reincarnation narrative attempts to address these anxieties.⁴⁵⁵ Abandonment is a key theme in Faludi's discussion of fathers and sons at the end of the millennium, and in the films discussed here it remains central.⁴⁵⁶ While the father's death is accepted as an inevitable future trauma, it still happens too soon. *Jack Frost* and *Ghost Dad* follow *The Lion King* in having the father die before the child achieves maturity, as do *Twister* and *Contact*. Reincarnation allows for restoration and reassurance simultaneously, a reversal of trauma. Pearl suggests that "[t]he primary anxiety in reincarnation films is... the anxiety of resolution: that ethereal love, but also concrete bodies, will be restored".⁴⁵⁷ These films share this anxiety, channelling it towards a restoration of meaning through the figure of the father, while retaining the underlying notion of crisis that AIDS cements as an indelible feature of the cultural framework of the U.S. during the 1990s. Reincarnation suggests that the apocalyptic event has not been entirely successful; there is still the possibility of being able to harness the future. Here, the father has a second chance to influence the child and in doing so secure his own legacy.

⁴⁵³ Monica B. Pearl, "Symptoms of AIDS in Contemporary Film: Mortal Anxiety in an Age of Sexual Panic", in Michele Aaron (ed.), *The Body's Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desires and Contemporary Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 212.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 210–211.

⁴⁵⁶ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), 596–598.

⁴⁵⁷ Pearl, "Symptoms of AIDS", 213.

The returning father is not confined to films featuring, or aimed at, young children. *Field of Dreams* is entirely consumed with immortalising its dead through reincarnation. Shoeless Joe is only the first; as the film progresses, more and more dead baseball players fill up Ray's field. This project of immortality shapes the film from the beginning. Ray, in his opening narration, reveals that his father died the year Ray and Annie were married, yet this narration occurs over a collection of still photographs of his father. John is immortalised in photographic form even as his mortality is confirmed. The death of the father is established as ambiguous from the outset: much like Mufasa, gone in one sense, he lives on in another.

Field of Dreams is preoccupied with the return of the father and, as in *The Lion King*, this return heralds his rehabilitation. In finally coming to understand his father, Ray trades in resentment for respect. In the process, John ceases to be an old man consigned to memory and is resurrected as young and tangible, suggesting that he now has a future. It is significant that this future is only realised at the very end of the film, when Ray has rectified the breach between them, acknowledging his regrets but also accepting that he is much more like his father than he realised.

Ray's opening narration functions to set up the differences between Ray and John, demonstrated in their support of different baseball teams. While his father supported the Yankees, Ray chose the Dodgers, until the Dodgers left Brooklyn and "we had to find something else to fight about. We did". This explication of difference continues as Ray justifies his building of the baseball diamond in terms of opposition to what his father would have done: "for all I knew he heard voices and ignored them".

Yet in tandem with this conscious separation from his father is an unconscious pull back towards him. "If you build it, he will come", the voice tells Ray, and though he does not

acknowledge the possibility himself, it is his father for whom the field is ultimately built. Ray does his best to actively *disprove* this, originally concluding that “he” is Shoeless Joe, one of eight disgraced Chicago White Sox players found guilty of throwing the 1919 World Series. Ray reveals belatedly that Shoeless Joe, a man wrongly accused and forced to give up his dream as a result, was one of his father's heroes. Shoeless Joe thus acts as a stand-in for Ray's father, yet he remains merely a point on the way to Ray's realisation of reconciliation with his father.

Likewise, the voice's subsequent instructions to “ease his pain” and “go the distance” lead Ray first to Terence Mann, reluctant literary father to a generation of 1960s college kids, and then to Doc ‘Moonlight’ Graham (Burt Lancaster). As a young man Doc Graham played one game in the major leagues, never getting the chance to bat, before being sent back down to the minors. He subsequently decides to become a doctor, as his father was before him. Doc Graham is revealed as a particular type of small-town doctor—“half the towns in America have a Doc Graham”, surmises Mann—one who always went the extra mile for his patients, a “father figure” for the entire town.⁴⁵⁸

As the men that Ray believes he needs to help, the three (Shoeless Joe, Mann and Graham) appear incongruous at first glance. Yet on closer inspection, they all serve a useful function in Ray's quest. All desire an opportunity to play baseball again, whether to fulfil a childhood dream or revisit a much-missed career. In addition, all engender a degree of fatherly spirit towards Ray. Yet at no point during these encounters does the film, or indeed Ray, acknowledge out loud that the “he” who will come is John Kinsella himself. “If you build it, he will come” may also credibly be re-visioned as “If you build it, He will come”, and there is a particular vein of religiosity coursing through *Field of Dreams*. Harlan

⁴⁵⁸ Frank Ardolino, “Ceremonies of Innocence and Experience in *Bull Durham*, *Field of Dreams*, and *Eight Men Out*”, *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 18:2 (Summer 1990), 50.

Jacobson sees Shoeless Joe as this religious figure, the “He” of the command,⁴⁵⁹ yet it seems better applied to John, the father becoming Father, reconstructing the “ancient paternal ideal” inherent in the idea of God.⁴⁶⁰ The booming voice from on high suggests that the force compelling Ray is particularly God-like, just as Mufasa replicates “God speaking from a Burning Bush”.⁴⁶¹ Yet as Nadel argues, Ray is always *unconsciously* aware that “the field of dreams was an altar built to the sacrificed father”.⁴⁶² While the film attempts to deflect from this mission in the choice of surrogates, who both point to Ray's father while denying him at the same time, *Field of Dreams* is always, at its heart, building towards (and for) the father. The Godlike “He” is rooted in the paternal “he”, but his influence is no less powerful.

Only once Ray's ostensible mission is fulfilled—the baseball field is built, Mann has promised to write again, Doc has realised his dream of batting in a major league game, albeit one between two teams of dead men, and the farm is saved—does John appear to his son. As Ray realises that the unassuming man in the catcher's mask at the edge of the field is his father, the voice returns, this time repeating in quick succession the three phrases that have haunted Ray for the duration of the film. The end of Ray's odyssey is to realise that “he” *is* his father. Ray has built this field not to see Shoeless Joe and the rest of the disgraced White Sox play, and not to solve his financial problems, but to achieve that elusive game of catch with his dad. Earlier, when Mann asks Ray about his father, Ray's abiding recollection is one of refusing to engage in this act of bonding: “Imagine, an American boy refusing to play catch with his father”. John's return rectifies this break between father and son that occurred when Ray shunned this activity, long symbolic of the particular and unassailable bond between an American child and his father. Mary Kirtz captures the importance of this final

⁴⁵⁹ Harlan Jacobson, “Shot in the Dark: Born Again Baseball”, *Film Comment* 25:3 (May 1989), 78.

⁴⁶⁰ Freud, “Totem and Taboo”, 149.

⁴⁶¹ Modenessi, “Disney's ‘War Efforts’”, 401.

⁴⁶² Alan Nadel, *Flatlining of the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 52.

moment of bonding: “the two finally have their game of catch, one patriarch ‘passing the ball’ to the other, as the credits begin to roll”.⁴⁶³

This passing of the ball reinforces the generational link between Ray and his father. Just as Mufasa must pass the responsibility of the pridelands to Simba before he can *truly* die, John returns in order to “[pass] the ball” to Ray, who is finally open to this exchange. Frank Ardolino suggests that Ray and the protagonists of other baseball films of the same period are essentially “[searching] for accommodation with the past and future, with fathers and women who will teach them how to create their best selves”.⁴⁶⁴ The implication here, and one that is borne out in the film itself, is that Ray is not fulfilling his potential—is not all the man he could be—until his father fills in the missing pieces.

