

Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics  
Number 67, January 2015  
ISSN: 2047-0622  
URL: [www.freeassociations.org.uk](http://www.freeassociations.org.uk)



## ENVY, GUILT, SYMBOLIC REPARATION AND IMAGES OF WHITENESS IN CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD SPORT THEMED FILMS

Marcus Free

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**Abstract:** Taking a primarily Kleinian psychoanalytic approach, the article first examines how the *Rocky* series of boxing films (1976-2006) illustrates the displacement of a problematic of downward economic mobility onto race in contemporary Hollywood cinema. The theme of white man as innocent casualty of a society that rewards style over substance evinces an enduring envy of the exalted status of the ‘black athlete’, who in these films is taught a moral lesson in ‘heart’ and commitment. At the psychodynamic core of their narratives is an embedded, but disguised envy of the supposedly natural ability of African American athletes. His defeat in the ring enables the redemption of the white protagonist and, figuratively, the white working class community he represents. The article then considers how more ostensibly liberal and reflexive films, which acknowledge and explore the psychodynamics of racial envy and resentment, might be seen as a form of symbolic Kleinian ‘reparation’. It is argued, however, that these films tend to privilege the enlightenment, learning and capacity for empathy of their white characters. Superior psychological complexity reproduces a racial hierarchy that the narrative challenges. Even films that highlight and problematise whiteness as constructed through envy of the ‘black’ other share this hierarchisation by distinguishing ‘good’ from ‘bad’ white people, or by associating whiteness with cleverness and dissimulation, or with lost innocence, boyhood, tradition and community. The films considered here are *The Hurricane* (1999), *O* (2001) and *The Fan* (1996).

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Kyle Kusz (2008: 210) contends that many contemporary Hollywood sport themed films are formally and thematically indicative of the anxieties and desires of contemporary American

white men. Reflecting ‘unstable social positions in an economically precarious, more diverse and increasingly globalized America’, they are variants of a broader tendency in Hollywood film towards the sympathetic depiction of supposedly ‘everyman’, but distinctly white male protagonists. Film narratives focusing on their struggles to reaffirm their masculine identities through achievement in sport figuratively represent a broader sense of loss of white male privilege, ‘recuperating and repopularizing the sorts of conventionally masculine forms of American white masculinity that previously came under heavy critique from feminists, critical race observers and queer theorists in post-1960s America’ (ibid.: 210). Driven by the neo-liberal economic doctrine of reduced government intervention, regulation and welfare support, economic precariousness in an America undergoing rapid de-industrialisation is more broadly distributed across gender and racial categories in American society. However, in these films it is limited to narratives of specifically ‘white male injury’ (Carroll, 2011: 2). As such they exemplify a broader phenomenon of ‘affirmative reaction’ (ibid) in contemporary Hollywood cinema. ‘Affirmative reaction’ is Hamilton Carroll’s pun on how these reactionary narratives challenge the limited redress for non-white Americans afforded by the Affirmative Action measures of the 1960s and 1970s in their sympathetic focus on white male protagonists alone.

Kusz, Carroll and others emphasise the post-9/11 specificity of such symbolic representations of white masculine recovery. The sanctification of the self-sacrificial white male 9/11 firefighter in American popular media intersected in complex ways with the bellicose rhetoric and warmongering of the Bush administration in the 2000s. However, a key sport film of the 2000s, Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky Balboa* (2006), was the sixth instalment in a film series dating back to *Rocky* in 1976. Although partly historically specific to the 2000s, the film thematically and formally resembles the original. Its protagonist’s mission to symbolically recover his masculinity, and so to offer a beacon of hope to a markedly white impoverished inner city community, involves returning to the boxing ring to face an arrogant African American champion. While in other sport themed films race is implicitly present, here it is foregrounded as a key dimension of its protagonist’s plight. As in *Rocky*, set in the 1970s recession, downward white mobility is contrasted with upward African American mobility. *Rocky Balboa* thus highlights the enduring displacement of problematics of class onto race in Hollywood cinema. More particularly, it will be argued, it continues a psychodynamic current in *Rocky*, whereby the theme of the decentred white male is developed through his interrelationship with a more

successful black athlete. In each case the latter's negative depiction as 'naturally' gifted but of flawed character evinces an implicit envy and resentment of an archetype that is a white male projection: an imaginary stereotypical construction of 'natural' physical strength and athletic prowess whose historical emergence in the twentieth century was a means of rationalising the ascendancy of African Americans in sport by white commentators. These narratives de-emphasise explanations of sporting success in terms of limited social structurally determined opportunity and physical and intellectual labour (Carrington, 2011).

Taking a mainly Kleinian psychoanalytic approach, this article explores the theme of envious resentment of the 'black athlete' in *Rocky Balboa* and its *Rocky* predecessor as evidence of a persistent, but ambivalent and disguised racism in representations of supposedly decentred white masculinity in American society. We could read it as racism in the more 'neutral' sense of reinforcing imaginary racial difference. The climax is a fight between two boxers clearly differentiated by skin colour in a sport where the achievements of African American athletes offer evidence of sport as a meritocracy. So, a benign interpretation is that this is a post-racist (racism in the pejorative sense), if not post-racial spectacle in which the 'black' athlete's achievements are acknowledged and celebrated. However, the emphasis on the opponent's arrogance, complacency and reliance on 'natural' talent versus the protagonist's 'heart' and labour indicate an envious, resentful undercutting of those achievements that reproduces both racial difference and hierarchy. The 'white guy' has substance, while his 'black' opponent has not 'earned' his position. There is a resistance here to the relinquishing of historical constructions of racial otherness. Using Kleinian applications to the analysis of racism I read this as resistance to the 'depressive position' in which guilt for fantasied (in the case of racism, actual) damage to the other can be acknowledged. Sport's utopian inclusivity is celebrated but becomes a vehicle for reproducing difference and denying the value of the other's achievements.

The emphasis on the performance of an idealised, redemptive white masculinity is interpreted via Butler's conceptualisation of gender as the melancholic identification with a paternal ideal mapped onto the body and 'performatively' reproduced in action. That the 'action' requires a 'black' other is in turn indicative of what Cheng (2001: xi) calls 'racial melancholia', the construction of whiteness through the necessity of a racial 'other' as a boundary marker. Thus, Kleinian envy as a defence and racial melancholia are intertwined in these film narratives.

As a counterpoint, the article also considers whether examples of more ostensibly liberal Hollywood sport themed films may be construed as narratives of symbolic Kleinian ‘reparation’ for the impact of racism in sport and beyond. Hypothetically, by explicitly representing and exploring the psychodynamic fantasies at play in white characters’ constructions of the ‘black athlete’, such films might constitute a form of reparation indicative of a Kleinian ‘depressive position’. However, I conclude that these films either offer redemption narratives that privilege the enlightenment, learning and capacity for empathy of their ‘good’ white characters over the enduring two dimensionality of their black counterparts; or stress the tragedy of their white characters’ demise. Either way, superior psychological complexity reproduces a racial hierarchisation that the narrative apparently challenges, so that the ‘black athlete’ remains as an imaginary projection, fixed in the gaze of a white, liberal audience. Ranging from Norman Jewison’s *The Hurricane* (1999) to the *Othello* adaptation *O* (2001) and *The Fan* (1996), the films considered here highlight the enduring shortcomings of contemporary Hollywood film. The latter films identify and frame their white characters’ envy as deeply problematic and destructive, but render them objects of sympathy and understanding through their sense of disconnection from the archetypal white father: the tragedy of racial fantasy is primarily *theirs*. Thus there is a recurring tension, variously manifested, between desire for, and resistance to symbolic reparation for the history and material and psychological impact of racism in these films.

### **Kleinian Psychoanalysis, Racism and the ‘Black Athlete’**

Theoretically and methodologically, the article utilises the applications of Kleinian analyses of the psychodynamics of racism, as developed by Dalal (2002), Clarke (2003) and others. Kleinian psychoanalysis differed significantly from Freudian psychoanalysis in its focus on the infant ego’s development in the pre-Oedipal first years of life. Melanie Klein theorised that the infant’s dependency on the mother or primary carer gives rise to ‘phantasies’<sup>1</sup>, ways of representing ‘somatic events’ (Ogden, 1986: 11) of satisfaction or frustration such that the nascent ego is split into identification with the mother as ‘good’, nourishing object and ‘bad’, withholding object, ‘introjecting’ the ‘good’ and ‘projecting’ outwards the ‘bad’ qualities that are experienced as threatening to the ego, in what Klein called the ‘paranoid-schizoid position’. Progression to the ‘depressive position’ entails advancement in that the infant begins to recognise the mother’s

wholeness, difference, and develops the capacity to experience guilt for the imagined damage effected by psychic splitting and destructive phantasies (Klein, 1946/1975: 14-16). While the depressive position enables the capacity for love, concern, empathy and social interaction, recognition and acceptance of guilt and desire for reparation are psychically resisted. Klein (1957/1975) focused on envy, particularly, as an entirely destructive emotion that denies and seeks to destroy the goodness of the infant's source of care and nourishment, projecting *into* the mother those unwanted parts of the ego in a process she calls 'projective identification', seeking to make its 'good object' the container of all that is 'bad'. Envy is thus a defence against the pain of guilt and the fear of the irreparability of the ego's fantasied destruction. It is a wholly destructive attack on the 'good breast' which Klein distinguishes from greed and jealousy in that greed involves the 'destructive introjection' of all that is good and jealousy seeks to exclude a third party through sole possession of the good object (ibid.: 181).

