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1 Mutilated Masculinities and Their Prostheses:

Die Hards and Lethal Weapons

A battered white man collapses in the protective arms of a black man. This picture has become a familiar one in recent action films, and it is one of the strongest images shared by three 1980s blockbusters: John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988) and Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989).[1] The heroes of each film are versions of a familiar action film figure: the renegade cop who takes the law into his own hands and slaughters a series of criminals. In each case, the central characters enact the film's title: John McClane (Bruce Willis), the "die hard" New York City cop, single-handedly defeats a group of twelve terrorists who take over a high-rise office building in Los Angeles, and Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson), an unstable LAPD cop, seems unable to avoid killing any suspect he encounters. (Apparently he is also lethal to most women, by the way; until *Lethal Weapon 3*, any woman who falls in love with him seems bound to die.)[2] In each case, the hero has lost a woman, has come uncoupled. Distraught over his wife's recent death, Riggs is considered to be on the verge of psychosis—either homicidal or suicidal. *Die Hard*'s McClane is spending Christmas vacation in Los Angeles, attempting to restore his relationship with his estranged wife, an ambitious executive in a Japanese-owned corporation.

Arriving in the city, McClane is chauffeured directly to his wife's office Christmas party at Nakatomi Plaza. Just after the couple's first dispute, which concerns her career and her return to her maiden name, the party and the building are invaded by a group of apparent "terrorists." McClane, who has escaped their detection, spends the rest of the film in the building's elevator shafts and ventilation system, conducting a one-man guerrilla-style battle with the terrorists. Meanwhile, the film inter-

rupts and parallels this romance plot, which aims to restore the marriage, with a buddy plot. Throughout the film, the cop on the inside, McClane, remains in CB communication with a black street cop on the outside. Al Powell represents one of several competing voices of the law (the others include the FBI, the deputy chief of the LAPD, and, to some extent, the television newspeople) gathered outside the building and vying with each other for radio time and for McClane's ear.

From the start, we can say that both *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* offer curious and excessive rewritings of a plot familiar to us from westerns: the hero is a lawman—uncontained by marriage—whose renegade force is unleashed by a woman's disappearance or the threat of her disappearance. And as in westerns, the relationship of the hero to the law is unstable—does he represent it, or does he become it?[3] But these contemporary versions of this plot both articulate new twists in the question of the law; they operate within an apparently generalized crisis of authority where the law itself is highly unstable—it vacillates between murderousness and ineffectuality. Significantly, the hero's relation to the law turns on the question of whether or not he can, or must, embody it—quite literally; that is, on whether or not his body can be the law, whether the law is written on the body.[4] Finally, in each case the crisis of authority combines with masculine sadomasochistic spectacle in the context of bonding with a black man.[5]

To return to this crucial and conditioning figure for these films: in all three cases the embrace between the white man and the black man constitutes the film's strongest form of closure.[6] In *Lethal Weapon* this scene seems nothing short of an obsession, repeated at the ends of both the original and its sequel, *Lethal Weapon 2*. Moreover, *Lethal Weapon 2* exhibits a particularly—and jocularly—anxious fascination with its own homoerotic subtext, expressed in Riggs's jokes on two occasions. When his partner, Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover), finds himself sitting on a toilet that is wired with explosives, Riggs loyally remains with his partner for the controlled detonation that ensues. The two end up in a sexually suggestive pose, with Riggs on his back and Murtaugh on top of him. Riggs smirkingly suggests that they get out of this embrace, as he wouldn't "want anyone to find us like this." At the film's end, we find Murtaugh holding the wounded Riggs in his lap, as they wait for the police to arrive. Riggs quips, "Give us a kiss before they get here." Such wit here seems designed to diffuse and contain the overtly homo-

erotic charge these scenes produce—to offer and then withdraw the lure of homoeroticism. And this strategy persists, persists to the point that it becomes visibly crucial to the signature formula of the *Lethal Weapon* films.[7] Tania Modleski has characterized that formula as follows: "a feminist/psychoanalytic critic is entitled to regard the ingredients of the film's formula as a heavily condensed mixture of racism, misogyny, homoeroticism and heterosexual panic."[8] What requires our further attention, it seems to me, is the structural interdependency wherein each term of the formula serves to guarantee the others, as well as this structure's bearing upon the formula's tendency toward repetition. Repetition seems to produce shifts that most often tend toward more obviously "camp" readings, which we will explore later.

Even more interesting, the obsessions that compose this formula are shared, although more subtly articulated, by *Die Hard*, and the success of *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* seems to unleash a series of films organized around reworkings of that formula and extending beyond the direct sequels—*Lethal Weapon 2* and *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992), and *Die Hard 2: Die Harder* (1990), *The Last Boy Scout* (1992), and, finally, *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995). When scenes of interracial embrace operate as narrative resolutions, they raise the question of what connections the films are working to establish through the figure of racial difference. Inevitably, it seems, this figure connects the mutilation of the white male body to social and erotic bonding. This is not a new question. It arises as early as 1958 in *The Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer), which starred Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis as convicts who escape from a prison transport truck while handcuffed together.[9] This film ends with the wounded Tony Curtis cradled in Sidney Poitier's arms as they wait for the police to catch up with them.