Kirtz suggests that “the most important directive” of *Field of Dreams* is “honor thy father”.⁴⁶⁵ Though this message has been absorbed into the Reaganite nostalgia of the film, it addresses a wider issue of returning to the father in order to continue the father’s reign. The son does not develop a “new régime”, but sanctifies an old one. Likewise, in *The Lion King* “Simba’s inheritance... is a matter of choosing to reaffirm the Law of the Father”, rather than forging his own path.⁴⁶⁶

The acceptance of responsibility is a key element of upholding the existing regime. What occurs in both *The Lion King* and *Field of Dreams* is the bridging of an existing gap between father and son. Faludi suggests that the break with the father, which both films grapple with, is crucial to the shattered sense of masculinity that pervades 1990s culture in particular. Again, the notion of building a bridge to the future, as utilised repeatedly by Clinton, is employed:

⁴⁶³ Mary K. Kirtz, “Canadian book, American film: *Shoeless Joe* transfigured on a *Field of Dreams*”, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 23 (1995), 29.

⁴⁶⁴ Ardolino, “Ceremonies of Innocence”, 44.

⁴⁶⁵ Kirtz, “Canadian book, American film”, 30.

⁴⁶⁶ Byrne and McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney*, 92.

Down the generations, the father wasn't simply a good sport who played backyard catch, took his son to ball games, or paid for his education. He was a human bridge connecting the boy to an adult life of public engagement and responsibility.⁴⁶⁷

It is crucial, therefore, that this responsibility is both recognised and accepted. Simba cannot become king until he renounces his “naïve and ego-driven” ways.⁴⁶⁸ Yet in doing so, Simba simply trades in one form of narcissism for another, “from life-negating to vital”.⁴⁶⁹ He renounces a selfish existence for one in which the interests of the kingdom are put first, ultimately replicating Mufasa’s legacy and taking his own place in the ‘circle of life’. This acceptance of responsibility pushes the son forward into his own future, to continue his father’s survival. In reference to *Field of Dreams*, Scott Winkler says of Ray and John, “[t]hey construct a postmodern utopia, a 'heaven' where 'dreams come true' because memory has been used in the interest of the future, not as an escape from the future”.⁴⁷⁰ The interest in the propagation of this future is what propels these narratives towards their conclusion.

Freud suggests that “[n]ormally, respect for reality gains the day” when an individual is grieving.⁴⁷¹ However, the tendency to deny the need to sever bonds with the lost object “can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis”.⁴⁷² This melancholic wallowing in the past is what must be avoided if reality is to triumph, much as in those films discussed in the previous chapter, in which the father’s desire to move forward must endure. Confronted by the ghost of his dead father, Simba must face the reality of the ravaged pridelands, not

⁴⁶⁷ Faludi, *Stiffed*, 596.

⁴⁶⁸ Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero*, 98.

⁴⁶⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 53.

⁴⁷⁰ Winkler, “Is this Heaven?”, 715.

⁴⁷¹ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Completed Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), 244.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*

dwell on the looming memory of his father even as he acts in his name. Therefore, while reality is tampered with in order to effect the dead father's return, it is never suspended completely. The father's return must always be geared towards the good of the future rather than acting as a bridge to the past.

Likewise, Ray must not be permitted to follow his father and the dead ball players into the corn beyond the baseball field. When Shoeless Joe invites Mann to go "out there", Ray is angry that he is not allowed to cross the invisible boundary too. Though Mann intimates that he will write again ("what a story it'll make"), suggesting that his venture into the corn is only temporary, throughout the film the fading into the corn has suggested a place beyond which only the dead can go. Ray's desire to follow this far in his father's footsteps cannot be allowed; the drive towards his own death must not be acknowledged. Mann's last words to Ray are, "take care of this family", an instruction to Ray to stay and finish his own job as father. In doing so, however, Ray must channel his own father, in order to ensure John's immortal survival. As Ray and John walk alongside each other, their mannerisms are mirrored along with their stride, suggesting physical inheritance; more importantly, Ray must keep his father's morals and beliefs alive.

This is expressed in a short scene in which Ray ploughs the cornfield with his daughter Karin (Gaby Hoffman) by his side. He lectures Karin about the so-called 'Black Sox' scandal, sharing his belief that Shoeless Joe was not guilty. In ploughing the field Ray involves Karin in the act of turning against the community, who watch as Ray destroys his crop, in turns snide and disbelieving. In doing so, Ray instils in his daughter the notion of the father's supremacy even in the face of overwhelming opposition. The two are thus united in what will turn out to be a quest to bring back Ray's father. This places both Ray and Karin within the "generational continuum". Finally, in telling Karin the story of Shoeless Joe, Ray

continues the work of his father, who would tell the same stories to Ray as a young boy. The difference here is that Karin listens, rapt, while John's own championing of Shoeless Joe caused Ray to tell him "I could never respect a man whose hero was a criminal". In passing on John's stories to Karin, Ray attempts to right the wrong he committed against his own father, ensuring the survival of John's spirit, if not his strictly mortal self. Ray, like Simba, negotiates the survival of his father by coming to identify with him, as Bruzzi posits: the "restoration of the father" that has died relies on "his romanticisation by the son", who must "[come] to understand and identify with the paternal ideal he has constructed".⁴⁷³

Identification with the father is crucial to the narrative of redemption that structures *Jack Frost*, which once again relies on the figure of the returning dead father. In it, Jack (Michael Keaton) is a musician who continually neglects his son Charlie (Joseph Cross) in pursuit of his long-awaited record deal. On Christmas Day, Jack chooses to play a gig instead of going with his family to their cabin, but changes his mind halfway there and is killed in a car crash on the way back. A year later, he returns as a magic snowman to rebuild his relationship with his son.

Jack's character adheres closely to the trope of well-meaning but neglectful dads common to other Hollywood family films of the same period, some of which were discussed in chapter 1. He promises to go to Charlie's hockey game, but loses track of time in the studio. Rather than being a steady presence in the family home, he is most often seen leaving or arriving, marking him out as transient and lacking a fixed paternal influence. While he is away on tour, his wife Gabby (Kelly Preston) takes on the stereotypically male role in their family. She has a steady job in a bank; she shovels snow from the driveway; she threatens to discipline Charlie if his school report is poor; and she fixes a leak under the sink, at which

⁴⁷³ Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-War Hollywood* (London: BFI, 2005), 117.

point Charlie, seeing only the flannel shirt, mistakes his mother for his father. While Gabby fulfils the role of both male and female parent, Charlie is left with no discernible paternal influence. This lack potentially threatens the young boy's development as he approaches adolescence and manhood. In Oedipal terms, he has a limited opportunity to separate from the mother and emulate the father, as his dad is hardly ever there.

Jack, then, is framed as an inadequate provider for his family, not simply in terms of his unstable financial contribution, but in his ability to guide Charlie towards maturity. As a result, his position is threatened on two fronts. When Gabby decorates the house for Christmas, it is Jack's best friend Mac (Mark Addy) who helps, while Jack is too busy preparing for his gig. He is also displaced by Coach Gronic (Henry Rollins), who teaches Charlie how to take a winning shot in hockey. Jack promises to teach Charlie "the J-shot", supposedly superior to Coach Gronic's shot, but never does.

Further to the threat posed by these stand-in father figures, much like the stepfathers in chapter 1, the bond between father and son is damaged when Charlie hands back the harmonica given to him by his dad. The earlier exchange of the harmonica exists as an act of passing on. The instrument is prized by Jack, bought on the day that Charlie was born. "I walked out [of the hospital] in a great mood, bought myself that harmonica. Never had a harmonica that played better than that", he tells Charlie. The harmonica is linked explicitly to a celebration of Jack's fatherhood, and passing it on to Charlie forms a generational link between the two of them. This is ruptured when Charlie, disillusioned by his dad's decision to miss Christmas at the cabin, hands back the harmonica. "I gave this to you", Jack insists, but Charlie drops it in the snow, telling his dad, "I don't want it". The harmonica, symbolic of their father-son relationship and Jack's commitment to Charlie (if he plays the instrument,

Jack will “always hear” him), is discarded. Jack’s subsequent death finalises this fractured bond, as Charlie’s rejection places his survival beyond the self in jeopardy.