In social and cultural theory Kleinian ideas have been fruitfully extended to analysing the psychodynamics of racism as a classic instance of how 'splitting' – introjection, projection and projective identification – pervades psychically insecure adulthood. The scientifically bogus concept of race becomes a container for unresolved anxieties and insecurities that become heightened at times of personal and economic crisis. As Clarke argues, psychic splitting into 'good' and 'bad' objects 'can lead to the formation of strong boundaries around the self, in which the other is denigrated and is perceived as larger than life, threatening and wholly destructive' (Clarke, 2003: 132). For the racist, the other as 'denigrated object' is both 'deeply threatening and dangerous'. While it thus becomes a 'site of the creation of order from disorder' (ibid.: 134), this 'order' is nonetheless pervaded by the enduring fear of annihilation by that which is 'split off'. Hence the racist fear of invasion and contamination by the other. 'Projective identification' is key here. Klein saw this psychic expulsion of 'split-off parts of the ego [...] *into* the mother' so that she 'is felt to be *the* bad self' (original emphasis) as the 'prototype of an aggressive object-relation' (Klein, 1946/1975: 8). Clarke (2003: 158) posits that this is 'at the heart of ethnic and racial hatred' as the 'recipient of these projections acts as a container of feelings such as fear, hatred and anxiety'. Projective identification exceeds the defence mechanism of projection, penetrating the psyche and impacting significantly on the self-identity of the other (ibid.: 159). But with projective identification 'the projection of a predominantly hostile inner world which is ruled by persecutory fears leads to the introjection – a taking-back –

of a hostile external world' (Klein, 1946/1975: 11). When such an 'internal state of affairs is projected into the external world and into the "outsider", this gives rise to the phenomenon where the majority population, despite being more powerful, feel in danger of being overpowered and dominated by the racialized (and thus *made* alien) Other' (Dalal, 2002: 46).

Klein theorised that in the depressive position, 'good and bad internal objects come closer together', that 'when the infant feels that his destructive impulses and phantasies are directed against the complete person of his loved object, guilt arises in full strength and, together with it, the over-riding urge to repair, preserve or revive the loved injured object' (Klein, 1952/ 1975: 74). However, the inability of the ego to bear 'premature guilt' where paranoid schizoid mechanisms are at work can lead to guilt being 'felt as persecution' (Klein 1957/1975: 194). Klein saw envy as a key contribution 'to the infant's difficulties in building up his good object, for he feels that the gratification of which he was deprived has been kept for itself by the breast that frustrated him' (ibid.: 180). Where 'excessive envy' causes this unbearably 'premature guilt' the desire for reparation can conflict with a defence against the 'depressive anxiety' because it is confused with 'persecutory anxiety' (ibid.: 194). In contrast 'a child with a strong capacity for love and gratitude has a deep-rooted relation with a good object and can, without being fundamentally damaged, withstand temporary states of envy, hatred, and grievance, which arise even in children who are loved and well mothered' (ibid.: 187). If 'excessive envy' precipitates 'premature guilt' its heightening or modification may also be central to the defence against the depressive and persecutory anxiety generated by it.

As Dalal (2002), Clarke (2003) and Balbus (2004) highlight, envy of the other in the racist imagination is commonly manifested, but often in contradictory ways. Indeed the notion that envy features in racism at all seems counter-intuitive if we read envy common-sensically as the desire for properties possessed by another. For 'envy to be a precipitator of racism, the racialized Other must be being attacked for some goodness' (Dalal, 2002: 44), which is problematic in a typical situation of material social inequality between notionally distinct 'races'. While 'the breast is envied by the infant because of its "real" fullness, the racialized Other is envied for their imagined fullness', projected qualities that are desirable, but 'resented because of some hazy realization that this thing that resides with them rightfully belongs to me' (ibid.).

Both Clarke (2003) and Balbus (2004) relate the manifestation of racist envy to resistance to the 'depressive position'. Balbus posits that rage against the mother for fantasied oral privation during weaning is turned against the self in order to preserve an idealised 'good' mother. But this uncontainably destructive rage is then projected onto the black other as the 'bad, needy oral part of the self', so complementing the 'militantly "independent" negation of' one's own 'neediness' (Balbus, 2004: 168). Hence the depiction of non-whites, in the neo-liberal rhetoric of contemporary racism, as welfare dependents. The fantasy of the black other as hyper-sexualised is connected with genital fantasies concerning the maternal body. The black male is the fantasied projection of the 'depressively unintegrated genital boy', now the 'man who defends against his dangerous, incestuous sexual desires by attempting to contain the rapacious sexuality of other men' (ibid.: 174). Such projected attributes are both denigrated and desired, deeply envied. If 'dangerous bodily needs are controlled by projecting them into others who are consequently experienced as mindless "animals" that must constantly be contained by a "civilized" self', the 'persistent envy of their proximity to "nature" [...] reveals an unconscious craving for the body' that is 'consciously condemn[ed]' (ibid.: 176).

Balbus thus connects Klein's paranoid schizoid and depressive positions with the history of American racism and the construction of the normative 'white' subject through differentiation from the black other. The disciplined, civilised, self-denying 'white' subject is contrasted with the black other whose rise is at 'our' expense. Resistance to reparation in the Kleinian, psychic sense underpins the 'shrill, sometimes even hysterical tone' (ibid.: 178) of resistance to calls for apology or material reparation for the impact of racism on all non-'white' subjects, including those who, in a defence against 'depressive anxiety' are variously idealised: 'the call for racial reparations is likely to evoke the depressive anxiety and guilt of white people who would otherwise remain comfortably enclosed within the walls of their racial fantasy fortress' (ibid.). The 'risk of the rhetoric of reparations is that it can trigger defences against guilt that reinforce rather than reduce white racism' (ibid.) because 'the fantastic segregation of "good black people" from "bad black people" is necessarily called into question by the claim that slavery, segregation and their aftermath have harmed *all black people* and that *all black people* therefore deserve compensation' (ibid.: 177).

Clarke (2003: 142) also sees envy 'as a barrier to reconciliation of good and bad in the depressive position', but uses British examples to show how it is related to what Barker (1981)

called the ‘new racism’, the notion of race as ‘cultural’ rather than biological difference. The ‘double bind of the “new racism”’ is such that there is a rationalisation that ‘we’ the ‘British nation are tolerant, “we” open our arms to you, but in doing so the “we” marginalises “you”. “You” cannot be like “us” because you are not like “us”. We make reparation to you, but in doing so we are unable to cope with the anxiety that we feel, the guilt of treating you the way we have’ (Clarke, 2003: 143). Reparation is thus entwined with the reassertion of difference as division, if not (consciously at any rate) as hierarchy. Yet there is a sense that ‘you’ now possess something that belongs to, and that you have ‘stolen’ from ‘us’: ‘jobs, cultures, ways of life. We try to take it back, but we cannot have it all (greed), so we destroy it (envy). In seeking to ethnically cleanse “others”, we are in fact cleansing ourselves’ (ibid.: 142).

Such contradictory currents of envy and idealisation have pervaded the representation of ‘black’ athletes in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century American popular culture. Ben Carrington (2011) traces the fantasy of the naturally powerful black athlete to the deep resentment, among white commentators, of the reign of Jack Johnson as the first African American heavyweight boxing champion (1908-1915). The hitherto persistent notion of ‘white’ intellectual *and* physical superiority that Johnson’s supremacy exploded was subsequently transformed, through theoretical developments in inter-war ‘sport science’, into the ‘explanation’ of Johnson’s and other athletes’ successes as manifestations of supposedly innate black physical superiority, the equation of the black athlete with raw, physical, animal power. While ostensibly acknowledging a form of superiority, this effectively served to ‘supply white supremacist logic with a much needed rationale that would disallow any suggestion that such sporting achievements be reflective of any deeper, cognitive and above all intellectual disposition’ (Carrington, 2011: 79). It also sustained the imaginary construction of racial difference based on skin colour. In this rhetoric the fetishised ‘black body’ became ‘either *sub*-human or *super*-human – never just common, never ordinary, never defined by its unspectacular *humanity*’ (Carrington 2002: 35). The fantasy of immense natural power devalues both labour and intellectual capacity, while constituting the ‘means through which the white cognitive self is produced’ (Carrington, 2011: 80).

