masculinity
masculinity

bodies,
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culture

edited by

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In Memory of Paul A. Thom
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First, thanks go to Edward Branigan and Chuck Wolfe for inviting me to propose an anthology for their series. I have great respect for Edward, Chuck, and the series. When they approached me years ago and I proposed a volume on masculinity, the idea was received with what I interpreted as polite disbelief. Sometime later I proposed a volume on an unrelated topic only to be asked to do the one on masculinity. I thank them for their confidence in me as an editor and their willingness to go with the topic. I hope the results justify their confidence. All of my work on masculinity and the male body owes a special acknowledgment to Susan Hunt. Countless hours of telephone conversation with her (unfortunately counted by the long-distance telephone carriers) have enabled me to clarify my thinking and to benefit from hers. Finally, everything I publish is indebted to Melanie Magios for her valuable revision suggestions, and my introduction and essay in this volume are no exception.
About 1980 a colleague remarked to me that she thought feminist film theory and criticism provided men and women within our culture an opportunity to have a conversation about sexual topics that they would not otherwise have. In other words, we were talking to each other about topics of importance in our lives, that we could not speak to each other about directly, so we talked about them indirectly through films. While we seemed to be talking about sexuality in films, we were in reality talking about our lives. My immediate response was to write off her perspective as a generation issue; even though she was only a few years older than me, I felt that I was part of a generation where men and women had no problem talking to each other openly about sexual issues. If feminist criticism fulfilled that function for her, fine, but it seemed inapplicable to me. In the following years, however, I thought back many times to that comment, realizing its perceptive insight and my naivete. Not only had I underestimated how much we talked about sexual issues to each other as men and women through
film theory and criticism, but I simultaneously overestimated the degree of openness with which men and women of my generation spoke to each other about issues of sexuality.

If the above was true of men and women speaking to each other about female sexuality and the female body within a heterosexual context (which was the focus of academic attention at the time), it was even truer of talking about the male body and male sexuality. This was the case whether it was men or women talking, and if the mode of address of the intended audience was gay or straight. Even my generation couldn't fool itself on that topic. Important essays on the male body appeared, however, in the 1980s (Richard Dyer and Steve Neal) and were followed by a number of books on the subject (Studlar, Silverman, Cohan, and Mark, Lehman, Bingham, Jeffords).

The context, then, for another book about masculinity and the male body at the end of the decade is quite different than it was at the beginning. When I told a male colleague about my work, then in progress, on the manuscript for Running Scared, he lost no time in replying, "Who needs it?" I was, therefore, pleasantly surprised that, when the book was published, he praised it and recommended it to his students. By the end of the decade, I think the question "Who needs it?" is less likely to come up, and there is a growing consensus that many of us, men and women, straight and gay or lesbian, need it and want it. And while the essays in this volume extend previous work and push in new directions, some central aspects of work in this area haven't changed all that much. As several of these essays make clear, both in the movies and within our culture, representing, showing, and even talking about many areas of masculinity, sexuality, and the male body are still nearly taboo. Indeed, as I prepared to write this introduction, I received an e-mail message from Tim Miller, a performance artist and contributor to this volume, in which he writes of a recent experience performing in Tennessee with hateful, homophobic protestors outside the theater.

Tim Miller's inclusion in this anthology is of extreme importance to me precisely within the context of the manner in which men and women, straight or gay/lesbian, talk to each other about masculinity and the male body through film theory and criticism. Miller is not a film scholar nor even primarily an academic but, rather, a gay performance artist whose performances frequently include nudity. In addition to performing a one-man show on stage, he conducts community-based group workshops on sexuality. His account of working with primarily gay men in the workshop/performance context reveals precisely how many of the theoretical and critical issues taken up elsewhere in this volume are part of men's lived experiences. Furthermore, Miller has brought much attention to legal issues of public funding for the arts through his political activism for the "NEA Four,"
artist(s) who were denied grant funding due to the controversial sexual content of their work. In his work, Miller blurs lines between creative performance and self-help workshops, and between “art” and social activism; I hope his inclusion in this volume blurs lines between film theory and cultural theory, between theory and practice, and between straight and gay modes of address and audiences.