Jack’s return occurs when Charlie builds a snowman, as he and his father did the preceding Christmas in a rare moment of bonding. He accessorises the snowman with Jack’s hat and scarf, which he finds in a box along with the discarded harmonica. Later, Charlie plays the harmonica and, as promised, Jack “hears” him and comes back to life as the snowman. Charlie retrieving the harmonica is only the first step in fixing the breach between them, however. Roger Ebert ridicules the lack of scope in Charlie’s relationship with the snowman, in which Charlie focuses on the snowman’s ability to help him beat the school bullies rather than anything more ambitious and otherworldly.⁴⁷⁴ This, however, highlights the true purpose of Jack’s return: not to have an adventure or to unravel the meaning of life, but to offer both guidance and an apology to the only person capable of continuing Jack’s legacy beyond himself.

Jack’s return is framed as a second chance. He thanks Charlie for “giving me a second chance to be your dad”, albeit one that melts all over the kitchen floor, and the focus is ostensibly on forgiveness. However, much like Mufasa’s return is only partially intended as an act of comfort for Simba, Jack’s return serves a parallel purpose too. The bridge between father and son must be rebuilt, and Jack must be the one to bestow on Charlie the necessary tools—physical and mental—for Charlie to become a man in his father’s image, something that, given the influence of Mac and Coach Gronic and the lack of influence from Jack, is far from certain when Jack dies.

The dangers of the son not knowing the father are hammered home by the characterisation of the school bully, Rory (Taylor Handley). In a snowball fight that marks

⁴⁷⁴ Roger Ebert, “Jack Frost”, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 11 Dec 1998, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19981211/REVIEWS/812110301/1023> (30 Nov. 2012)

the start of the Christmas holidays at the beginning of the film, Charlie defeats Rory; a year later, the same fight goes on while Charlie ignores it and trudges home, Rory shouting insults after him. Rory's friend notes that Charlie is "no fun to pick on since his old man died", to which Rory opines that Charlie should "get over it", adding, "I never even met my old man". Rory is an unpleasant bully, the film suggests, because he has no relationship with his father. It becomes imperative, therefore, that Charlie takes this chance to reconcile with Jack; as a suddenly sympathetic Rory suggests later, "Snowdad is better than no dad".

The overall project entails turning Charlie back into the boy he was before his father's death—hard-working member of the hockey team, loyal friend willing to stand up to the bullies—but this time these qualities are a direct result of paternal invention. Early in the film, Charlie protects one of the younger kids from Rory and his gang, yet a year later he ignores their pleas for similar help. It is at this point that the snowman appears, hurling snowballs at the gang until they are defeated and Charlie once again learns the value of protecting his friends, this time with the help of his dad. Implicit in this is also the idea that it is a weak, dispirited Charlie who ignores the bullies. Jack must reinforce his son's masculine development by reigniting in him the desire to stand up and fight.

The second fix that Jack must perform is to finally teach Charlie the "J-shot" and convince him to re-join the hockey team. This not only restores Charlie's self-confidence, but allows Jack to fulfil the promise he made while he was alive, to attend one of Charlie's hockey games. Teaching the "J-shot" also allows him to displace Coach Gronic's influence. Jack further demeans Gronic by frightening him with the presence of a walking, talking snowman, so that later in the film Gronic is a man nervous to be out in the snow, rather than the formidable coach he was previously. At Charlie's hockey game, Charlie scores his long-awaited first goal, the one Gabby suggested Jack was bound to miss if he continued to

prioritise his own commitments. When the film ends, another Christmas on, it features a happy Charlie playing hockey in the front garden with his friends, all thoughts of building a magic snowman forgotten. He has moved on from mourning his father (the past) to living out the life his father has helped engineer (the future). Jack may be gone, but he will be remembered each time Charlie makes the “J-shot”.

The purpose of Jack’s return is to imbue in his son a sense of his father, and thus cement his own future survival. When Mufasa’s ghost reveals itself to Simba, the message is one of responsibility. The same is true of Jack, who discusses with Charlie the importance of “looking out for” his mother. Despite Charlie’s protestations that “I’m only twelve”, Jack reminds him that, “you’ve got responsibilities now, Charlie, and you’ve got to face them”. Only once Jack has (somewhat belatedly) instilled in his son the values that will make him an asset to his father’s name can he leave, this time for good. Gabby sees her dead husband for a matter of minutes before he disappears, reinforcing Jack’s primary need to fix his relationship with his son, rather than see his wife. As the snowman melts away and Jack’s human image fades with it, he tells Charlie, “you’re gonna to be a good man”. For Freud, this is the driving force behind the parent’s narcissistic construction of the child:

The child shall fulfil those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out—the boy shall become a great man and a hero in his father’s place, and the girl shall marry a prince as a tardy compensation for her mother.⁴⁷⁵

These final words bring into focus the necessary outcome of Jack’s return: the guarantee that Charlie will not just be a good boy but a good man. The father is necessary if the son’s masculinity is to be secured; in doing so, he can also secure his own survival.

⁴⁷⁵ Freud, “On Narcissism”, 91.

Reproductive futurism as the father's ultimate legacy

The Oedipal underpinnings of the films discussed above foreground the relationship between father and son. However, the following films explore the daughter negotiating the death of the father: *Armageddon*, *Contact* and *Twister*. While the focus on the father's survival after death remains crucial, these films highlight one particular facet of this in their conclusions: the drive towards reproduction and family that underlies the survival of the father. All three of these films deal in scenarios of disaster and outside threats to American life, underlining the potentially apocalyptic state that the father's death poses on a broader scale. In doing so, the drive towards reproduction that underlies these films marks the survival not only of the father but of humankind more broadly.

Contact focuses on Ellie (Jodie Foster), an astronomer working for SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence). Ellie's mother died in childbirth, and the opening scenes of the film establish a young Ellie's close relationship with her father Ted (David Morse). Ted encourages Ellie's love of science and her hobby of playing with a radio in a bid to make contact with people across the country. "Could we talk to Alaska?" she asks her father. "Could we talk to the moon? Could we talk to Jupiter? Could we talk to Mom?" Ted tells his daughter gently, "I don't think even the biggest radio could reach there". Ellie's quest to talk to her parents is amplified once Ted suffers a heart attack and dies. After the funeral she desperately radios out for her dad: "Dad, are you there? Dad, this is Ellie, come back?" This frantic plea recalls Simba crouching over Mufasa's body, trying to shake him awake, but while Simba flees, Ellie's adult life becomes a quest to resurrect her father.⁴⁷⁶ The film opens with a vision of the universe overlaid with snippets of music and speech representing events of the 20th century, including the prominent announcement of JFK's assassination. Just as the

⁴⁷⁶ Philip Strick, "Contact", *Sight and Sound* 7:10 (October 1997), 44–6.

youthful, Democratic spirit of JFK is resurrected in Clinton (largely by Clinton himself), whose image is used in the film, so Ellie is tasked with bringing her father back to life.

Ellie's career choice relates directly to her father, citing a conversation they had about Venus when she was young. Though she is mocked by her colleagues for pursuing what amounts to "career suicide" (searching for "little green men"), Ted's belief that "if we're the only ones out there, it seems like an awful waste of space" spurs Ellie on. Again, the father's influence triumphs over the beliefs of the wider community. When she does discover communication from elsewhere in the universe, a vindicated Ellie is chosen to go on the mission to discover more. The alien that she encounters takes the form of her father, who uses her childhood nickname ("Sparks"), as well as Ted's oft-repeated saying, "small moves, Ellie. Small moves". In addition, the beach that they meet on resembles a drawing that a young Ellie gives to her dad at the beginning of the film. On her return, the rest of the scientific community dispute Ellie's claims that she interacted with an extra-terrestrial, yet Ellie chooses to put faith in her father (and the alien's projection of him), rather than her fellow scientists. The film ends with her teaching a group of children about the universe, echoing her father's rationale for the existence of extra-terrestrials: "if it's only us, it seems like a big waste of space". Ellie's scientific ventures have been modified by both a lack of funding and her relationship with Joss (Matthew McConaughey), who challenges her view of science as inherently 'good'. However, that the film ends on this echoing of her father's speculative ethos regarding the universe reinforces the passing of the ball from Ted to Ellie, who cements the father's primacy even after death by voicing his beliefs to the next generation.