Embedded here is a combination of ‘fear and fantasy’ concerning the black body. As Kobena Mercer (1999: 439) has observed, it is ‘idolized to the point of envy’, with an ambivalence that ‘cuts deep into the recess of the white male imaginary’ (Mercer, 1999: 439).

Sport offers a cultural arena where the fetishised black athlete may be ‘controlled by a complex process of objectification and sexualisation that once again renders the threat of negritude controllable to white patriarchy’ (Carrington, 2011: 88), but it helps to perpetuate the black athlete as an object of envious resentment in the white male imaginary.

Read from a Kleinian perspective, such ascribed attributes originate within this imaginary. The white spectator’s imagined helplessness and sense of wonder entails both idealisation as ‘naturally gifted’ and denigration as instinctually driven, a splitting off and acting out of fantasies in the spectacle of the other. ‘Idealisation’ is a defence against envy, a way of keeping ‘the potentially envied person on a pedestal and out of range’ (Joseph, 1986: 18), but the admiration for ‘natural’ attributes effectively denies the intellectual and physical labour of achievement. The idealisation of elite black athletes is exemplary of racial ‘tolerance’ and ‘proof’ of the meritocracy of sport as, in turn, an indicator of democratic meritocracy. However, its intermingling with barely repressed envy evinces Dalal’s (2002: 50) ‘pseudo-depressive position’, a liberal acknowledgement, acceptance, even elevation of racial otherness while, structurally, ‘hurts and violence continue’. It is a form of ‘mock reparation’ through which ‘one gives in order to limit damage to the (m)other’, and so ‘to limit damage to the self’ (Balbus, 2004: 183). The other enables the fantasied redemption of the distinctly *white* self and the denial of the impact of racism in perpetuating structural, economic and cultural inequality. Spectacular black athletic feats ‘prove’ economic and social meritocracy while the maximisation of the exchange value of athletic labour power and the fetishized black body evidence the wages of black super-athleticism. Underlying envy is also often entwined with jealousy: the fear of loss of position and a status that is rightfully ‘ours’.

This was particularly evident in the naked displays, via internet postings, of *schadenfreude* and blatant racism following news of Tiger Woods’ marital infidelity in 2009. Orin Starn (2011: 91) comments that, ‘once the outsized action hero of the golf world, Tiger was cut down to a single body part by this coarse modern variant of the primordial racist trope of black savagery: the big black phallus’. Masterful exponent of the quintessentially ‘white’, non-physical contact and cerebral sport of golf, Woods’ downfall was met with a gleeful combination of envy, jealousy, fear and loathing. The celebrated, self-identified post-racial ‘Cablinasian’, married to blond, blue-eyed Elin became the animal – black – other of white imagination after all. Woods’ ‘blackness’ was not explicitly highlighted in much mainstream media commentary.

As Andrews et al. (2011: 252) note, his ‘work ethic, his parents, his life story (and values), his sport of choice, his Stanford education, and so on [would] all contribute to his being able to walk a path toward redemption’. However, the extensively reported scandal nonetheless afforded the opportunity to ‘reiterate the facts of blackness without sounding racist’ (ibid.). The sense (though it remains tacit) of envious judgement in Buzz Bissinger’s (2010) comments on the truth lurking beneath Woods’ idealised image is clear:

Early on, he had learned that one of the rules of pro golf is to conform, a commandment only heightened in his case by his being black in a white man’s game. “He tried to present himself as a normal person,” said Michael Bamberger, a senior writer for *Sports Illustrated*, who has covered Woods’s career. “What seems clear now is that he lived a very abnormal life all his life in a sport in which guys are very conventional, and if you are not conventional you get ostracized right away.” Whatever demons lurked, he kept them well hidden. Too well hidden. [...] It is safe to say that behind the non-accessible accessibility and seemingly perfect marriage to a beautiful woman was a sex addict who could not get enough.

Whiteness equals conventionality, respectability and ‘normality’. In his efforts to effect an inscrutably white public image, Woods’ ‘blackness’ was exposed. First idealised as proof of sport’s meritocracy, its symbolic reparation for the devastating impact of the history of racism, now he is an object of thinly veiled envy.

As this commentary on Woods indicates, the complement to the construction of the ‘black athlete’ as other is the ‘white athlete’ as normative subject. The Hollywood sport themed film is a key cultural site in which these complementary constructions of race have been repetitively dramatised (Crosson, 2013: 66-102). In such films there is often a sense of nostalgic yearning for a lost or passing form of working class masculinity in the depiction of the white athlete. The classic case of this is the series of *Rocky* films, which commenced with *Rocky* in 1976 and concluded with the sixth instalment, *Rocky Balboa* in 2006, but it is also evident in recent releases such as *Cinderella Man* (2005), *Fighting* (2009) and *The Fighter* (2010). The discussion of the *Rocky* films that follows focuses on the combination of idealisation and envy in their depiction of the ‘black athlete’, but it also highlights how this depiction is complemented by

the theme of redemption of the 'white' athlete. In order to make sense of this theme I make additional use of Judith Butler's analysis of gender 'performativity'. This is conceptually important because while Klein's ideas were derived from analysis of the child's ambivalent pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother, the gender exclusivity of men's sporting contests requires closer consideration.

Butler's analysis follows Freud's (1923) seminal argument that the infant ego is formed by 'melancholic' identification, through introjection, with the idealised abandoned object-cathexis of infancy, making it the 'precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes' (Freud, 1923: 29). She stresses that though initially each child's melancholic identifications are both male and female, heterosexual gender identification follows repudiation of homosexual attachment to the same sex parent as a loss that cannot be acknowledged or grieved. It thus remains as a melancholic identification performed as heterosexual identification with the same gender, but which 'embodies the ungrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis' (Butler, 1997: 136). In Kleinian psychoanalysis the Oedipal encounter with the father is seen to help resolve the infant ego's ambivalence towards the mother, to ease the progress of the 'depressive position', and so the 'mourning' for the lost object which the infant fears has been injured by its destructive fantasies. Butler, however, theorises an enduring melancholic attachment underpinning heterosexuality which stems from the inability to grieve a loss – the love of this parent – which has never been acknowledged. Thus if we accept the Kleinian thesis that identity formation is initiated through the infant's psychic objectification of the mother, the inevitable ambivalence in this objectification is at least complicated rather than resolved through Oedipal identification with the father in the case of males. Anne Cheng (2001: xi) has highlighted how the construction of 'white American identity' has also historically been 'secured through the melancholic introjection of racial others that it can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate and whose ghostly presence nonetheless guarantees its centrality'. The construction of white masculinity is therefore inextricably linked with the melancholic introjection of 'black' masculinity.

There is thus a multifaceted contradiction, that idealisation of the 'black athlete', envious denial of dependence and melancholic attachment, both to the white paternal ideal and the racial other, are intertwined. This contradiction is dramatically played out in the climax of *the* classic sport film, *Rocky* (1976) and again in its fifth sequel, *Rocky Balboa* (2006). While there is an ostensibly 'reparative' dimension to these films' narratives in the spectacle of meritocratic

contests in the idealised, socially decontextualized sporting arena, this contradiction works against the possibility of reparation. In both cases, Rocky's redemption entails the embodiment of this masculinity in competition with the simultaneously idealised and envied black other. In each case, too, the theme of Rocky's white redemption and the ambivalence towards the black opponent he faces resonate with the distinct social and cultural contexts in which they were made.

### **The Rocky Road to Redemption**

Written by and starring the then virtually unknown Sylvester Stallone, the low budget *Rocky* was a surprising commercial success and won the 'Best Film' Academy Award, suggesting that it resonated in very powerful ways with its audience. The simple plot is well known. Against the backdrop of a rapidly de-industrialising Philadelphia in the throes of the 1970s economic recession, the struggling Italian-American boxer Rocky Balboa is given an opportunity to fight the African-American world heavyweight champion Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) to mark the 1976 US bicentennial celebrations. Rocky loses on points, but he recovers his masculine self-respect by proving himself as a boxer. In its sentimental depiction of an inarticulate but likeable working class hero the film harks back to the 1950s characters of *Marty* (1955) and Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* (1954). More particularly, though, it is a parable of the recovery of white masculine identity in the context of the recession and the aftermath of both the 1960s Civil Rights and feminist movements.<sup>2</sup>

Rocky's increasing social marginality is directly highlighted in the film's early stages as we see him box for little money and work part-time as a loan shark enforcer. The theme of downward social mobility and disconnection from a more affluent youth is suggested by a scene in which, taped to his shabby apartment mirror as he gazes at his bruised face, we see pictures of a boy, presumably Rocky, and (again, presumably) his deceased, respectably dressed parents.