I have not grouped the essays in this volume into formal categories for several reasons. If one has a category on “race” or on “homosexuality,” the implication may be that the essays are easily contained in those groupings. But that is far from the case. Indeed, such categorizing tends to create artificial barriers. I prefer to emphasize the interconnectness of these essays. Most of them address more than one issue. Nevertheless, certain directions emerge from them, and I have ordered them accordingly. The collection begins with recent trends and then moves to the representation of gay characters and issues. The next essays blur the line between the homosexual and the homosocial. These are followed by essays on race, ethnicity, and nationality, and finally to essays dealing with individual men and male characters in relationship to power. The volume concludes with Tim Miller’s touching account of his work with men and issues of masculinity and sexuality.

Krin Gabbard focuses his attention on race in recent films in his analysis of the manner in which _Ransom_ , starring Mel Gibson, represents black masculinity in relation to white masculinity. Gabbard argues that _Ransom_ fits into the “angry white male” genre. Even though the kidnappers are white, an African-American FBI agent attempts to control the negotiations and Gibson’s hero is directed at that character. Gabbard shows that the film displaces its racism in a manner that enables identification with Gibson against the hypermasculine black character. My essay identifies a new pattern of showing the penis in films of the ‘90s, which I term the “melodramatic penis.” Starting with _The Crying Game_, a number of films show the penis within the context of extreme melodrama. Although these films avoid the conventional polarity of either trying to make the penis an impressive phallic spectacle or an object of pathetic or comic collapse, they still imply that showing the penis has to be of great importance.

Other essays focus on recent films that represent gay characters. Amy Aronsen and Michael Kimmel argue that in the ‘90s, it has become the function of gay, sexual men to save heterosexual romance. In such films as _My Best Friend’s Wedding_, a gay man replaces what had earlier been the function of a female character or even a child—to bring the heterosexual couple together. Justin Wyatt directs his attention to the “new queer cinema.” He describes patterns of friendship among men in the gay community and argues that seemingly straight films such as _Swingers_ co-opt that model. At a time when the conventional heterosexual film...
ily is under siege, the gay model of friendship resonates deeply within the culture. One of the early films of male homosocial bonding that Wyatt identifies is Barry Levinson's *Diner.* This is especially interesting in light of Joe Wlodarz's analysis of Levinson's later film, *Sleepers.* Whereas Wyatt is sympathetic to *Diner,* Wlodarz identifies a homophobic subtext within *Sleepers.* The proliferation of gay characters in recent Hollywood films in general is, Wlodarz argues, easily assimilated. Serious homophobia, however, is particularly related to anal sex between men. Recent Hollywood films including *Sleepers* represent such sex as rape, dangerously collapsing the meanings of homosexual sex with rape.

Robert Lang and Maher Ben Moussa also take up the subject of homosexuality but within a quite different cultural context. They argue that Nouri Bouzid's *Man of Ashes* (1986) is a particularly daring Tunisian film on the subject of male sexuality. Homosexual rape is, however, also central to that film in which two childhood boyfriends are raped. Lang and Ben Moussa, however, argue that the rape is merely a device to show what happens when someone rejects socially approved sexual roles, as one of the boys does when he chooses to be homosexual or "not a man."