Similarly, *Twister* concerns a protagonist whose career is shaped by the death of her father at a young age. Jo (Helen Hunt) sees her father swept away by a tornado when he

attempts to rescue the family's dog. This traumatic moment manifests itself in Jo's decision, as an adult, to become a "tornado chaser", designing equipment that can be deposited inside the tornado to reveal its inner workings. Just as Ellie wishes to prove that contact can be made "beyond" (inherent in this being the promise that her father, too, is not beyond reach), Jo's need to discover how a tornado works is structured around a need to understand and explain her father's death. With explanation comes the hope of negation.

Underlying both films, alongside the survival of the father through the child, is a concerted focus on the establishment of a romantic relationship between the protagonist and a suitable man. In *Contact*, this relationship is between Ellie and Joss. In *Twister*, Jo's estranged husband and fellow tornado chaser Bill (Bill Paxton) is attempting to get her to sign their divorce papers; the two later reconcile. Though Jo wishes to enact some kind of paternal survival by explaining—and thus nullifying—her father's death, this must not come at the expense of the next generation, as exemplified by Bill's speech, in which he chastises Jo for endangering her own life chasing tornadoes:

Killing yourself won't bring your dad back. I'm sorry that he died, but that was a long time ago. You've got to move on. Stop living in the past and look what you've got right in front of you. Me, Jo.

Jo's career is one way of foregrounding the father and working towards his survival, in this case through the wish fulfilment of reversing his death through scientific discovery. Yet what overtakes this is Jo's own contribution to the next generation, in which her father's future, and her own, can be continued indefinitely. To successfully honour her father, Jo must move beyond her single-minded quest to understand his death and instead focus on generating life. Naming the tornado monitoring equipment "Dorothy", as if it were a surrogate child, is not

enough. Jo and Bill's reconciliation, and the reversal of their plans to divorce, is the first step to realising "the extension of individual life into that of the species", in this case the survival of her own father through her acceptance of her place within, rather than at the end of, the "generational continuum".⁴⁷⁷

This focus on the establishment of a romantic relationship is more pronounced in these films concentrating on the daughter dealing with the father's death. While the son wishes to both overcome and venerate the father, these father-daughter scenarios speak to another facet of the Oedipus complex: the young girl's need to renounce her attachment to her father in favour of a healthy adult relationship. The images of a young Ellie and a young Jo as a precursor to the main action of *Contact* and *Twister* reinforce such an early attachment to the father. This must be tempered later by their attachment to a different man. The father is still a structuring force, but his influence is diminished just enough that he survives without jeopardising the next generation.

Armageddon ends with a similar reiteration of the importance of the next generation. Faced with an oncoming asteroid that threatens to wipe out the planet, NASA enlists the help of a team of oil rig drillers, led by Harry Stamper (Bruce Willis), to help them destroy the asteroid before it hits Earth. For much of the film, Harry disapproves openly of his daughter Grace's (Liv Tyler) boyfriend A.J. (Ben Affleck), one of the young drillers, declaring to the rest of the team that "she's better than that. She's better than all of us". Here Harry adheres to the narcissistic parental belief that his daughter's life should be, and will be, better than his. Yet at the end of the film, when Harry and A.J. must leave the spacecraft in order to blow up the asteroid and complete the mission, Harry forces A.J. back into the airlock, where he cannot be harmed. "You gotta take care of my little girl now", Harry tells him. "That's your

⁴⁷⁷ Freud, "On Narcissism", 78.

job. I've always thought of you as a son. Always. I'd be damn proud to have you marry Grace". As A.J. is carried back to the safety of the ship, leaving Harry alone and exposed, Harry's final words are, "my son".

Here, Harry is quick to rewrite the past in the interests of the future. His contempt for A.J. that marks their early relationship is recast as paternal pride, a way of gaining a son before death. At the beginning of the film, Harry chastises Grace for not calling him 'Dad', revealing a fracture in their relationship. Harry's declaration that A.J. is his son is a way of cementing his place in the "generational continuum" before he dies.

The film ends on Grace and A.J.'s wedding, with large pictures of Harry and the other dead astronauts flanking the aisle. In giving his belated blessing, Harry has ensured a future for Grace and A.J. that in turns cements his own future through the prospect of their eventual reproduction. *Armageddon* drives home the importance of sacrifice for the next generation throughout. Before A.J. leaves for space, he and Grace share a romantic picnic. Kissing him, Grace asks if he thinks anyone else is doing the same thing at that exact moment. "I hope so", A.J. responds. "Otherwise, what am I trying to save?" At the same time, Harry visits his own father and confesses that Grace is angry with him. His father reassures him, "God gave us children so we'd have roses in December". The build-up to the mission is characterised by platitudes to securing the next generation, and is further reinforced on its successful completion. Chick (Will Patton), whose ex-wife has previously blocked his visitation, is reunited with his young son on landing. Rockhound (Steve Buscemi), whose interests prior to the mission extend to sex, money and women, returns to Earth and promptly tells the woman he met previously in a strip club that "I wanna have babies". For Grace, the death of her father is subsumed beneath the future he has bequeathed

to her in saving A.J. In doing so, Harry writes his own survival into the story from beyond the grave.

Apocalypse averted

Armageddon also raises implications of apocalypse, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the extent to which films featuring the death of the father can be considered as part of a wider apocalyptic narrative in Hollywood. The film employs a common apocalyptic scenario, in which the world is threatened with obliteration through natural disaster on an epic scale, much like *Independence Day* and *Deep Impact*. Yet even those films that do not concern such world-ending scenarios also reflect the concerns inherent in apocalyptic cinema. The death of the father suggests more than just the death of an individual man, but the death of something more fundamental. Stability, meaning, certainty: all of these things threaten to disappear with the father when he dies. The persistent focus on young protagonists—Simba, Charlie, Ellie, Jo—losing their fathers creates a sense of premature abandonment. The need to fill the space left by the father consumes these films. If the death of the child is apocalyptic in the sense that it heralds the death of the future (concurrent with notions about the end of the world), then the death of the father adds another facet to this crisis: the loss of knowledge regarding how to be a man and therefore how to navigate through the masculine crisis.

There is a belief that with the father's death comes the death of a recognisable form of masculinity, that somehow the father 'knows' how to be a man in a way that the son does not. Both *The Lion King* and *Jack Frost* play on this gap in masculine inheritance and in doing so raise the problem of sons deviating from the father's path through the influence of men who become paternal stand-ins. Sturken's link between the crisis of masculinity and

“paranoid narratives” remains relevant here.⁴⁷⁸ While these two films do not resort to disaster scenarios or indeed the “spectacular violence” deemed a feature of “apocalyptic discourse”, the masculine crisis feeds into a less violent, but equally threatening, apocalyptic scenario in which men are confronted with their own erasure, and their sons are confronted with having to find their own way.⁴⁷⁹ This recalls Faludi’s framing of the father-son relationship in the 1990s as being one characterised by the son’s desperate quest to discover his father and in doing so discover himself.

In *Independence Day*, the importance of the father passing on the ‘right’ kind of legacy is explored through the character of Russ (Randy Quaid), who is cast as a failed father throughout. His older son Miguel (James Duval) is scathing towards him, telling him “you’re not my father, you’re just a man who married my mother”. Russ is an ex-veteran suffering from PTSD, who believes that he was abducted by aliens and as a result is a laughing-stock in their small rural community. The masculine persona of the soldier is undermined by the stories of trauma and alien abduction. His neighbours speculate continually over whether or not the aliens participated in sexual activity with Russ, suggesting the ‘passive’ role of being probed. In death, however, Russ is able to redeem both his masculinity and his fatherhood. As an amateur pilot, he volunteers for the mission of attacking the alien spacecraft in the film’s last-ditch attempt to destroy the alien interlopers. Finding his missiles have jammed, Russ decides to take on the suicidal task of flying directly into the aliens’ weapon. This action recasts Russ as a hero, as he sacrifices himself for the survival of the country as a whole, yet beyond this he also regains the position of ‘father’ in the moment of death. Preparing to attack, he radios back to the command centre: “Tell my

⁴⁷⁸ Sturken, “*Affliction*”, 203–4.