It is striking, though, how a problematic of downward economic mobility from the post-war economic boom as visually suggested here is subsequently displaced in the film onto one of inverse racial hierarchy in boxing. While ostensibly idealising the black champion, Creed, there is a running theme of envious resentment that resonates with the growing backlash, from the 1970s onwards, against the Affirmative Action anti-racist employment measures introduced in

the 1960s, a backlash exacerbated by rising unemployment. Ross (1997: 28) contends that the notionally 'innocent white victim' of anti-Affirmative Action sentiment inevitably 'triggers at some level its rhetorically natural opposite', the 'undeserving black taker'. The resonance with this context is first notable when, without his knowledge, Rocky's gym locker is given to a black boxer by the white gym owner, Mickey. Adding insult to injury, Mickey tells him he fights like a 'god-damn ape'. Rocky displays no resentment of the implied inversion of crude social Darwinian racism, but the irony of the remark is unmistakable. Similarly, it is Rocky who idealises the champion, Creed who, in an act of patriotic generosity affords him a unique opportunity. However, while Rocky describes him as 'the best', naked 'white' envy of Creed is expressed by Rocky's friends, the barman who calls Creed a 'jig clown', and Paulie, who entreats Rocky to 'punch this guy's lungs out' as Creed verbally toys with Rocky in a television interview. Rocky remains Christ-like, taking the unexplicated 'it' on the chin throughout, as visually suggested by the image of Jesus adorning the disused Church that stages the film's opening fight (Martin, 1995). This is a film that both idealises the 'black athlete' in the figure of Creed, not least through Rocky's own admiration, but also suggests that his status as such is a source of resentment for Rocky's white associates, a resentment that the film suggests may have some legitimacy.

The film's narrative structure is such that Creed is first inflated by reputation, then evacuated of all moral substance as he arrogantly fails to take his opponent seriously and suffers a deservedly brutal beating despite his points victory. He appears to rely solely on his natural ability. A hybrid of the brashly loquacious Muhammed Ali and boxing promoter Don King, Creed arranges the fight himself, often appearing in a three piece suit. In a key scene, as a black female television interviewer talks to Rocky while he trains at a meat freezer, the camera pulls back to reveal Creed's trainer watching the television while, his back turned, Creed makes the fight arrangements. The *mise-en-scène* unmistakably visualises the theme of inverse racial hierarchy later highlighted at the climactic fight when Creed arrives dressed first as George Washington, then Uncle Sam, both highlighting his personal generosity and racial ascendancy in boxing. While the 'land of opportunity' has afforded Creed the chance to capitalise on his natural ability, it renders Rocky a markedly *white* underdog.

Rocky's moral victory by 'going the distance' exposes Creed's artificiality, despite natural prowess, as a master of language and mind games, but with skin deep sincerity and only a

money-worshipping creed. By contrast, Rocky is all ‘heart’, discovering inner worth beneath the white skin he insists that Mickey cut when his eye swells late in the fight. This enables the fight to continue but also lets the blood flow so he can *see*, literally and metaphorically, the ‘truth’ of Creed’s weakness. Reduced to a raw meat like state after his pummelling, in the process he has found ‘himself’, become a ‘subject’. However, at this point it is worth recalling Francis Bacon’s (2002: 354) characterisation of envy as ‘an ejaculation or irradiation of the eye’, noting that ‘the times when the stroke or percussion of an envious eye doth most hurt, are when the party envied is beheld in glory or triumph’. The spurt of blood is visibly ejaculatory, the capacity to wound himself a source of phallic renewal. Indeed, Alan Dundes (1980: 114-117) notes numerous historical associations of phallus and eye in his commentary on the ‘evil eye’ of envy. A problematic of social and economic recovery, particularly in the de-industrialising northern States, is thus transposed onto one of race, of discovering the ‘truth’ of Rocky’s white character by equalling his supposedly more naturally gifted opponent through physical suffering and exposing the latter’s corporeal and cultural vacuity. That Creed should be exposed is no real surprise given that this black athletic superman is a figment of ‘white’ imagination, a de-valuing of physical and cultural labour while making his symbolic dethroning a figurative step to white renaissance. If Creed has benefitted from sport’s meritocracy, it has fuelled an unhealthy arrogance.

Conversely, Rocky progressively grows in stature by finding the *character* to remain upright in the climactic fight. *Rocky* was thus a classic instance of symbolic ‘vampirism’, ‘suck[ing] the blood of moral indignation’ from non-Whites (see Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998: 14). Writer/star Stallone successfully appropriates the imagery of black urban poverty by taking the meat freezer training from the biography of black Philadelphia-born boxer Joe Frazier (McKenna, 2011). Creed’s imitation of Ali’s style, shouting ‘you’re next, Joe Frazier’ when the real Frazier appears ringside heightens Rocky’s alignment with Frazier and serves to disguise the film’s tacit racism.<sup>3</sup>

*Rocky* is thus an interesting case of how symbolic reparation for the wrongs of racism is limited by ambivalence. Rocky’s idealisation of Creed contrasts with a ‘white’ envy that is both openly featured in the film through its vulgar expression by Rocky’s own friends and dismissed by Rocky’s Christ-like refusal of their sentiments. However, the film narrative (written by Stallone, after all) nonetheless stresses Creed’s lack of substance. As a post-Civil Rights film in

which a fictional variation of Muhammed Ali, the champion stripped of his world title for refusing to fight in Vietnam is both idealised and enviously attacked, *Rocky* stresses the enduring 'otherness' of the 'black athlete'. Conversely, Rocky's metaphorical training run from his own neighbourhood's urban decay to the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art signifies his performative recovery of the white paternal masculinity that is markedly absent from the film in the shape of any of the characters. As Elmwood (2005) highlights, Rocky's masculine recovery also entails a key role in the transformation of his dowdy girlfriend Adrian into a confident, glamorous partner by the end of the film. Her visual feminisation accentuates Rocky's masculinisation as he symbolically beats the recession by mapping the imagined paternal masculinity of melancholic identification onto his own body.

Rocky's return in *Rocky Balboa* (2006), sixteen years after *Rocky V* (1990) was part of a post-9/11 sequence of Hollywood films that promoted the virtues of idealised working class masculinity, and echoed the sanctification of the New York firefighters who died in the 9/11 attack (see Nystrom, 2009: 157-86). As Kusz (2008) shows, many sport and action films from this time resonated with the bellicose rhetoric of the George W. Bush administration, harking back to the 'hard masculinity' of Reagan era cinema (Jeffords, 1994) following the depictions of 'softer', more nuanced masculinities in Hollywood films of the Clinton era in the 1990s (Malin, 2005).

Long retired and aged 60, Rocky is implausibly lured back to boxing to face current world heavyweight champion Mason 'The Line' Dixon in order to reignite interest in a sport in decline. By surviving the ordeal, despite losing, he provides the latest African American incumbent with what the ringside commentator calls an 'on the job lesson in courage'. His potentially fatal return is also presented as a model of stoic endurance and self-motivation for his son Robert (who ultimately quits his nameless corporate job to help train his father), and the seemingly uniformly white, unemployed denizens of Rocky's old neighbourhood in inner city Philadelphia. The film thus chimes with the increasingly ubiquitous neo-liberal doctrine of welfare reform through individual 'self-empowerment' as antidote to urban poverty in post-industrial America (Cruikshank, 1999) while reinvigorating the original film's nostalgia for white working class masculinity and its valorising of boxing's 'bodily capital' (Wacquant, 1995). More particularly, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Rocky's resurgence entails recovery from a debilitating melancholic attachment to his now deceased wife, Adrian, through the perpetuation

and revitalising of both an idealised paternal masculinity and melancholic attachment to *race*. Early in the film we witness the bereaved, slightly unkempt Rocky daily attending Adrian's grave, revisiting the now derelict haunts of the original *Rocky* and telling anecdotes of his boxing exploits in a restaurant he has named 'Adrian's'. The sombre bluey-grey imagery and piano score (a tear jerkingly slow variant of the famous training run music from *Rocky*) visually and aurally evoke Freud's (1917: 253) 'open wound' of melancholia that, in Schiesari's (1992: 37) gloss, 'drains all prowess, like a libidinal black hole absorbing cathectic energies until the ego catastrophically implodes'. Rocky's 'work' of mourning Adrian, 'the very *process* of recuperating the ego's investment of libido in the lost object through a ritual of commemoration and farewell' (ibid.), is presented here as entailing his 'remasculinisation'. However, in effect this is more a repudiation, rather than mourning, of his dependence on Adrian (spatialised as the restaurant's emblematic representation of the 'feminine' world of consumption) by returning to boxing. The association of the restaurant with oral dependency, and this in turn with femininity, is reiterated through the character of Angie, an angry young white woman who attempts to cadge a drink from him when he revisits the 'Lucky Seven' bar from *Rocky*.