Several other essays reveal how often work on masculinity and the male body in general blur clear, comfortable distinctions between straight and gay. Susan White identifies a strong homosocial subtext in Anthony Mann's *T-Men,* a film that she notes perfects the pleasures and threats of looking at the male body. The film's strong homosocial and homoerotic overtones result from a narrative trajectory that places many scenes in public bathhouses and restrooms. The homoerotic body in *T-Men* is tied to horrific forms of brutal punishment. Chris Straayer analyzes the character of Ripley in the film *Purple Noon* and the Patricia Highsmith novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* upon which the film is based. Straayer examines the two texts in relation to masculinity, homosexuality, and class, arguing that the novel endorses a notion of freedom that contrasts with the film's emphasis on determination. Sally Robinson analyzes cultural discourses about masculinity that see it as naturally possessing sexual energies which, if blocked, will cause physical and psychological damage. Concentrating on *Deliverance,* the film that Wlodarz identifies as the first of the homosexual rape films, Robinson argues that these films have contradictory ideological implications about masculinity. On the one hand, they legitimate various forms of masculine behavior as natural in light of the dangers of a blocked masculinity lacking release. On the other hand, they reveal a post—women's liberation notion of a willingness to abdicate and renounce male power, even to the point of considering the pleasures of the loss of power.

Robert Eberwein turns his attention away from recent cinema and
analyzes the representation of masculinity in a series of World War II films that show men engaged in such nontraditional male gender roles as nursing each other and dancing together. Eberwein argues against previous readings of such films as always signifying homosexuality by placing them within a number of historical discourses such as training films and advertisements. By examining the relationship of the mise-en-scène to the narrative, he shows how these films negotiate complex, historical gender issues.

Yet another group of essays emphasize race, ethnicity, and nationality. Lee Parpar makes an important case for paying careful attention to nation and region when considering such issues as the representation of the nude male body. She notes that images of the penis are relatively common in Canadian cinema and that their presence doesn’t provoke the anxieties and the strategies so commonplace for containing those anxieties in U.S. cinema. Parpar relates this to Canada’s position in relation to the world’s powerful nations, arguing that Canadians are not heavily invested in notions of empowered nationhood and dominant masculinity. Concepts which bear upon when, how and what types of nude male bodies can be represented. Amy Wood provides an analysis of one of the most deeply disturbing sets of images of the male body ever created — lynchings photographs taken by white Southerners of their black victims. Comparing them to hunting photographs, she analyses the functions these photographs fulfilled for the men who took them. Wood’s essay does not deal with cinema but along with Tim Miller’s essay clearly shows the need to consider related areas such as photography and performance. For all their obvious differences, the lynching photographs and the racial subtext in Ramen bear a sad similarity, both testifying to white male attempts to control their perceived threat of black male sexuality.

Aaron Baker and Julian Vitullo analyze the representation of Italian Americans in such successful films of the ’70s and early ’80s as The Godfather and Rocky, which they then compare and contrast with such ’90s films as A Bronx Tale and Bulworth. Baker and Vitullo argue that the earlier films focused on physical and violent urban, ethnic, working-class men in contrast to overcivilized, weak, white men, while the latter films question that dichotomy and adopt more complex ideas about identity.

The final group of essays focuses upon individual men and power, but shown in a variety of contexts: an actor, a fictional character, and a well-known nonfictional character. Luci Bozzola analyzes Warren Beatty’s star persona by considering the relationship between his private life and movie roles during two distinct periods, the mid-’70s when he made Shampoo and the mid-’90s when he made Ishtar and Bulworth. During the ’70s, Beatty was notorious for being a legendary lover and Shampoo dwells upon that and presents his body in a
manner that assumes its desirability for women. By the mid '90s, his marriage to Annette Bening, and his image as a man who has settled down, is seen in *Love Affair* where sex is replaced by love. By the late '90s, Beatty's place in the public eye had shifted entirely from the area of sexuality to politics, another area of traditional male power.

Toby Miller directs his attention to a fictional character of great power—James Bond. Or perhaps, it would be more accurate to say, to his penis, a part of that fictional character's body and potential source of power. Miller notes that in the novels, Bond runs away from sex, his penis representing a threat of the loss of control. In the films, on the other hand, Bond is highly sexual. Miller places this shift within an historical, political, and economic context. Dennis Bingham's subject is also a figure of great power—a president of the United States. Bingham shows how in *Nixon*, Oliver Stone represents the man as one driven by a host of anxieties about his masculinity and a desperate need to overcompensate for them. Stone's Nixon can be understood in relationship to the historical, cultural discourse of the self-made man, one who is given nothing and has concept for those born with a silver spoon in their mouths. This leads Nixon to embrace "compulsive manhood," a never-ending quest to prove his masculinity.

