

The Phallic Limbo

Deconstructions of Masculine Theory in Claire Denis' *Beau Travail*

William T. Haydon

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An uncompromising, enigmatic, and endlessly fascinating masterpiece from arthouse legend Claire Denis, *Beau Travail* marks a complex, lyrical, and confrontational analysis of the masculine performance. The film holds a complex relationship with traditional masculine presentation and function, capturing the male form with the near-fetishistic eye of a blockbuster and characterizing each role with an ultra-macho flair, yet resolutely refusing to give the story any traditional action. It feels as if Denis is creating a hollowed-out action film, deploying masculine caricature into a cinematic vacuum to ultimately analyze the emasculating folly of the hypermasculine image. She skillfully deconstructs and rearranges the vapid stylings of cinematic hypermasculinity outlined in Tasker's theories, stripping away overblown story beats, self-referential dialogue, and showy action set pieces to create a stark and spare takedown of the archetypal "muscle-bound phallus," creating a complex work that falls somewhere between an inversion of Tasker's theories and a complete recontextualisation.

Beginning with some background on *Beau Travail*, the film was released in 1999 and is commonly regarded as one of Claire Denis' finest works. Loosely based on Herman Melville's novel *Billy Budd*, the story follows a squadron of French Foreign Legion officers stationed in Djibouti, focusing on a cycle of jealousy, distrust, and violence enfolding between Officer Galoup (Denis Lavant) and new recruit Sentain (Gregoire Colin) both of whom are vying for the attention and affection of commander Forestier (Michel Subor), ultimately resulting in tragic consequences for all. A far cry from a Hollywood blockbuster, *Beau Travail* is nevertheless a masterclass on both the depiction of the male form and the deconstruction of performative masculinity. Utilizing cinematographer Agnes Godard's stunning cinematography, Denis contrasts the purgatorial salt flats of Africa with the sinuous, vibrant forms of its male cast, all of whom were trained rigorously in dance by choreographer Bernardo Montet. It coalesces into a fascinating work that celebrates the beauty of the male form as much as it sharply deconstructs performative manhood.

With an understanding of the story and intent of *Beau Travail*, one must now come to understand Yvonne Tasker's theories of cinematic masculinity. Outlined in her paper *Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, the Body, and the Voice in Contemporary Action Cinema*, Tasker analyzes the construction and implementation of manhood in mainstream action film, chiefly describing masculinity and the depiction of muscular bodies as a performance in of itself. It is this ultra-macho muscle-bound appearance that initially dominates observations of traditional blockbuster masculinity. As Tasker points out, there are the pin-up musculature of the 80s, the hulking Arnold Schwarzeneggers and Sylvester Stallones, whose intense masculinity and muscular form come to represent an archetype within cinema. "Both actors resemble and anthropomorphised phallus, a phallus with muscles if you like... they are simulacra of an exaggerated masculinity, the original completely lost to sight, a casualty of the failure of the paternal signifier and the current crisis in master narratives" remarks critic Barbara Creed, rather vividly (Tasker, 757.) It is a harsh critique, but an insightful one. This class of cinematic masculinity represents a castration of the male by way of exaggeration, in which manhood

becomes so overblown that the actual duty and meaning of being a man becomes entirely crushed beneath the form of the actors and the vapidness of their act, a paradox of self-emasculatation.

From here Tasker mines the vein of cinematic masculinity further, discovering trends within the greater masculine performance. First, she notes a sense homoeroticism and sexual anxiety that comes with commodifying the male form as a spectacle, often bizarrely expressed in the torture of the main character in order to portray his strength and dominance. Another tenet of this performance involves a repression of one's emotions, in which a character is seemingly always in control of their feelings and able to adapt to any situation. These aspects of torture and repression compound a sense of faux-fortitude that feeds into this greater performance of unphased exaggerated strength. The setting in which this violence happens is also an essential quality. "The action cinema for the most part prefers all-male environments as the stage for such a performance, arenas, such as sport, prison, and the world of work, including the military and the police force" describes Tasker (Tasker, 761.) The performance of masculinity is most effective when it has a stage to set on, and it is these high-energy majority-male spaces that provide the perfect enhancement to the construction of male image. On a subtler note, Tasker identifies a fundamental link between the voice of a character and their masculine power. "Securing a position to speak from is crucial in order to invest the voice with authority" she posits (Tasker, 762.) It is the voice of a character that emphasizes both their superiority and their agency within a film, essential again to this greater performance. Lastly, in this same vein, uniforms or other physical identifiers are essential to the masculine hierarchy of a film. "Uniforms associated with sports and the military provide a way to stabilize body image, to relieve anxiety and to raise self-esteem" paraphrases Tasker (Tasker, 765.) It is these clear symbols of status that help unify an identity and coalesce the masculine performance, particularly with items of rank helping to establish a range of authority. Each of these different aspects forms a piece in the constructed form of cinematic masculinity, in which manhood becomes a performance linked to these physical traits as much as behavioral. Finally, building on these aspects of masculine performance, Tasker discusses the idea that modern action and blockbuster films have developed a post-modern awareness of excessive masculinity, incorporating more humanist and feminist edges into cinematic masculinity, exemplified in the familial motivations of *Die Hard* which presents a more nuanced take on masculinity. She portrays cinematic masculinity as something of a fluid concept able to change with emerging trends and modernizing movements, and with different forms of masculinity, outdated or otherwise, remaining present in current cinema.