The film's gestures towards the softer 1990s 'new man' give way to a celebration of the revived hypermuscularity of Stallone's '80s incarnations of Rocky and Rambo in the post-9/11 era. Eliminating feminine melancholic identification is one element of the equation, but it is a Kleinian 'manic defense' (Klein, 1940: 349) against feminine/maternal dependency, rather than 'mourning', which Klein associates with the depressive position.

The return to boxing highlights the endurance of Rocky's 'racial melancholia' (Cheng, 2001) through his latest moral victory over an opponent whose name clearly signals the implicit racial theme. Mason 'The Line' Dixon can ambiguously signify either progressive 21<sup>st</sup> century racial integration or the uppity black who has crossed the historic line separating the southern slave owning States from the north, a line running close to *Rocky*'s Philadelphia setting. As Trudier Harris (2009) observes, it has been an enduringly 'scary' reference point in the work of African American writers. It is hard to imagine an African American boxer taking this nickname unless in an act of provocation, an act to which Rocky's resurrection as the Great White Hope implicitly responds.

What name could be more indicative of Rocky's needing a racial other in order to '*be*' himself? And what could be more indicative of a manic defense against mourning the lost 'good

objects' of infancy than his leaving the grave of an idealised, but one dimensional, deceased femininity to fight a distinctly 'bad object': another arrogant, but fragile black opponent? (In *Rocky*, Adrian becomes a substitute, of sorts, for Rocky's deceased parents. There, too, Rocky escaped a poignantly conveyed sense of familial loss by accepting Creed's challenge.)

Even though Dixon's obvious 'blackness' (apart from his manager, all of his friends and associates are black) is never acknowledged as such, his very name signifies what Freud (1917: 249-50) calls the 'cannibalistic' introjection of the 'lost' object in melancholia, the incorporation of the object into the ego. Cheng stresses that the object is 'uncomfortably swallow[ed]' (2001: 10), for the object of melancholic attachment that is sustaining of the ego is also reviled and denigrated (Freud, 1917: 248): the melancholic is 'stuck – almost choking on – the hateful and loved thing he or she just devoured' (Cheng, 2001: 9). Dixon represents the 'racial other' who sticks in his craw as an object on which Rocky's identity is dependent. Despite the gestures towards his dependence on the loving memory of Adrian, this is actually shown to be mentally crippling. Her memory is expelled *through* the renewal of his melancholic dependence on the black other.

This dependence is also inextricably intertwined with melancholic attachment to an abstract (white) paternal ideal, physically embodied only in the photograph featuring the deceased father in *Rocky*. His climactic performance of masculinity in the ring, displaying the real scars of Stallone's notoriously gruelling training for previous *Rocky* films (Rovin, 1985: 76, 120), is an astonishingly visceral embodiment of the introjection of the paternal ideal through melancholic identification, in Butler's (1997) sense of gender as the performative embodiment of the forbidden, ungrrieved lost love object of infancy. Rocky's clearly ageing body, gnarled and veiny, *becomes* the missing father from *Rocky*; and as he slugs it out with Dixon, fragmentary flashbacks to Adrian's grave signify her progressive elimination from this triangular interrelationship. He loses the fight, but is also able, finally, to walk away (literally) from Adrian's grave at the film's conclusion.

Like Creed, Dixon is both elevated and denigrated, but while Creed was boxer, manager and promoter combined, Dixon (whose name invokes slavery itself) is cast as a 'forty million dollar slave' (Rhoden, 2006), in thrall to sport's commercialism, surrounded by manipulative white managers and a metaphorically almost luminous white training gym that emphasises his isolation and reduction to an image void of personal substance or cultural sustenance. Stallone's

DVD commentary tells us that such athletes are ‘so superior in their abilities and so protected by management, they really never [...] show what it would be like if they were just playing for nothing’.<sup>4</sup> Dixon’s lack of ‘passion’ (fans pelt him with ice cubes as he easily wins his fight in the film’s opening sequence) codifies the film’s cultural ‘racism without racists’, the phenomenon Bonilla-Silva (2006: 28-29) identifies as the rhetoric of racism without explicitly invoking the concept of race; here implying lazy complacency and passive subjection to manipulation despite immense ‘natural’ ability. Dixon is a manipulated puppet forced to prove himself by the challenge (in his own words), of ‘a crazy old [white] man’ willing to risk his life.

However, the film’s racial theme is again partly acknowledged and disguised through Rocky’s friendship with Steps (son of the now grown up white girl ‘Little Marie’ from *Rocky*). Steps’ absent Jamaican father alludes to the stereotype of black men’s refusal of paternal responsibility, while his name invokes Rocky’s famous training run up the Museum of Art steps. When Rocky adopts a rescue dog that Steps names Punchy, oblivious to, or playfully accepting of Steps’ jab (‘Punchy’ suggests ‘punch drunk’, but his rescue status might represent Steps himself), Rocky becomes the good (white) father Steps never had, containing *Steps’* envious adolescent attack without crumbling or leaving. Christ-like in *Rocky*, now he has a God-like ability to save others, including his son Robert from yuppie oblivion. When, fixing Marie’s front door light he says ‘let there be light’, the joke encapsulates the film’s theme of the *white* father who, by example, saves white inner city poor, fatherless blacks and emasculated service industry white kids alike. He even rescues Dixon from the virtual slavery of superstar enthrallment to commercial imperatives and management, forcing him to prove his credentials as champ in a ‘real’ fight where he has to work for his victory.

Thus while Rocky ostensibly mourns Adrian’s death by returning to boxing, this return does not, as Klein (1940) identifies as the heart of the mourning process, restore the ‘good objects’ of infancy. Rather, it reinvigorates his hyper-muscular, white masculine identification *through* racial melancholia and the elevation of the black athlete as an object of envious resentment in its allegory of white male economic recovery. It is also notable that while Creed was depicted as possessing considerable charm (and there is a clear homoerotic undercurrent in *Rocky III* (1982) where Creed becomes Rocky’s coach and friend in a fraternal rapprochement; albeit united in opposition to the terrifyingly brutal Clubber Lang), Dixon is singularly charmless and glowering throughout. If anything, the racial boundary in this 21<sup>st</sup> century film is firmer. The

necessity for reparation is vigorously denied through Dixon's singularly unsympathetic portrayal and the theme of Rocky doing the paternal work that Steps' biological father has forsaken (so by implication contributing to his and Marie's poverty). There is a basic contradiction that the denial of envy of the 'black athlete' through the idealisation of his 'natural ability' co-exists with evidence, both of the endurance of this envy (Stallone's DVD commentary (above) being exemplary), and of melancholic dependence on the black other for the construction of white identity.

### **The Limits of Symbolic Reparation**

There is a history of a more evidently liberal Hollywood cinema that ostensibly offers a more critical view of race and racism. However, there is a notable tendency there to privilege the enlightenment, learning and empathetic capacity of their white characters. The problem, as Roman (1997: 274) argues, is that 'redemption discourses claim that loving identification with, and caring for, the "racial other" partially overcomes and appropriates what the racially privileged are *not* able to know (consciously) from their own *direct experiences* – that is, the concrete effects of racism'.

In Kleinian thinking, 'art and creative work in general become not merely acts of symbolic wish-fulfilment arising from hedonistic appetites, but activities symbolically commemorating and preserving the relation to a loved other' (Rustin, 1991: 22). Theoretically, artistic creativity in the form of symbolic representation 'arises when depressive feelings predominate over paranoid-schizoid ones, when separation from the object, ambivalence, guilt, and loss can be experienced and tolerated' (Segal, 1991: 41). Destructive fantasies and projections can be acknowledged and represented. However, 'sincere fictions of the white self' (Vera and Gordon, 2003: 15), which appear to constitute a desire for 'reparation' for the wrongs perpetrated by racialised social hierarchy may in effect exemplify Dalal's (2002: 50) 'pseudo-depressive position'. By ennobling the exercise of conscience or the artistic vision, these 'sincere fictions' are 'mock reparations' that 'limit damage to the [white] self' (Balbus, 2004: 183). The other continues to be objectified, fixed in the gaze of the implicitly *white* subject.