It is perhaps fitting to end this introduction with Bingham's drawing on Michael Kimmel's notion of "compulsive manhood" because it indicates how sadly troubled many common conceptions of masculinity are. Most of the essays in this collection deal with cultural texts that can only be understood within such troubling contexts of masculinity, or represent masculinity and male sexuality within cultures that embrace such troubling notions. Thus, at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, masculinity remains a disturbingly complex and shifting category that the essays in this book help us to better understand.

**works cited**


"someone is going to pay"

An early scene in *Ransom* (directed by Ron Howard in 1996) presents an image that powerfully symbolizes the masculine anxieties of both the hero and the film. We see Tom Vallen (Mel Gibson), the wealthy owner of an airline company, his wife, Kate (Renée Russo), and their son, Sean (Brawley Nolte) at a science fair in New York’s Central Park. The boy has built an airborne device in which a video camera is attached to two helium-filled orange balloons. Using a remote unit, Sean, who looks about nine years old, controls the flight of the balloons as well as the direction of the video camera. Suddenly, kidnappers seize the boy while both parents are momentarily distracted. We then see the balloons drifting slowly out of the park. The possibility that his son has been kidnapped begins to dawn on Tom just as the balloons collide with the cornice of an apartment building. One of the balloons bursts, sending the video camera plummeting to the sidewalk. The falling camera functions as a synecdoche for the son, who has been seized while deploying that camera over the rooftops of
New York City. With its two large circular balloons, the contraption is also a metaphor for Tom's prominent but threatened masculinity: his "balls."

Those who threaten Tom and his status as a member of a white ruling class include not only the group of working-class kidnappers but also an African American FBI agent who seeks to control Tom's negotiations with them. The racial themes of the film function untoldly apart from the narrative, but they create similarities between _Ransom_ and the growing number of films in the "angry white male" genre. The familiar white male heroes of Mel Gibson are deployed primarily against the persona of Delroy Lindo, who plays Special Agent Lonnice Hawkins. Lindo's character speaks with a slight accent associated with working-class black people, but otherwise he comports himself very much as an assimilated member of the American middle class. The white kidnappers, however, are much more likely to engage in signifying practices associated with African Americans. Nevertheless, it is Lindo's black FBI agent who embodies white anxieties about black masculinity and its imagined threat to the dominance of white men, particularly for a character played by Mel Gibson, whose lack of physical stature may be partially responsible for his desire to project a hypermasculine image in most of his films. In the case of _Ransom_, Gibson's character encounters a man whose size (and color) threaten his quest for masculine dominance.