⁴⁷⁹ Catherine Russell, “Decadence, Violence and the Decay of History: Notes on the Spectacular Representation of Death in Narrative Film, 1965 to 1990”, in Christopher Sharrett (ed.), *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film* (Washington D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1993), 178.

children I love them”. On the ground his children are upset, but the focus is on Miguel, who finally reneges on his disappointment in his father. “What your father did was very brave. You should be proud of him”, says one of the Air Force commanders, to which Miguel replies, “I am”. Here, the death of the father is acceptable because it allows for his legacy to be restored. Miguel’s pride paves the way for an adult life in which he will both remember, and pass on, his father’s belated model of heroic masculinity.

This focus on the next generation, and on the projection of the self into the future through the process of reproductive futurism, is a crucial element of the father’s legacy. It is not enough that the father simply pass on his stories or his responsibilities. He must also instil in his progeny the importance of striving towards the future through the child, as he himself has done after death. The final scenes of *The Lion King*, when Simba’s cub is held up proudly for all the animals to see, demonstrates this desire to see the father’s reign extended indefinitely, recalling the survival of the ego through succession, as discussed previously in relation to Freud. In doing so, the living son, reconfigured as father, is also guaranteed survival, and the extension of the self continues.

The son can only survive as the son-as-father, however, once it is clear that what he will be passing on will be his own father’s legacy. Part of this legacy is the affirmation that fatherhood and reproduction are the only acceptable way forward. Mann’s instruction to Ray, to take care of his family, roots Ray firmly within the role of father above all else. The man who desires to join the dead baseball players must not be allowed space to surface. Ray must internalise the importance of family, solidifying further his gradual understanding of his father’s priorities—family over self-fulfilment—that Ray was unable to appreciate until now.

This is also the lesson that Jack must learn in *Jack Frost*. Alive, he tries to impress upon Charlie the importance of having dreams, comparing Charlie’s desire to be like his

hockey player hero, Wayne Gretzky, to Jack's own desire to be a "really great musician". While Charlie's dream amounts to putting up a poster and joining the hockey team, Jack's involves the considerable sacrifice of time and paternal involvement. For Jack, this dream excuses his neglectful behaviour. However, snowman-Jack confesses that "I was so busy trying to make my mark on the world", he failed to realise that "you [Charlie] were my mark on the world". This notion of "making a mark" underlies much of this drive towards an immortal future. It connotes purpose and an indelible impression—a piece of the self—that will "exist when others are no longer there", the crucial motivation for survival as identified by Canetti.⁴⁸⁰ Being a "really great musician" died with Jack, but Charlie is a symbol of something more, something better, than Jack can still achieve.

The Lion King also invests in reproduction and the continuation of the family line as the only permitted outcome for Simba. Though he begins the film as a cub, the image most often employed in merchandising and promotion, Simba spends a considerable portion of *The Lion King* as an adolescent, then adult, lion. As a cub, when told that he and Nala are betrothed—a rather antiquated imagining of adult lion relations from Disney—Simba is adamant that they cannot be married, as "Nala's my friend". His altered feelings towards Nala are encapsulated in the scenes that accompany the song "Can You Feel The Love Tonight", in which the two lions' nuzzling and wrestling has definite sexual overtones. This is swiftly transferred into reproductive function, as rendered in the final scene, in which their child is produced as proof of Simba's acceptance of the "extension" of his life (and his father's before him) "into that of the species".⁴⁸¹ This marks Simba's wholehearted acceptance of his existence as "a link in the chain", over and above his "own purposes".⁴⁸²

⁴⁸⁰ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 265.

⁴⁸¹ Freud, "On Narcissism", 78.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

The acceptance of responsibility, and the channelling of this responsibility into the well-being of the next generation, becomes the most fundamental element of the father's legacy.

What is also being saved is the image of masculinity embedded in the figure of the 'good' father, a masculinity that remains anchored to a heterosexual, white American model of manhood. What becomes most dangerous is the threatening of this chain of events, the suggestion that outside forces may prevent it from taking place. As discussed above, Mufasa's future is threatened by the fraternal, responsibility-free existence of Pumbaa and Timon, who provide an attractive alternative to Simba. Being males of two different species, Timon and Pumbaa doubly oppose the notion of reproduction as a way of attaining a future. It is further threatened by Scar and his characterisation in opposition to both family and fertility, as expressed in the devastation of the once-green landscape under his rule.

Conclusion: Negating death through paternity

In *High Fidelity*, as discussed briefly at the beginning of this chapter, this compulsion towards the future becomes apparent in Rob's soliloquy following the death of Laura's father. Ruminating on the reasons for their original break up, Rob declares

I can see now that I never really committed to Laura. I always had one foot out the door, and that prevented me from doing a lot of things, like thinking about my future. I guess it made more sense to commit to nothing. To keep my options open. And that's suicide. By tiny, tiny increments.

Rob's realisation that he would rather foster a comfortable, permanent relationship with Laura than pursue a sexual relationship with a glamorous musician like Maria La Salle (Lisa Bonet), who he dreams might one day immortalise him in the liner notes of her CD, ends his own protracted adolescence. The son becomes the (potential) father as the father before him

dies, a potentiality borne of Rob's acceptance of an 'adult', heterosexual relationship. Rob's belief that "commit[ting] to nothing" is akin to a kind of "suicide" reinforces the notion that the man's survival is linked inextricably to the promise of continuation.

Rob's reunion with Laura is demonstrated in one final scene. In it, Laura has arranged for Rob to DJ at a local club, part of his new long-term career plan to make something of his stagnating record shop business. The two teenagers in whom Rob has invested some time and money to further their music are also shown DJing, suggesting that Rob's concern for the next generation has begun to pay off in the shape of these two surrogate son figures. On stage, Rob's colleague Barry (Jack Black) and his band play "Let's Get It On", a paean to sex that underlines all the elements of this scene: Rob's "suicidal" commitment to nothing has been replaced successfully with a relationship, a career, and an investment in youth, all of which set Rob up for a reproductive future of his own.

The death of the father, then, does not so much enact an elimination or a forgetting as it does a continuation. The death of the father, necessary for the son's own realisation of manhood, does not extend to the death of his ghost, and it is the ghost that "they [the sons] find themselves enthralled by".⁴⁸³ The influence of the father's ghost is cemented by his frequent on-screen return, and ensures that even in death, the father ultimately survives, thus realising through fatherhood a version of immortality. Recognising the "ambivalence" at the heart of the Oedipal structure, these films acknowledge the son's desire for supremacy while refusing to eliminate fully the authority of the father.⁴⁸⁴ His return functions to secure his legacy, by ensuring the child is prepared for a responsible adult life, within which he is likely to keep his father's example of paternity and masculinity in mind. It also reinforces the primacy of the "generational continuum", balancing the knowledge of human mortality

⁴⁸³ Ryder, "Politics after the Death of the Father", 116.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

which faces every father (and every son who will become a father) with the knowledge that this mortality can be thwarted, to a degree, through the investment in what will continue to exist once the father is no longer there.

The father's death reveals a masculine instability and an anxiety over the very future promised by Clinton, as addressed in the introduction. The fundamental concern inherent in the crisis of masculinity, of surviving as men, is acknowledged in the father's demise. The father's death represents a wider cultural death: a loss of male power, authority, and knowledge, all of which somehow must be restored to the son. Alongside the son's masculine survival, the father must also be seen to survive. If "it's a little child who will lead him" to safety, this ability must be seen to be believed.⁴⁸⁵ In bringing the father back from the dead, whether through reincarnation or reproduction, Hollywood's project of rehabilitation through fatherhood is legitimated, constructing a sense of immortality from the paradoxical fact of his death.

⁴⁸⁵ Amy Aronson and Michael Kimmel, "The Saviors and the Saved: Masculine Redemption in Contemporary Films", in Peter Lehman (ed.), *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), 44.