A complex case is Norman Jewison's *The Hurricane* (1999) which dramatises the wrongful 1966 triple murder conviction of boxer Rubin 'Hurricane' Carter and the re-

examination of evidence leading to his 1985 release following a Federal Appeal. Carter's case is infamous in US legal history as his conviction in New Jersey, along with a younger black man, John Artis, was based on highly questionable eye witness evidence (Hirsch, 2000: 123). Famous as the left-liberal director of *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), Jewison had earlier abandoned a 'biopic' of Malcolm X following a campaign against his appointment and outspoken criticism by *Malcom X's* (1992) ultimate director, Spike Lee (McNeil, 2012: 129). Carter's story offered a variation on Malcolm X's biographical trajectory. However, as McNeil (ibid.) highlights, while Lee 'emphasized the importance of X's pilgrimage to Mecca and connection to the black diaspora', in his search for a 'cross-over audience', Jewison 'highlighted Carter's relationship to selfless white Canadian liberals'.

The narrative is outwardly framed from the perspectives of two black characters. It moves between opening flashbacks from Rubin's (Denzel Washington) life, including an allegedly unfair judges' decision against him in a title fight, his conviction, writing and publication of his autobiography while in prison (Carter, 1973/2011); and the inspiration for the re-investigation by Lesra, a teenage black boy from Brooklyn who encounters Rubin's book while under the benevolent care of three affluent white Canadians. The latter belonged to a Toronto commune, and the film was largely based on Chaiton and Swinton's (1991) book about how their re-investigation led to Carter's ultimate release.

The film visualises the problematic of psychic integration and reparation as a challenge for its *black* characters, while the Canadians, particularly Lisa, have a transcendent, almost angelic visual presence. They embody what Testa (2007: 162) calls Jewison's commitment to the 'positive outcomes of liberal justice', but with a distinctly Canadian sensibility. Like Jewison's other typical protagonists, working within the institution of law they exercise 'concrete reason' and 'expertise' to expose 'a political truth about the society depicted' (Testa, 2007: 165). Thus, despite efforts to 'soothe black anger by showing that there is both race hatred *and* selfless interracial love' (Williams, 2001: 303), the film exemplifies the 'sincere white fiction' that 'whites are more insightful about or active in racial change than blacks' (Feagin and Vera, 1995: 143). Against the backdrop of Jewison's personal history, twice losing the opportunity to direct key films about African American history (the other being his reluctantly abandoned project to film William Styron's novel about slave rebel Nat Turner (Quinn, 2011: 8-11)), and despite its evident liberalism, *The Hurricane* privileges its white characters.

The film combines images of Lesra's reading of the book as we hear Rubin's corresponding narrative voiceover with a series of visual flashbacks. This effectively shifts the focus from the original trial, and 1976 retrial, to Rubin's righteous anger and recourse to psychic, and by implication, racial, splitting in prison as a coping mechanism that nonetheless perpetuates his isolation. Proclaiming that 'everything that matters, I lost at the hands of white folks', he survives through literal splitting from, and refusal to recognise his prison surroundings, remaining cell-bound and waking only at night. The challenge of effecting 'reparation' effectively becomes *his*. As the film's co-writer, Dan Gordon, remarked, Carter 'faced his own fragmented segments of personality and surrendered those which were full of violence and hate, even though they had kept him alive in prison' (quoted in McNeil, 2012: 129). Meanwhile, the implied structural racism underpinning his conviction is localised in a single police officer, Della Pesca, who is shown eliciting false witness statements.<sup>5</sup> Presented as a constant presence in Carter's life from childhood convictions onwards, he sneeringly, and with unmistakable envy, addresses the arrested Carter as 'Mr. fuckin' champeen of the world'.

Meanwhile, the Canadians' vague backstory and otherness to the American legal system gives them both a neutral distance and a distinctly parental quality. Having adopted Lesra, they proceed to adopt Rubin, their interest triggered by Lesra's reading of Rubin's book and his acting out of Rubin's anger and frustration through what we might infer as a form of 'projective identification'. As Lesra attempts to emulate Rubin by venting his anger with a punchbag, in the foreground the blonde, maternal Lisa commences her reading of his book and is inspired to pursue the cerebral path of re-investigating the case. Thenceforth, Rubin's recovery of subjective integrity involves enlightenment, literally, by them as, through trust, his splitting of black from white is slowly undone. They are visualised repeatedly with looks of loving concern, and significantly it is the blonde Lisa who, illuminated by her table lamp, receives Rubin's desperate phone call ('I can't do the time'), and accelerates their reinvestigation. Like the 'good' mother, she contains and helps productively channel destructive and self-destructive impulses.<sup>6</sup> Hers is a transcendent (Canadian) whiteness unencumbered by the baggage of American racism localised in a rogue cop.

Indeed, Lisa's visualisation is not dissimilar to Leigh Anne Tuohy's in *The Blind Side* (2009), a markedly neoconservative take on racial disadvantage also based on a 'true story' (Lewis, 2006). Here a wealthy, devoutly Christian, Republican white Tennessee woman (Sandra

Bullock) adopts a poorly educated homeless black teenager, Michael Oher and oversees his induction into a school's American football team as a 'left tackle' charged with protecting the quarterback's 'blind side' from oncoming attackers. The film visually stresses her centrality as quasi-angelic mentor and coach, discovering an ability of which Oher was unaware. Its trailer, particularly, emphasises the maternal/filial dyad through a series of look/reverse look shots, a kind of 'Winnicottian' maternal mirroring culminating in her instruction to Mike to imagine the quarterback as Leigh Anne herself in order to perform his protective role. Whereas Lacan (2000: 44-50) saw the infant's fascination with its mirror image as 'misrecognition' of self, the imagery resembles, somewhat, a caricature of Donald Winnicott's (1967: 26-33) vision of the mother-child mutual mirroring as the path to the infant's realisation of self-identity. The giant but child-like Mike finds himself in the mirror of a kindly *white* mother who rescues him from the slum dwelling blacks whom she warns: 'threaten my son, you threaten me'.

*The Hurricane*'s evidently 'reparative' mission nonetheless repeatedly infantilises its eponymous hero whose challenge is to trust his protectors, particularly Lisa. Indeed, white masculinity is likewise rescued through a separate quasi-parental intervention. When a prison guard offers Rubin number-less white prison pajamas as a protective compromise between regulations and his already severely punished refusal to wear the uniform, the scene is lit by white light streaming through a high window over the guard's shoulder, nearly blinding the squinting Carter, who has just emerged from solitary confinement. According to Hirsch (2000: 95), Carter's pajamas actually dated from his hospitalisation for an eye operation. When he returned to the prison 'wearing pajamas and slippers [...] no one touched him'. Here, though, the pajamas' connotations as a protective white, parental membrane are unmistakable. Similarly, the climactic court hearing contrasts the mouth twitching Della Pesca with the Federal Judge (Rod Steiger), who initially sits parallel to his bench to *hear*, colour blind, the case for new evidence, so suggesting, as characteristic of Jewison's work, that 'law and reason as social institution' (Testa, 2007: 165) will defeat *visually* informed prejudice.

The film thus reproduces a white/black duality in which good white people undo bad white people's tampered evidence, so enabling the entry, into full subjectivity, of poor black people. Hence, ultimately, a form of 'mock reparation' (Balbus, 2004) that falls short of what Benjamin (1998: 96) contends is the condition for entry into the 'depressive position': that 'the other's difference must exist outside; not be felt as a coercive command to "become" the other,

and therefore not be defended against by assimilating it to the self'. In *The Hurricane*, Carter and Lesra are effectively adopted and assimilated to an image of benign whiteness which is split from malign and distinctly localised white racism. As Galatzer-Levy (2007: 238) observes, 'what whiteness must negotiate in the face of disparities between white and black America must be the failure of the liberal ideal', but the 'rigidity' of the latter 'does not allow itself the possibility of accepting that loss'. The liberal ideal presented here is a form of 'magical reparative process' (ibid.: 239) that locates the pathological causes for this loss in those white people who have betrayed it. The loss, therefore, is not being 'mourned'.

At least two sport themed films, *The Fan* (1996) and *O* (2001), foreground and explore the theme of envy as a manifestation of the white protagonist's resentment of 'black' athletic success. While in both, the idea of the 'black athlete' is clearly framed as an imaginary projection of 'white' imagination, the object of envy becomes a vehicle for externalising a sense of 'loss' made more poignant through its familial contextualisation; particularly its association with the more understandable and culturally acceptable emotion of familially motivated jealousy. These films also deny their black characters any independent subjectivity, presenting them as the manipulated projections of the white protagonists, so that the focus on envy does not extend to a dialogical recognition of the perspective of the Other. Though distinct, they are thus manifestations of a resistance to the 'depressive position', critical meditations on the tragedy of 'white racism' that reproduce the normativity of the *subject* as white - complex, internally conflicted, and as such an object of empathy.