Sean's attempts at urban surveillance foreshadow a series of gazes directed at Tom Mullen as he endures the pain and humiliation caused by the kidnapping and attempts to regain control of his life. As the large body of psychoanalytic film theory suggests, looking in movies usually involves empowerment while being looked at often means the opposite. From his penthouse apartment near Central Park, Mullen can look out over the city from a privileged location consistent with his financial and social position. Once his son has been kidnapped, however, that lofty position becomes systematically less available. Tom learns that his movements are being carefully monitored not only by the kidnappers but also by the FBI, the media, and random onlookers, almost all of them from the working class. Although the plot of _Ransom_ is driven by Tom's attempts to retrieve his son, the film is in many ways much more involved with Tom's needs to retrieve his manhood, in particular that version of manhood that has little to do with the daily demands of fatherhood. The film repeatedly dramatizes Tom's paranoia as he confronts masculancing forces linked to family, class, and—most disturbingly in a film that presents the familiar face of "liberal" Hollywood multiculturalism—race.
The prominent image of large but fragile balls floating inexorably toward destruction can also be read as a symbol for Tom's vulnerability as a father. Although the film repeatedly pays lip service to the importance of families, Ransom reveals the tension between life in the nuclear family and the aspirations of the American hero, especially the familiar type that Robert B. Ray calls "the outlaw hero," the ubiquitous figure in American narratives who runs away from home and rejects values associated with domesticity and conventional social organization. American heroes of this breed make their own laws, answering to an internal but infallible sense of right and wrong. The hero often risks his life to save the people he cares about, but he usually moves on, as the narrative ends, still resisting the compromises and entanglements that come with family and stability. Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, and John Wayne made careers playing this character. More recently, Mel Gibson has joined Clint Eastwood, Tom Cruise, Bruce Willis, and various others who continue the tradition. It is difficult to imagine any of these actors playing a domesticated man in a stable relationship with a wife and child. Eastwood, the oldest of the current crop of outlaw heroes, has never once played such a character in all thirty-eight of his starring roles since 1967. Eastwood may spend large portions of a film pursuing a woman, and he may ride off with a woman at a film's conclusion, but if an Eastwood character is ever married in a film's "back story," he is inevitably estranged, divorced, or widowed. Because Eastwood's masculine presentation is incompatible with the daily frustrations and accommodations of conventional family life, a stable loving relationship becomes for his characters an unrepresentable element in an impossible past. Although Gibson plays a family man in Ransom, he spends most of the film asserting his manhood in violation of the family conventions that are missing from the films of Eastwood and the other male stars of the action cinema. The fundamental and incoherent project of Ransom is to represent Tom Muller, as simultaneously, a family man and a "real" man of the action cinema.

Frank Krutnik understands paradoxes of masculine representation through Freud's account of the male child's oedipal crises. For Freud, the child must renounce the mother and accept the authority of the father in order to escape the threat of castration and ultimately to achieve masculine autonomy. To maintain his autonomy, the man must avoid a return to the body of the mother or her surrogates—who hold out that promise of plenitude, the "oceanic" feeling. Freud says that even "normal" male desire returns the man to his "intimate
fixation on tender feelings on the mother" (Freud 168–69). These feelings, however, must always coexist with the fear of castration as punishment for violating the father’s law. For Krutnik, The Maltese Falcon (1941) is the purest representation of “redeemed” masculinity, especially as the climax when Sam (Humphrey Bogart) overcomes his desire for the murderous Brigid (Mary Astor) and hands her over to the agents of patriarchal law on the police force. Krutnik is more interested, however, in the more masochistic scenario of certain films with of the mid-to-late 1940s that reflect the inevitable dissatisfaction with traditional representations of masculinity in postwar America. Films such as Out of the Past (1947) and The Killers (1946), even stars who would later become macho icons like Robert Mitchum and Burt Lancaster betray their father figures and submit to the will of phallic women. Although these films tend to be moral fables about what happens to men who diverge from the true path of masculinity, the films also reveal male anxieties about living up to the impossible standards of manliness presented by American culture. Films such as Bonnie and Clyde (1967), Body Heat (1982), and Basic Instinct (1992) have continued to offer audiences the complex experience of identifying with men who violate the laws of patriarchy on multiple levels as they submit to sexual and powerful women.

Ransom is much more typical of the mainstreams of the Hollywood cinema in which men achieve masculine autonomy by resisting union with a woman, but it is unusual in creating a character like Tom Mullen who does so from within an idealized family structure. While the fathering of children gives men a certain degree of phallic authority, it also erodes their autonomy and draws them back into the world of the child, the mother, and the oceanic feeling from which the adult male in dominant American narrative must escape. Ransom dramatizes what happens when myths of the American hero are superimposed on myths of the bourgeois family. Something’s got to give. In the script by Richard Price, Jonathan Gold, and Alexander Ignon, the hero defies his wife and agent Hawkins by refusing to pay a $2 million ransom. Convinced that the kidnappers will kill his son as soon as they receive the ransom money, Mullen appears on television and promises the ransom money to anyone who provides information leading to the capture of the kidnappers, dead or alive. If the kidnappers return his son, Mullen will withdraw the reward.