CONCLUSION

In the past four chapters I have examined numerous representations of fatherhood in Hollywood from the beginning of the 1990s up to the turn of the millennium. Dealing primarily with themes of survival and death, built upon the foundations of contemporary anxieties surrounding masculinity, this thesis has sought to interrogate the ways in which Hollywood has employed fatherhood as a viable method of ‘saving’ men and visualising their future.

A focus on survival suggests that there is something from which to survive, in this case the contemporary crisis of masculinity, understood here as an amalgamation of scrutiny over the construction of masculine identity and the perception (if not the reality) of lost power. Though in reality the crisis of masculinity is an exaggeration of persistent—rather than unique—unease regarding men’s roles, Hollywood wholeheartedly adopts the crisis and its attendant anxieties regarding erasure and continuance during the 1990s. In doing so, it absorbs the anxieties regarding masculinity and fatherhood that persisted in U.S. culture during the decade, and seeks a solution in the figure of the father and the promise of reproductive futurism. Amidst a preoccupation with apocalypse and destruction in the build-up to the millennium, rendered through cataclysmic scenarios on the big screen, Hollywood constructs a domestic apocalypse in which fatherhood becomes the one solution powerful enough to negate extinction for men struggling to define a coherent masculine identity.

The threat of erasure is centred specifically on men, perceived as figures of crisis and victims of diminished power and dwindling patriarchal authority in a postfeminist, technological age. Edelman’s statement that the “Child... [serves]... as the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now—or later” remains

indicative of the wider project of resurrecting and restoring fatherhood in Hollywood.⁴⁸⁶ From the lingering spectre of AIDS to the temporary destruction of the future rendered in the on-screen death of the child, apocalyptic undercurrents can be identified that make paternal survival both necessary and yet fragile.

Certainly, traditional apocalypse films produced during the decade often rely on the ‘good’ father to bring about salvation. The self-sacrifice of Russ in *Independence Day* and Harry in *Armageddon* provide two particularly extreme examples. Equally, the actions of Harry (Pierce Brosnan) in *Dante’s Peak* demonstrate the need for a strong father figure to guide a family—and a community—out of the catastrophe caused by a volcanic eruption. Harry’s ability to perform this act of salvation, like Alan Grant in *Jurassic Park*, is filtered entirely through the adoption of a paternal persona. Harry is reluctant to forge a relationship with anyone after the death of his partner in a previous volcanic eruption. However, he finds himself thrust into a surrogate father role as he attempts to save the mayor (Linda Hamilton) and her two young children from the volcano that is threatening to wipe out their idyllic small town. As the film ends, Harry confirms his dedication to this new paternal role by assuring the mayor’s son, Graham (Jeremy Foley), that he will keep his promise to take the children fishing. The father is able to save the family, but crucially it is fatherhood that allows Harry to be saved from a lonely life in which he can only derive meaning from the volcanoes he monitors, a fundamentally helpless position in which he is doomed only to watch, rather than participate. “I’ve always been better at feeling out volcanoes than people”, Harry declares early in the film. It is this attitude that must be reversed if Harry is to discover a more meaningful and long-lasting version of survival in the simulacrum of immortality bound up in the appeal of reproductive futurism. Outside of these overtly apocalyptic films,

⁴⁸⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 18.

the same transfer of masculine focus is at play more broadly in Hollywood: the man, threatened with erasure, turns towards fatherhood and in doing so is permitted access to a future that appears diminished in the context of the crisis of masculinity.

In constructing the father as the figure through which the apocalyptic notion of masculine erasure might be averted, Hollywood puts its faith in a paternal figure viewed with both reverence and doubt in the U.S. during this period. In approaching this thesis from an American Studies perspective, I have sought to situate these films within a sociocultural context, demonstrating how themes of paternal rehabilitation are influenced by real-life concerns surrounding fathers and fatherhood. This approach also ensures that these films are viewed as products of a particular cultural moment, one in which masculine insecurity, debates over paternal importance and involvement, and the future as a tangible millennial event, coalesced. Contemporary anxieties over the father, whether regarding his absence, his failure, or his disappointments, are not excised from the Hollywood narrative of survival-through-fatherhood, and these films provide a lens through which to understand these issues.

Within this framework, the use of psychoanalytic theory reveals the broader drive towards survival that occupies these films. Concerns over real fathers are elevated to the symbolic: while images of fatherhood dominate the screen, it is not merely his presence, but the restoration of his legacy, that is sought. In the father's on-screen death, these concerns find their most overt explication as he is seen to abandon the child before imparting sufficient guidance and influence. This disappearance, a 'slipping away' that leaves the son or daughter floundering and uncertain, reflects those accusations—at public and policy level—of paternal abandonment and its detrimental effect on subsequent generations. In death, in the threat of 'unparenthood'; in legal erasure; everywhere, the anxiety of fading away permeates. This fading away, captured in the men's disappearance into the corn in

Field of Dreams, reveals the drive towards death that must be obscured. Recapturing fatherhood becomes not only desirable, but necessary for the realisation of the future: a future that draws ever nearer with the dawn of the new millennium.

It is the father in these films, rather than the child, that retains primacy. Concerns over the father and his presence in the family in the 1990s generally extended to fears over the effect of poor or absent fathering on the child. In Hollywood, however, the same concerns coalesce around giving the father a second chance to prove himself, not so much for the good of the child but for the continued survival—and thus dominance—of the father. Those concerns that arise from the sociocultural context of these films extend beyond reality to inform a wider project of crisis, survival and redemption. The returning father, re-emerging temporarily from death, provides reassurance for the child. Yet beyond this, the endeavour is revealed to be an ultimately selfish one. In returning to provide guidance to his progeny, the father is able to secure his own survival by passing on his own legacy. In “On Narcissism”, Freud states that “[t]he individual does actually carry on a twofold existence: one to serve his own purposes and the other as a link in a chain”, suggesting that the two are not always compatible in the individual’s mind.⁴⁸⁷ Yet here the two are revealed as one and the same. The father returns to strengthen that “link in a chain” that he and his child form beyond his mortal self. In doing so, he “serve[s] his own purposes” insofar that it is his survival that is secured in this ostensibly selfless return. Equally, the bereaved father who wishes to re-establish a reproductive future by investing in another child acknowledges the importance of this continued link to the future in the narcissistic pursuit of his own immortality.

⁴⁸⁷ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction”, in James Strachey (ed. and trans), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), 78.

This focus on upholding paternal supremacy becomes all-important in a decade characterised by two intertwined strands of perceived crisis centred around fatherhood specifically and around masculinity more generally. At the same time, there is a concerted focus in these films on eliminating those paternal stand-ins that only serve to undermine the father and his quest for survival. In particular, the father's fractious relationship with the law reveals the unease of usurpation. In being constructed as the visible, viable solution to masculine crisis, such obstacles to fatherhood must be suppressed. The circumvention of legal authority, however, simply allows for the continued authority of the father, a transfer of power rather than a dismantling of it. Though in the films discussed in chapter 1 a triumph over the law is framed as a victory for the 'son' battling against an unfeeling patriarch, in the end this must be read as a continued victory for the father. In the preceding chapters, the fallibility of the father is recognised, and the consequence of his failing to harness fatherhood is acknowledged. The outcome, however, must see the triumph of the paternal figure, and his ultimate restoration.

The approach becomes one of balance: to acknowledge the disillusion with fathers that underlies the contemporary masculine crisis, while constructing the father—and fatherhood—as the paradoxical saviour of men. There are elements of transformation that accompany this balancing act. The father must accept responsibility, renounce frivolity and, perhaps most fundamentally, 'grow up'. Such a persistent narrative of transformation involves the recognition that fatherhood is the only role through which survival can be guaranteed. Yet what remains is always a particular image of fatherhood, one that separates the 'good' fathers from those unworthy of survival. In focusing so singularly on fatherhood, Hollywood reveals a particular reproductive anxiety underlying this drive towards the restoration of the paternal. Roof suggests that reproductive anxiety is symptomatic of a wider

cultural anxiety, and that “the father’s alignment of reproduction with conceptions of continuity represents a particularly suspicious, Symbolic instance of overcompensation for an order that is giving way”.⁴⁸⁸ This thesis has argued that the focus on fatherhood in Hollywood exists as a manifestation of such reproductive anxiety, concerned as it is with grasping the future that becomes available through reproduction and an insertion into the heteronormative order of reproductive futurism. The uncertainties inherent in the crisis of masculinity are channelled towards the establishment of this reproductive future in a bid to deny the apocalyptic potential in this “order that is giving way”.