In each, paralleling Butler's (1997) analysis of masculinity as 'performative', the white protagonist's tragedy is clearly represented as their melancholic emotional attachment to a paternal masculinity whose loss cannot be grieved because it cannot be acknowledged as such. They also have an implicitly homosexual triangular core in which envy of the black athlete is connected with jealous resentment of their cultural status in the eyes of an actual father (*O*), or the symbolic cultural representation of the father (*The Fan*).

The theme of envy is explored somewhat, though rather ambivalently and contradictorily, in Tony Scott's *The Fan*, which traces a baseball fan's turn from adoration to hatred of his favourite player. The narrative structure echoes Anthony Elliott's psychoanalytic reading of John Lennon's murderer, Mark Chapman, but with an implicitly racial theme through the casting of Robert de Niro as *The Fan*, Gil Renard, and Wesley Snipes as the player, Bobby Rayburn. In

Elliott's analysis, Chapman projected an idealized vision onto Lennon, so 'introjecting' an enhanced 'good object' but, 'discover[ing] that the celebrity is unable to transcend the trials and tribulations of everyday life [he] comes to [...] entertain fantasies of revenge' against this now 'persecutory' object (Elliott, 1999: 140).

For Gil, a lifelong San Francisco Giants fan fired from his salesman's job by his deceased father's knife company, downward economic mobility intensifies his emotional investment in the symbolic cultural sphere that he associates with personal and familial continuity. Seeing a parallel between Bobby's declining fortunes and his own when Bobby's form slumps, he murders Bobby's principal team rival. Gil feels slighted, in his delusional state, by Bobby following his subsequently renewed form, but failure to acknowledge his rival's removal as the cause. Seeking redress, he effectively challenges Bobby to embody his elevation of him to a quasi-Freudian 'ego ideal' by scoring a home run in exchange for the life of Bobby's son, whom Gil has kidnapped.

Inevitably, Bobby cannot compensate for the loss of the idealized, implicitly white world of Gil's childhood baseball heroes and the paternally and economically secure world they represent. Indeed, somewhat ironically, San Francisco Giants originated as the New York Giants, and was transplanted to San Francisco in 1958 (Spatz, 2012: 307). Gil is clearly presented as increasingly deluded and ultimately psychotic. However, the film's ambivalent stance with respect to Bobby's Otherness is notable. While it focuses extensively on Gil's increasingly destructive envy of Bobby's supposedly 'natural' ability, selfishness and social disconnectedness, his resentment is presented as having some justification. Thus, although Gil's envious resentment of Bobby's seemingly effortless athleticism is clearly delusional, Bobby's intimation that he recovered form because he 'stopped caring' offers some legitimacy to Gil's grievance.

The film's context was the 1994-1995 baseball players' strike, which left many baseball fans feeling embittered and led to 'quixotic discussions about [...] "fans' rights", a way to formalize the nausea about greedy baseball players and owners' (McGimpsey, 2000: 14). Indicative of this context, in an early scene we witness Bobby and his agent mocking fans in the studio during Gil's call to a radio station phone-in. This sense of betrayal by a spoilt wealthy player echoes *Rocky* somewhat, and intertwines with a more racially specific discourse of irresponsible, failed African American fatherhood in American society and film (Bruzzi, 2005:

162-169). While the divorced Gil's right to paternal access to his son is removed when he temporarily abandons him at a Giants game, Bobby's neglect of his son Sean almost results in his drowning. It is Gil who redeems *himself* by saving Sean, so making direct contact with Bobby. His making Bobby prove he 'cares' (for his son and fans alike) by hitting the home run is a form of Kleinian 'projective identification', forcing *into* Bobby the feelings of jealousy and insecurity Gil has experienced through witnessing his ex-wife's new partner's control over his own son. His vengeful disciplining of Bobby's irresponsible 'blackness' is his imagined route to recovering his identity as a white man capable of having some material social impact. The challenge to Bobby is to emulate the feats of white baseball legends Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, sentimentalised in *The Babe Ruth Story* (1948) and *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942), of hitting home runs at the request of sick children. Although delusional, Gil thus successfully disciplines an otherwise wayward black masculinity, a man who has earlier *visibly* and stereotypically forsaken his paternal responsibilities and derided his supporters. Thus although it never names 'race' as a theme, *The Fan* indulges envious destructive fantasies of a naturally gifted but indolent, spoilt and irresponsible black masculinity.

At the climactic moment, when Bobby has made his home run, he is denied his achievement by Gil who, disguised as the umpire, calls him out. Unmasking himself to confront Bobby with the taunt 'now, do you care?', Gil opts to sacrifice himself, ensuring his own death in a hail of police bullets by 'pitching' his father's knife at Bobby. This is clearly depicted as an act of envious rage. The 'pitch' is his performative incarnation of an imagined paternal masculinity which, having been rejected by Bobby (as hero but also as an object of implicitly homoerotic investment), becomes, for Gil an object of even more intense identification. However, the visualisation of his death, shot from different angles, resembles erotic pictorial depictions of Saint Sebastian's (the patron saint of athletes) masochistic martyrdom. Before turning to face Bobby, he gazes at his image on the stadium screen, turns back to Bobby, then faces the screen again, frustrated at his reliance on Bobby (either way) for visual recognition in a world that has deemed him expendable. His death is a tragic outcome of idealisation of his baseball idol turned denigration, but his actions are mitigated somewhat by context, rendering them akin to a form of martyrdom for his melancholic attachment to a lost personal and collective past whose loss, manifested by a black baseball player's ascendancy, he cannot grieve, cannot *countenance*.

Gil's martyrdom is also perhaps more than a 'performance' of masculinity, in Butler's sense. Rather, as Freud argued, male masochism evinces a love of the father manifested through anal-regressive fantasy: love of the father is forcibly renounced through introjection of the paternal superego, but the masochistic fantasy of being 'beaten by the father' is a 'regressive distortion' of the wish 'to have a passive (feminine) sexual relation to him' (Freud, 1924: 169), the 'negative' Oedipus complex (Freud, 1923: 33). As Gil ensures his own death through his voluntary martyrdom, by inviting the wrath of the Law he invokes a love of the father while disavowing both his envy and love of his black idol. Gil's tragedy has a poignancy that cuts across the representation of his envious attack as pathological.

Thus, while *The Fan* is far from being a straightforwardly reactionary text in which economic insecurity is displaced onto 'white' resentment of 'black athletic' ascendancy, it nonetheless 'explains' its white protagonist's envy, not least through his imaginary antagonist's flaws as a black man. It cannot be seen as a reparative text, therefore, in that it does not name its implicit theme of envy as white racism, yet offers a mitigating explanation of its motivation which effectively reproduces the imaginary 'black athlete' as envied and deeply resented Other.

A more complex case, *O* (2001), directed by Tim Blake Nelson and written by African American Brad Kaaya, transposed Shakespeare's *Othello* to a high school basketball team whose star, Odin (Mekhi Phifer), the school's only black student, is deeply envied by the film's equivalent of Iago, teammate Hugo (Josh Hartnett). *O* is a rare dramatisation of the projection of destructive fantasy onto and into the black Other, but is somewhat contradictory as a reparative, confessional parable of the psychodynamics of racist motivation. Here, Hugo's voiceover address to the audience parallels Iago's bitter soliloquies in *Othello*, but transforms Iago's envy of Cassio's elevation to Othello's lieutenant into direct envy of Odin himself, the focus being Odin's supposedly natural athletic prowess. However, *O* evinces a tension between its focus on Hugo's envy as the author of Odin's behaviour, and Odin's embodiment and acting out of these fantasies. The issue of whether Odin's actions result from what has been projected *into* him, or are symptomatic of *immanent* potential, is not entirely resolved.

The film's iconography innovatively highlights the combination of destructive envy and the inscrutable mask of 'whiteness' that keeps Hugo above suspicion from the other characters. Its visual motif is the metaphor of hawks and doves, extending the play's extensive animal imagery (Spurgeon, 1935: 335). In his voiceover, Hugo likens Odin to a hawk, 'powerful,

determined, dark', while the film is visually bookended by images of doves, which clearly represent Hugo's outwardly 'white' innocence. Hugo's theft of the team's mascot, a live hawk, early in the film, signifies his plan to ensnare Odin by inducing his jealousy of his girlfriend Desi's intimacy with friend and trusted team lieutenant Michael (Cassio).