Mullen makes this decision entirely on his own. His wife, Kate, and Agent Hawkins are flabbergasted when they see Tom on the television broadcast, and they both look for ways to pay off the kidnappers with or without Tom’s cooperation. In a conversation with Kate, Tom explains his decision: if the Mullen’s pay, they are likely to lose their son; but if the kidnappers know that a huge bounty has been put on
their heads, they will return the child in mint condition and live the rest of their lives without being targets for bounty hunters. As an essential element in the gender and racial politics of the film, Tom's logic is meant to be more convincing to the audience than to the film's other characters. By daring the kidnappers to kill his son, Tom can resuscitate the voice of the Other—this case a woman and a black man—and remain the audacious, autonomous protagonist of his own narrative rather than a passive player in the kidnappers' drama. As several critics pointed out, a crucial scene in _Ransom_ recalls the final shots of _The Godfather_ (1972): Tom and his advisors are photographed from his wife's point of view as she discovers that she has been excluded from Tom's deliberations. A major difference, however, is that _Ransom_ does not, like _The Godfather_, characterize Tom's decision to exclude his wife from "family business" as a descent into evil. Quite the contrary. Tom's gamble pays off when Jimmy Shaker (Gary Sinise), a corrupt police detective who is the leader of the kidnappers, kills his co-conspirators and attempts to collect the reward money at the scene of the shootout. Tom soon discovers Jimmy's deception and dispatches him in a long and bloody fight scene that climaxes the film. The credits role with the family reunited, the kidnappers destroyed, and the hero vindicated. Any suggestion that Tom has irreparably damaged his marriage by ignoring his wife and risking the life of his son is drowned out by the sound of bullets and the cathartic drama of Tom's triumphant fight to the death with Jimmy Shaker.

a morlock ascends

The white hero in _Ransom_ reestablishes his autonomous masculinity not just because he resists the leveling effects of family and not just because he kills the mastermind behind the kidnapping of his son. As I have suggested, Tom Mullen also overcomes the attempts of a powerful black man to control his dealings with the kidnappers. Further more, Tom enhances his success by escaping the gaze and control of members of the American working class, both black and white.

The film begins at a party in the Mullens' penthouse in which well-dressed guests are served by caterers, one of whom wears a tattoo on her neck, usually a marker of lower-class status and ethnicity. This is Maris (Jill Taylor), later revealed to be one of the kidnappers. Also in a clearly subordinate role is a Latina woman, Fatema (Iraida Polanco), the Mullens' housekeeper. Once the kidnapping plot is under way, Tom can no longer interact with members of the working class so rigidly, so hierarchically. In order to deliver the money to the kidnappers, Tom must follow the elaborate orders given to him by Jimmy Shaker, who speaks into a masking device attached to the telephone that gives
his voice a deep, demonic resonance. The odyssey on which Jimmy sends Tom takes him first to a swimming pool in Harlem, where Tom must dive into the water fully clothed in order to retrieve a key to a locker where he will find a change of clothes. Jimmy has also sent Tom into the water to disable the listening device that Tom is likely to be wearing and to change Tom's appearance so that the FBI will have more difficulty following him. This plan also gives Jimmy the pleasure of imagining Tom as he confronts the startled black bathers in and around the pool. The film's construction of an ascendant white masculinity here explicitly contrasts the trim, well-dressed body of Mel Gibson with the dark, partially clothed bodies of Harlem residents, many of them aged and overweight.