Just as prescribing a certain type of fatherhood is necessarily limiting, tying fatherhood so closely to the prospect of masculine survival becomes problematic when the space outside of fatherhood is rendered uninhabitable through a denial of its worth or viability. In the films discussed, heroism is reconstructed through the paternal image, channelling the “domestic triumph” suggested by Jeffords that puts the future in the hands of ordinary American men, always presuming these men are unmarked by any ‘other’ race, class or sexuality.⁴⁸⁹ In these films, fatherhood is almost exclusively filtered through a vision of white American masculinity, relying equally on a middle-class construction of the family that allows for the obfuscation of economic mitigations that may affect the performance of “therapeutic”, time-rich fatherhood.⁴⁹⁰ Working-class fatherhood is problematised in *Falling Down*, and is marginalised elsewhere. Equally, chapter 2 demonstrates the requirements of heteronormative fatherhood, performed ‘straight’ even by gay men if they are to benefit from its salvific promise. In *Dante’s Peak* the fact that the volcano threatens to wipe out the “second best place to live” in the U.S, reveals the reach of this sense of crisis. The threat of

⁴⁸⁸ Judith Roof, *Reproductions of Reproduction: Imaging Symbolic Change* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 13.

⁴⁸⁹ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 166.

⁴⁹⁰ Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood In America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 244.

extinction—of non-survival—has infiltrated the very core of white, middle-class America, as the community gathering in *Dante's Peak* makes clear, presenting a sea of concerned faces with few non-white characters in evidence. Likewise, it is the men of this version of America, existing at the tail end of the “American century”, who are characterised as those most in need, and most deserving, of a future. Paternal restoration must always be extended to the ‘right’ men, in order that hegemonic masculinity be upheld.

While limiting the reach of fatherhood and electing to focus on the straight, white American man as a figure of crisis, within this paradigm Hollywood suggests that as the millennium approaches, any man can adopt this heroic position and envisage himself as an immortal being. If not in the sense that he might live forever (a concept that threatens the ‘reality’ of these films), this immortality is rendered instead in the belief that some part of him, that “immortal substance” of Freud’s imagining, might continue down the generational line.⁴⁹¹ Therefore, as discussed in chapter 4, the father’s own survival is often bolstered by the passing on of both his personal legacy and a wider legacy of reproductive futurism, in the hope of ensuring the child’s own place in this “generational continuum”.⁴⁹²

Conversely, to fail to recognise this, or to wilfully choose a different path, is to forfeit such a survival. Edelman’s theory of reproductive futurism allows for the queer space outside of this constant drive towards investment in the future to be glimpsed. Though recognising the human desire for self-preservation and reproduction, in identifying reproductive futurism as a particularly powerful political and social construct, Edelman maintains that this is not the only drive at play. In identifying reproductive futurism as something other than natural and unquestionable, an alternative can be acknowledged. To embrace the death drive, which stands in opposition to reproductive futurism, is not to

⁴⁹¹ Freud, “On Narcissism”, 78.

⁴⁹² Peter Blos, *Son and Father: Before and Beyond the Oedipus Complex* (London: The Free Press, 1985), 6.

embrace imminent death so much as to signal an acceptance of the reality of this end point of life over the fantasy of the “generational continuum”. The negative space that arises when the fulfilment of the next generation is recognised as something other than inevitable can be seen in the films examined through the course of this thesis. It is articulated in the gap between the father and the future following the death of the child, as discussed in chapter 3, in which survival is disrupted by the erasure of the preceding generation. In chapter 2, this negative space is perhaps most vehemently denied and yet at the same time most visible in the depictions of gay male characters who have not ‘chosen’ fatherhood. As chapter 1 demonstrates, to occupy this space is to step (or be pushed) outside of the law, to take the position of the “non-father” that disrupts the supposed natural order of humanity.

It is therefore interesting that this negativity, and what may be acknowledged as a queer space in which anti-futurism is permitted to exist, is displaced forcefully onto the figure of the mother in a significant number of these films. These films emerge in what may be viewed as a postfeminist period in the U.S.; indeed, this informs the development of the contemporary crisis of masculinity to a great extent, particular regarding the perception of diminished power on the part of men. *Falling Down* is perhaps most overt in its anti-feminist stance, relying as it does on the image of the mother as an unreasonable and vindictive figure intent on severing the father-child link. *Mrs. Doubtfire* reveals another element of anti-feminist backlash: that of the father outperforming the mother at motherhood. Yet beyond this, the figure of the mother in these films becomes a convenient point of displacement and disavowal.

In their uncomfortable acknowledgement of the space *outside* of fatherhood and the survival inherent in reproductive futurism, these films struggle with how to neutralise and renounce such a space. For men to exist within this negative space is to deny their future

survival by placing them in opposition to the future. Instead, the mother becomes identified with anti-futurism. As stated in the introduction, the binary position that occupies this thesis is the one between father and non-father, yet the mother has remained on the periphery, often associated with the creation of the non-father. In chapter 1, this takes the form of mothers being partially responsible for the father's removal from the family. Legal intervention reveals the negative space outside of the family. The mother does not occupy this space; rather, she must take responsibility for the placement of the father within it. In blurring the line between the law's power and the mother's power, it becomes possible to equate the mother with a drive towards the father's anti-future and failure to survive.

In chapter 3, however, the mother is herself placed within this queer space of anti-futurism, adopting the melancholic position in opposition to the father's mourning. Content to focus on the past, rather than the future, the mother once again proves to be an obstacle to the father's survival. In refusing to focus on re-establishing reproduction and moving beyond the death of the child, she reveals the fragility of paternal survival alongside the dangers of a failure of reproductive futurism itself.

In chapter 2, mothers are again charged with occupying a queer position insofar as they are permitted the most progressive and open-minded view of familial relations. Yet this ostensibly positive position is later revealed as working within the confines of reproductive futurism, and remains reliant on a heteronormative imagining of family and fatherhood, despite any weak protests to the contrary. The queer space outside of reproductive futurism is reserved for those mothers who do not desire children (Katherine) and, more pertinently, those men who reject fatherhood. This queer position is projected onto gay men, preserving an image of heterosexual, masculine fatherhood at the same time as reinforcing the threat to the future caused by AIDS. Yet nowhere in these films is there potential for any man—gay

or straight—to reject fatherhood without also rejecting a future. The space in which the drive of reproductive futurism might be refused does not form another recognisable “side”: as Edelman states, the existence of such a “side” remains obscured by the pervasive nature of reproductive futurism.⁴⁹³ Reproductive futurism remains the centre; all that remains is the periphery, a space coded as both queer and, in the process, negative and anti-futuristic, always assuming that the future is something to be desired rather than challenged or subverted, avoiding any suggestion of alternative creativity or possibility.⁴⁹⁴ Hollywood accepts this space as undesirable and potentially dangerous. Only erasure exists in this space in these films, in which removal from the family becomes a kind of death, if not literal then akin to being erased from the future. The alternatives to fatherhood are seldom articulated in a positive way. Any move outside of the paternal model leads back to the threat of “unlife” as discussed in chapter 2.

This queer space is often designated as being narcissistic, entwined as it is with the notion of *jouissance*, what Bersani defines as the “exploded limits” of pleasure/pain⁴⁹⁵ and what Edelman associates with the death drive and the queer rejection of reproductive futurism.⁴⁹⁶ In turning away from this relentless drive towards the future, the individual becomes free to focus on their own desires, rather than channelling such desires forward into the next generation. However, as I have discussed, the turn towards fatherhood may be viewed as equally narcissistic, albeit also more socially acceptable in its narcissism. The sacrifice inherent in the role of the father obscures the existence of this parental narcissism, yet it cannot be entirely erased. Here the function of the paternal saviour model is crystallised as a tool by which masculinity may be shored up and patriarchy may, as a result,

⁴⁹³ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

⁴⁹⁴ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

⁴⁹⁵ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 24.