With a cursory understanding of Yvonne Tasker's theories established, a research method must be discussed. It is important to analyze both where *Beau Travail* adheres to and deconstructs Tasker's theories, as both approaches lend this film a unique cross-sectional commentary. Considering the detail with which Tasker outlines aspects of masculine performance, it is necessary to break down individual examples adhering to these different structures, outlining narrative technique, characterization, and visuals that reflect or reconstruct Tasker's ideas. Additionally, the depiction of the male form is fundamental to the effectiveness of

Beau Travail, thus particular images representative of Denis' exaggerated take on masculinity will be compared with Tasker and Creed's theories of the cinematic male as an emasculated phallic object, applying related theories of male eroticism in film to discuss the male form as an object. The directness of Denis' visual craft will be discussed in an overarching sense, as her artful yet confrontational approach to direction means her commentary on masculinity carries a distinctive bite.

With a methodology outlined, it is time to delve into *Beau Travail* itself. What immediately stands out about the film at large is Denis' inversion of traditional setups and settings of masculine action film. In a basic sense the film adheres to Tasker's concepts, following muscled, oft-shirtless soldiers, bound by the masculine hierarchy of rank, performing their duties in tandem, muscles flexed and guns raised. Yet in execution Denis resolutely denies the audience of any true masculine arena to actualize the setup of these setpieces. Rather than setting this story in an active battleground or war-torn country, a fitting environment for a hypermasculine display, her cast is turned loose into the empty, spacious, almost elysian expanse of the Djibouti Salt Flats. This creates a jarring effect between the physical intensity of the film's characters and context, and the actual setting of the film in an environment devoid of any outlet for this intensity. Arising from this dichotomy is a satirical edge to the actions of the soldiers. Without a conflict to devote their energies nor inciting incident to capture their attention, yet still fully written as masculine caricatures, the men are reduced to near-endless physical drilling with a misplaced, almost comical fervor. A scene at the 14 minute mark shows the men arming themselves, falling into formation, and sweeping an empty training building, ducking, rolling, sneaking, and strategizing their way through a building completely devoid of enemies and indeed nothing more than a basic concrete shell. Their actions are comically intense, the men move through this building as if their lives depend on it while Denis behind the camera emphasizes the sheer emptiness of both the building and area at large; there is no threat to warrant this behavior. As the scene progresses, lead Denis Lavant appears brandishing a machine gun, creeping almost mime-like through the training grounds, ducking around walls and crawling up stairs to avoid imaginary enemies. The sequence adopts an almost boyish quality, as if we are not watching soldiers train but rather children play, the dichotomy between a voided setting and exaggerated masculinity producing an emasculating effect. Around the 56 minute mark a similar sequence unfolds, following Lavant and his squadron as they suddenly abandon camp and march out into the salt flats, retreating from some imagined enemy. It is a bizarre and quite funny display, watching an array of stone-faced soldiers marching for seemingly no reason, their display of masculinity stripped of context and exposed for what it really is; meaningless child's play. Divorced from the connotations of conflict and the meaning of the male arena, the actions associated with masculine performance take on the appearance of boyish mockery. Denis brilliantly strips masculine action down to its barest bones, creating a sense of phallic triviality through the denial of any greater cinematic purpose to this action.