However, combined with his obsession with eliminating both Desi and Michael, the theft also indicates a displaced homosexual desire for Odin's qualities of seemingly natural athleticism (in both senses: possession, and as an object of erotic investment), and so echoes Iago's repressed homosexuality in *Othello*. As Wangh (1952: 206) observes, Iago's paranoid claim that 'it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets he hath done my office' is indicative of Freud's 'delusional jealousy' at work, a defense against a 'strong homosexual impulse' (Freud, 1922: 225) through the accusation of his wife Emilia's infidelity. Indeed, 'having succeeded in turning over the weight of his intolerable jealousy to Othello' by inducing the latter's jealousy of Desdemona, he 'becomes free to declare his love for' him, 'let[ting] go completely' with his vow that 'I am your own forever' (Wangh, 1952: 211). While Hugo does not share Iago's fear of being cuckolded, that he wishes to replace Desi in Odin's affections is visually conveyed when, implicitly reminding us of his remark to Odin that 'white girls are snaky', as he stands atop a staircase explaining to him his plot to destroy Desi and Cassio the camera spirals upwards in a serpentine movement. That he targets both suggests that his ulterior plan to destroy Odin is driven by homosexual jealousy of both female and male rivals for Odin's affection, and envious desire for Odin's exalted status as a black athlete. *O* thus hints at the homoeroticism implicit, and enmeshed with envious destructiveness, in the idealisation of 'black' athleticism.

However, *O* also replicates *Othello*'s key weakness. The ease with which Hugo manipulates Odin effectively reduces him to the status of 'animal' innocence, the kidnapped hawk. But like the hawk, an instinctual predator, it is possible that Odin's destructiveness may alternatively be evidence of *immanent*, animal capacity. Either way, this effectively heightens the play's white/black, mind/body duality. At the moment of climactic realisation of his manipulation by Hugo, Odin exclaims that 'I got played [by] this white prep school motherfucker'. The use of the passive voice verbalises what the film has visualised for us throughout. By effacing his whiteness, Hugo has *proven* his implicitly *white* possession of superior powers of male intellect.

A key focus is how, by encouraging Odin's jealousy and insecurity concerning Desi's fidelity, Hugo projects *into* Odin the unwanted, disowned bits of the psyche, making him the 'bad nigger' of 'white' imagination. Thus, while having initially loving sex with Desi, Odin sees in the mirror the growing object of his jealous hatred, Michael, and becomes increasingly aggressive, ignoring her pleas to stop. This is a rather Fanonesque image: the black athlete seeing himself through a mocking white gaze (though oblivious to Hugo as the 'real' possessor of the gaze), and becoming the hypersexual animal of white imagination. As his paranoia grows, his nickname increasingly signifies his Otherness to the normatively 'white' environment of the elite school when, tearing down the basketball hoop in an enraged slam dunk, he holds its severed 'O' aloft, then throws it to the floor before a silenced audience. Hugo's envy becomes the author of his imaginary nemesis' transgressions, ultimately leading to his murder of Desi and, through his running commentary, is clearly presented as such: Odin's fear of replacement by Michael and his growing sense of alienated Otherness within the school is 'really' Hugo's fear of replacement by Desi and Michael alike. And yet Odin *is* the embodiment of hypersexual, aggressive power and athleticism for all to see. Is it possible to become a fantasied projection without already having the capacity to embody the fantasy? *O* deliberately fuels its ambiguity in this respect in that Odin's full name, Odin James (OJ), indirectly invokes the infamous OJ Simpson case through surely deliberate intertextuality (see Hodgdon, 2003: 89-104), thus suggesting that his is an inevitable destiny.

Crucially, too, Hugo is rendered more sympathetic than Iago as Shakespeare's symbolically paternal Duke of Venice becomes team coach 'Duke' Goulding and Hugo's *father*. Thus when Duke publicly announces that 'I love [Odin] like my own son', and embraces Odin and Michael, Hugo is doubly marginalised. Father-son Oedipal melodramas are, of course, a staple of Hollywood cinema (see Bruzzi, 2005), but especially common in sport-themed films. Hugo's enviously racist motivation is undoubtedly mitigated in *O*'s narrative logic by the emphasis on how, as the actor Josh Hartnett put it, 'this kid is screwed up really, pretty bad' through 'loss', his 'missing a lot of love' from his father.<sup>7</sup>

Rendering Hugo a victim of an alliance between white paternal authority and the variation of Affirmative Action represented by Odin's presence in the elite school, *O* somewhat contradictorily deconstructs and 'explains' Hugo as both envious author of Odin's actions and authored *by* the situation in which he, by implication, *unfairly* finds himself. Its 'explanation',

and somewhat legitimization of Hugo's motivation thus makes *sense*; even as it pathologises Hugo's personal version of what Hamilton Carroll (2011) calls 'affirmative reaction' in contemporary Hollywood cinema. If his desire for Odin is never outwardly expressed, Hugo's desire for a father's love denied to him is all too clear: the first love triangle intersects with the second, which poses the all too real challenge of recovering the father. Thus, like Gil Renard, Hugo's tragic demise finally makes him visible, in this case attracting the attention of his biological but still figurative father.

### Conclusion

The category of 'black athlete' as object of envy, admiration, desire and resentment is an enduring vehicle for the construction of white masculinity in Hollywood sport themed films. Even those instances that critically *represent* the envious fantasies of their white protagonists redeem these characters by contextually explaining their motives, so that ultimately they are not so far removed from the redemptive vision of whiteness in the *Rocky* series. In a rather Catholic logic, the films' naming, representing, 'confessing' the sin of envy redeems their protagonists' whiteness. The Hollywood sport themed film largely remains a cultural site in which the black body is presented as an object of ambivalent contemplation and psychodynamic investment; a vehicle for the construction and affirmation of the cognitive superiority of the 'white' subject through their representation as possessing greater psychological complexity and suffering internal conflict. Meanwhile, the 'black athlete' remains as an imaginary projection, fixed in the gaze of the 'white' observer. The movement towards 'reparation' conflicts with an enduring resistance, often disguised through the idealisation (*The Hurricane*) or contextual mitigation of the white characters' actions.

Intertwined with the psychodynamics of envy, guilt and reparation in these films is the theme of jealousy. As Klein argued, jealousy emerges in the Oedipal phase of child development and is associated with anxiety regarding the feared loss of the mother as love object and sole possession of the infant in fantasy. In *O* and *The Fan*, as for the *Rocky* films there is a sense of legitimate grievance at the replacement of the white protagonist by a black usurper as quasi-sibling favoured by a symbolic parent. This diminishes somewhat the symbolically reparative potential of those ostensibly more liberal films that address the theme of envy. A further factor in

the white protagonist's attempted path to redemption in each case is the poignancy of their melancholic attachment to a paternal ideal whose embodiment in the *Rocky* films is inextricably linked with a melancholic attachment to the concept of racial difference. While in *The Fan* this is presented as distinctly pathological, and in *O* as an impossibility that fuels Hugo's envious destructiveness, by explaining their motivations the films give them a degree of poignancy. So, for instance, *The Fan* concludes with shots of press cuttings of Gil's Little League exploits, invoking a lost boyhood innocence that predates his murderous actions. In *The Hurricane* the vision of Canada as a maternal, liberal, nurturing State in conjunction with the benign paternalism of the Federal Court localises and isolates racism in the individual, pathological envy of a single police officer. Thus in each

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Klein's 'ph' spelling signifies an unconscious rather than conscious process. Given that distinguishing conscious from unconscious process entails considerable speculation, especially in the form of textual analysis employed here, I prefer to use the 'fantasy' spelling.

<sup>2</sup> Plot synopses for the various films discussed here are available at the internet movie database [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com).

<sup>3</sup> Even if we take a more benign interpretation of Creed's depiction, the running theme of undeserving 'black' usurpers in the *Rocky* series is unmistakable, from the black foreman who fires him from his meat freezer job in *Rocky II* (1979) to the ultra-violent 'black buck', Clubber Lang in *Rocky III* (1982) and the obvious Don King fictionalization, George Washington Duke in *Rocky V* (1990).

<sup>4</sup> *Rocky Balboa* DVD Director's Commentary (Twentieth Century Fox, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Della Pesca must be a fictional composite of several officers as the officer who had been involved with Carter's various convictions since childhood died in 1979 (Hirsch, 2000: 338).

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Hirsch (2000: 207-316) describes a far less harmonious relationship. Carter reportedly periodically fell out and ceased contact with Lisa, the commune leader, depicted by Hirsch as rather dictatorial.

<sup>7</sup> Interview on *O*, 2 disc special edition, Lions Gate, 2002.

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