⁴⁹⁶ Edelman, *No Future*, 25.

be upheld. In shutting out large numbers of men even whilst promoting fatherhood as the key to longevity and the future, Hollywood maintains the parameters of dominant masculinity, without ever questioning its need to survive in the first place. There is no question in these films that this patriarchal survival is necessary. Rather, it becomes the only chance of projecting a recognisable vision of the American family into the future.

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, constructing survival through the father is broadly successful in Hollywood up to the millennium. What often begins as a knowing eye roll at the typically disappointing father—he is selfish, or disinterested, or ungrateful, or else so difficult to fathom that the son has simply stopped trying—inevitably becomes a gaze of veneration, a realisation that father knows best after all. Investment in the father halts the apocalyptic erasure of masculinity by creating the future from a figure of the son's past, restoring certainty to a world perpetually threatened by crisis.

There is an undeniable optimism at the heart of the films I have examined during the course of this thesis, despite the recurrent themes of erasure and death that dominate their narratives. The drive towards renewal and rehabilitation is broadly successful: the father is restored in time, avoiding the previously threatened eradication. What occurs after the millennium in the U.S., however, threatens to disrupt this model of survival yet again. In the introduction I discussed President Clinton's persistent millennial rhetoric, in which he spoke first of building, and later crossing, a bridge to the future. Such statements vocalised the drive towards the future that Edelman identifies as inherent to the root of the American political order, a drive of both hope and sacrifice. Clinton's final State of the Union address in 2000 continued the bridge metaphor he established in his earlier addresses: "My fellow Americans, we have crossed the bridge we built to the 21st century", the President told the

nation, adding that “we stand on the mountaintop of a new millennium”.⁴⁹⁷ Clinton, too, had crossed his own bridge, making the transition from ‘son’ to ‘father’ that his advisers deemed crucial to his own survival as president into the millennium. Clinton was no longer just Chelsea’s dad, the willing “new man” of the White House; he had successfully achieved the status of symbolic national father.⁴⁹⁸

Clinton gave his final State of the Union in January 2000, eight months before the slightly delayed election result that saw George W. Bush installed as the first American president of the new millennium. The culmination of a decade in Hollywood that saw a heavy investment in the restoration of the father, often through the figure of the child and especially through the son, was a real-life instance of paternal restoration. If, as discussed in the introduction, Bush Sr. was the somewhat disappointing father figure in terms of his presidency, the election of his son provided the opportunity for a rewrite and the prospect of rehabilitation and survival. Bush Jr. even oversaw a replication of his father’s war in the Gulf, as the son becomes symbolic of the father’s second chance.

In his 2001 inaugural address, Bush Jr. begins by inserting himself into the “generational continuum” of presidents: “I am honoured and humbled to stand here where so many of America’s leaders have come before me, and so many will follow”. Though he makes no overt reference to his father (choosing, instead, to invoke God, the ultimate symbolic father), in acknowledging his place in the line of presidents—those chosen fathers of the nation—Bush Jr. invokes the father-son line of succession, adding, “now we must choose if the example of our fathers and mothers will inspire us or condemn us”.⁴⁹⁹ The case of Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. provides a public example of the drive towards inspiration, and thus

⁴⁹⁷ William J. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union” (27 Jan. 2000), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=58708> (30 Nov. 2012)

⁴⁹⁸ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 216.

⁴⁹⁹ George W. Bush, “Inaugural Address” (20 Jan. 2001), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25853> (30 Nov. 2012)

paternal restoration and survival through future generations. Bush Jr.'s successful bid to follow in his father's footsteps echoes the statement made by Charlie at the end of *The Santa Clause* that marks his reconciliation with his father and thus the assurance of Scott's own future: "I'm going into the family business". For the Bush men, the presidency becomes the family business through which their own project of paternal rehabilitation can take place. Fatherhood becomes a key aspect of the American political landscape during this period: the focus of much social concern and political legislation, it also underlies the success of the men in its highest office.

However, ultimately the paternal restoration that the second Bush presidency attempted to undertake was dealt a blow by 9/11, an event that ensured Americans' "collective fantasies of the national image were—if not shattered—then radically reframed".⁵⁰⁰ The optimism inherent in the images of fatherhood that 1990s Hollywood presents, of fatherhood as the key to the future, fails to guard fully against such a near-shattering of identity and meaning. The apocalyptic images inherent in 1990s cinema exist in part to be neutralised, to prove the ability of men to overcome the threat of annihilation. 9/11, conversely, becomes the apocalypse that cannot be averted. Fatherhood in post-9/11 Hollywood is, as a result, much more unstable. The ability of fatherhood to save the man is no longer guaranteed.

The films discussed during the course of this thesis are consequently revealed as products of both a particular place—an America struggling with anxieties surrounding men, fatherhood and the family—and a particular time. On the brink of an uncertain future at the dawn of a new millennium, these films are still able to project a degree of faith in restoration and renewal. The shift in depictions of fatherhood as a potential saving mechanism after 9/11

⁵⁰⁰ Sharon Willis, "Movies and Melancholy", in Timothy Corrigan (ed.), *American Cinema of the 2000s: Themes and Variations* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 61.

is illustrated in Steven Spielberg's remake of *War of the Worlds* (2005), based on the original *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953) and H. G. Wells' novel of the same name. In the film, Spielberg employs a similar tactic to the one he used previously in *Jurassic Park*, of suggesting the protagonist's future can be realised through fatherhood. Again, the notion of survival has very real implications. While Grant has to contend with a swarm of out-of-control dinosaurs, here Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise) becomes embroiled in a battle against alien invaders. The aliens control giant "tripods" that rise up out of the earth, having lain dormant for thousands of years in anticipation of just such an invasion. *War of the Worlds* continues the trend of the heroic father, yet here Ray's heroism—and subsequent survival—remains less than assured.

Ray's battle against the alien invaders runs parallel to his battle to reconnect with his teenage son, Robbie (Justin Chatwin). Ray is divorced and maintains a tense relationship with his two children, who live with their mother and her new husband. He embodies the image of the disenfranchised father who finds himself struggling to forge a meaningful existence outside the family, a figure recognisable from the previous decade of Hollywood cinema. Just as Grant's survival becomes entwined with his gradual transformation into a father figure in *Jurassic Park*, Ray's spirited fight against the aliens attempts to enact the same kind of paternal survival, as he is compelled to lead his children out of danger and secure their safety. Yet while Grant ends the film being flown to safety with a child in each arm, Ray's fate is less obviously optimistic. The end of *War of the Worlds* sees Ray and his daughter Rachel (Dakota Fanning) successfully arriving in Boston as the alien tripods begin to malfunction. Ray, however, must seek refuge with his ex-wife's parents, immediately placing him in a weakened, emasculated position. Furthermore, he is unable to fully bridge the gap between father and son that the film appears to demand. Robbie forges his own way

to his grandparents' house, arriving before Ray and Rachel. Their reunion is muted, rather than triumphant. *War of the Worlds* contains the potential elements through which Ray might rediscover his fatherhood and in doing so secure his own survival, not least in re-connecting with his son. Yet this scenario ultimately fails, leaving a gap between father and son that has yet to be bridged, and thus a future that remains unsure.

War of the Worlds retains an intrinsic recognition of fatherhood as analogous with a viable future. Yet it is in the 1990s, before the millennium and before 9/11, that this investment in the father was not only recognised as a form of survival, but believed in. In the last decade of the 20th century, rebuilding the link between father and child whilst re-channelling meaning through the prism of paternity restores the primacy of positive patriarchy. Beyond this, it enables the promise of the future to be envisioned, and with it the promise of masculine survival. In the build-up to the millennium, fatherhood is repackaged and resold as survival. Just as in *Jurassic Park*, where "life finds a way", in 1990s Hollywood men too are able to navigate beyond crisis and into the future: a future that had yet to be shattered.

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