After Tom Mullen has emerged from the recreation center, he listens to a portable telephone as Jimmy directs him to a stone quarry in New Jersey. As he drives along the same highway announced by Tom, Jimmy overtly categorizes his relationship with Tom in terms of a class struggle by describing George Pal's 1959 film The Time Machine. As Jimmy says, The Time Machine foresees a world in the distant future divided into two groups, the Eloi and the Morlocks. The beautiful, blonde, toga-clad Eloi live a carefree existence above ground while the ugly, ape-like Morlocks live beneath the surface. The Morlocks provide all the necessities of life for the Eloi, but the Morlocks occasionally ascend to the surface and bring back one of the Eloi for food. Jimmy explains that New York is like the world foreseen in The Time Machine. He is a Morlock, and Tom is one of the Eloi. "Every now and then one of you gets snatched." Although Pal's film draws upon Cold War ideology of the 1950s and early 1960s and explains the Morlock/Eloi division in terms of a nuclear holocaust, Jimmy's reading of the film is more faithful to H. G. Wells's 1895 novel on which the film is based. A committed socialist, Wells projected a capitalistic economy that would banish workers to underground factories, leaving the surface of the earth a verdant paradise for industrialists and their families. Eventually, the workers revolt and overpower the Eloi on the surface, but only after their long confinement by the forces of capital causes them to evolve into telepathic beings who cannot survive above ground. Ransom, however, like Hollywood's The Time Machine, gives the working-class little sympathy, consistently associating its working-class characters with predators and criminals while portraying the powerful and the elite as their victims.

After finishing his exegesis of The Time Machine, Jimmy says to Tom, "See you at the Whitney, see you at the Four Seasons, see you at the Met," ultimately chanting only the mantra-like phrase, "See you." Jimmy's look at Tom is tinged with envy and class hatred, but it is only one of many looks that are directed at Tom from the lower classes. Tom is also watched by members of the press corps who camp outside
his apartment building as well as by African Americans at the swimming pool. The film even dwells on a medley of gazes in a scene that might otherwise seem gratuitous. Immediately after Tom announces on television that he is transferring the ransom money into a charity, he is filmed in slow motion picking up the money he has dramatically spread out on the table before him. The music in James Horner’s score becomes atonal and percussive, creating confusion and disorientation. Slow motion shots of Mel Gibson’s face are then intercut with three separate shots of employees at the television station staring at him with varying degrees of disbelief. The camera then shoots Gibson from behind so that the TV spotlights are on either side of his body, emphasizing the extent to which he has become a media spectacle. Leaving the station, Tom’s image is doubled as he walks past the mirrored exterior of the building while a crowd shouts at him. Symbolically in danger of becoming fragmented by the multitude of refracted images of himself, Tom is trying to seize control of the narrative so that he is once again the one who looks down on the people and not the one at whose multiple images the people can freely gaze.

The tension between Tom and the working class is also central to one of Ransom’s more important subplots. When Sean is first seized, Tom suspects the involvement of Jackie Brown, a union official who had accused Tom of bribing him to prevent a strike at Tom’s company, Endeavor Airlines. We learn that Brown was imprisoned after a sting operation involving union deals at another airline. In negotiations with prosecutors, Brown offered to testify against Mullin in exchange for a shorter sentence. Tom denied offering a bribe, and an extensive investigation by the FBI declared that Tom was innocent of the charge. When the FBI arrive at his home after Sean has been kidnapped, Tom reluctantly explains to Agent Hawkins that he did, in fact, arrange to give Brown a payoff, and he attempts to justify the denial he made when Brown’s accusations became public. “Son, most guys at the top, they acquire their airline. Not … not me. I built it, I don’t operate it, I don’t own it. No union, no government, and no two-bit gangster like Jackie Brown … I paid him off. The bribe, I had a business to run. I had two thousand employees, God knows how many customers, and I didn’t have time for a goddamned strike.”

Tom and Ronnie Hawkins then ask Jackie Brown in prison if he is involved in the kidnapping. Jackie Brown is played by Dan Hedaya, a tough, former actor who is more likely to play a scrappy Laborer than a graceful aristocrat. Wearing bright orange prison overalls, a bad haircut, and a day’s growth of stubble, Brown is first confused by a visit from his antagonist but soon becomes enraged when he hears Tom accusing him once again. He crawls over a table and strikes Tom on the
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