Moving on from narrative implication, Denis' casting and depiction of actors is essential to the film's satirical effect. There is an overbearing sense of spectacle underscoring the film,

each body on-screen becoming an object first and a character second. At just the five minute mark, one of the first visuals we see is a field of arrayed shirtless in front of the camera. We know none of them, they are only partially clothed, standing arms raised, bodies slouched and chest flexed, the implication is clear; these men are a spectacle to be taken in. The hard and lean centerpieces of the film Gregoire Colin and Denis Lavant form the backbone of masculine portrayal, their emotional conflict expressed not through words but through the clashing sinew of their bodies. At the hour mark the men engage in a training exercise of intense embraces, toned bodies clashing in a strange inversion of masculine action. Just a few minutes later at the hour and five minute mark our leads clash again, engaging in a shirtless dance-like standoff in which the two men seem to battle using their masculine auras, encircling each other as if in a mating ritual. In this regard, hypermasculine conflict stripped down to the action of muscle-on-muscle, their forms taking precedent as a method of storytelling and communication. Denis employs a strategic objectification of these men, harkening back to the images of the muscular hyper-masculine soldiers, cops, and heroes of a hardbody film, yet without the necessary character context to reconcile their appearance. The muscle-bound, silent, objectified characters throughout the film are a contorted reflection and extension of Schwarzenegerian masculinity, the natural evolution of the hardbody action into further objective portrayal. It is this objectification that creates a greater emasculation and even feminization of *Beau Travail*'s cast, in which the exaggerated muscled forms begin to dominate the identities of the men, making them appear almost as vapid and infantile, dominated by the muscle of their performance. The film extends this objectification furthest in its sequences of silent work, in which the forms of the men are traced meticulously by the camera in scenes that border on eroticism. In a scene at the 51 minute mark we see partially clothed soldiers in short shorts digging tirelessly at the desert floor, the camera remaining at a low angle very clearly intended to objectify these men. It is a sequence of palpable homoeroticism existing as a parallel of the heightened performance and appearance of action stars, yet without the dramatized male arenas to give context, creating a stripped-down scene of erotic display. "In the hardbody genre, the camera treats the male body in much the same way as it has traditionally treated the female body: through excessively lingering shots, pans along the length of the body, and close-ups of specific body parts." Remarks film critic Drew Ayers in his essay *Bodies Bullets and Bad Guys: Elements of the Hardbody Film* (Ayers, 43.) This sequence stands as the farthest extension of Ayers' idea, a piece of evident objectification portraying its cast with an evidently fetishistic eye. There is no dialogue, the audience only really knows two of the characters in the sequence, and the entire length is shot in a stylized, montage-like structure that emphasizes pans and closeups on the men's bodies. The men have become exaggerated objects for the viewer, divorced from any identity or story implication, it is purely their forms that reach the viewer. Regarding the implications of such a scene applying almost suggestive feminine traits and structures to the male form, Ayers would elaborate "the audience member represses his desire for the male body by displacing the eroticized look onto the scenes of action that motivate male spectacle" However, considering the distinctive lack of action in a simple scene of manual labor, there is little place for audience members to delegate

the fetishism of this spectacle, meaning viewers are bluntly confronted with the overblown, emmasculating edge of the scene, giving the sequence an almost surreal and comedic effect. At the same time, the scene can be linked to ideas of homoeroticism and sexual anxiety present in Tasker's theory. The men's bodies become a landscape of erotic expression, thus necessitating a sense of torture or suffering to maintain a sense of hypermasculine resolve as described by Tasker, diffused in this case through the manual labor of the men. That said, the context of the scene only partially masks the evident homoeroticism, producing a direct effect that causes the audience to question the nature of the masculinity they are presented with. Ultimately this effect produces stripped-down and confrontational scenes exemplary of Denis' direct approach to commentary, displaying the male form in a bluntly eroticized manner, daring the viewer to find some excuse to deny the objectified images they see before them.

Ultimately, *Beau Travail* marks a powerful and complex approach to the objectification of the male form, converting the body into a powerful satirical instrument with which to prod the superficial tenets of manhood. It is a film distinct and important for its conversion of vapid hypermasculinity into something more; a construction of biting commentary by way of deconstructing traditional cinematic masculinity. Clair Denis gives meaning to the meaningless, twisting the overblown male form, the "muscle-bound phallus," into a new standard with which to judge the male form, synthesizing both traditional hollywood imagery and an intense sense of homoeroticism to confront the viewers' expectations and notions of what a cinematic male truly is.

A film founded on the beautiful depiction and calculated deconstruction of masculinity, Clair Denis' *Beau Travail* is a work of complex gender commentary, building on the ideas of Yvonne Tasker as much as it constructs its own entirely unique ideas. It is a film unafraid of following masculine depiction to its extreme, often reveling in the sheer gratuitousness of its images to create a work that intensely questions the viewer, never holding any pretentiousness regarding the method used to depict men. It is a film that ingeniously blends both artful and blunt expression, creating a gorgeous yet confrontational work rich in visual splendor and subtextual commentary.

Citations:

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