James Baldwin takes up these issues in his *The Devil Finds Work*, a 1976 study of American cinema, particularly the cinema of his own youth, and its constructions of race. Baldwin characterizes *The Defiant Ones* as a rather mystified allegory of American race relations played out on the level of individual hatred and reconciliation. This film's bonding, however, is possible only by virtue of reciprocal sacrifice: the white man gives up a woman, and the black man gives up his chance for freedom. As Baldwin puts it: "A black man and a white man can come together only in the absence of women: which is, simply, the American legend of masculinity brought to its highest pressure, and revealed, as it were, in black and

white."[10] Reflecting on what he calls the "rigorous choices, rigorously arrived at," that condition bonding in the several black-white buddy films he considers, Baldwin arrives at the following question.

> Why is the price of what should be, after all, a simple human connection so high? Is it really necessary to lose a woman, an arm or one's mind, in order to say hello? And let's face it, kids, men suffer from penis envy on quite another level than women do, a crucial matter if yours is black and mine is white: furthermore, no matter what St. Paul may thunder, love is where you find it. A man can fall in love with another man: incarceration, torture, fire, and death, and still more, the threat of these, have not been enough to prevent it, and never will. It became a crucial matter on the North American continent, where white power became indistinguishable from the question of sexual dominance. (*The Price of the Ticket*, 600)

What Baldwin understands as the embedded subtext in these films emerges as well in *Die Hard* and the *Lethal Weapon* films, with two significant changes. The heroes are now police, and not criminals, and race is not centrally *thematized*. This says something about changes in our culture since the 1950s. First, the black and white buddies can now uphold the law rather than threaten it; second, racial difference can appear on screen without any mention; it can be passed over in silence (despite a social world in which we are constantly, if obliquely and unproductively, talking about it).

A significant exception to this general silence about racial difference is *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (John McTiernan), which pairs John McClane this time with Zeus Carver (Samuel L. Jackson).[11] A contemporary reworking of the historical "race man," Zeus keeps the question of racial difference and McClane's assumptions about it constantly before us, referring repeatedly to "that race shit." Zeus specifies and analyzes the uncritical assumptions that seem to underlie McClane's position on racial difference and his efforts to "relate" across it.[12] His efforts to "relate," of course, have gotten off to a hyperbolically bad start, since his adversary Simon, the bomber, has coerced McClane into standing on a Harlem street corner wearing nothing but a sandwich board that proclaims hatred for blacks through the crudest racial epithet. Zeus intervenes, *not*, as in McClane's interpretation, out of motives that can be tied to the personal or to the personhood of the beneficiary; not, in other words, to save the other's life, but rather, for political reasons, to prevent the murder of a "white

cop," which would bring a thousand more white cops to the neighborhood. At the level of language, this relationship is characterized by conflicting interpretation, interpretive misfires in both content and address. (Right from the beginning, Zeus emphasizes that their negotiations involve competing definitions of their very relationship: "I ain't your partner, your neighbor, your brother or your friend. I'm your total stranger." Of course, he is also calling attention to a curious compensatory gesture in which the white man claims a false intimacy that gives the lie to the social gulf he feels in his encounter with the black man.)

In a film that thematizes misrecognition and miscommunication across racial lines, Zeus's critical discourse highlights the super "ordinariness" that has constituted McClane's appeal throughout the *Die Hard* series. And it links that ordinariness to racial identity. McClane is just an ordinary white guy, whose very ordinariness—as *whiteness*—is marked by his unselfconsciousness about race. At the same time, however, like McClane himself, the film never quite admits to any of Zeus's accusations. Instead, it constructs Zeus as obsessed with race, where McClane is relaxed, and it asks us to consider if Zeus suffers from the mythical racial paranoia, or "reverse racism," so commonly evoked in dominant discussions of race prejudice.[13] If Zeus is liberated from the task of embodying race for this film, the price is that he is the one who is charged with "speaking" it for himself and for McClane.

Despite their ironic moments of sophistication about masculine display and the constructedness of masculinity, these action films bear similar versions of the subtext that Baldwin describes. That subtext, the site of enormous anxiety and resistance, concerns the destabilization of masculinity as a category. Somehow, these contemporary representations have anxiously and unconsciously recognized that masculinity never exists as such. Rather, it is constructed within relations of and to race, class, and sexuality. What these films put forward as the central figure of masculinity in crisis is really white heterosexual masculinity desperately seeking to reconstruct itself within a web of social differences, where its opposing terms include not only femininity, but black masculinity and male homosexuality.

To construct this version of masculinity, these representations must continually renegotiate and reestablish differentiations, and they must hold off homosexuality as well as interracial desire. Probably this is why the favored buddy figures are lawmen; symbolically, they both uphold and submit to these prohibitions, if not to the prohibition on murder.

What I am interested in here, however, is the specific representation of this "crisis": the ways in which black-and-white bonding takes place across and through the spectacle of the battered white male body, displacing any aggressive component into vicious combat between white men. In these contexts, such an operation needs to marginalize women, to foreground romanticized figures of class in the represented crisis of authority, and to displace residues of the enormous energy that this crisis mobilizes onto relentless destructive action.[14] The narrative, visual, spatial, and discursive relations among black and white figures propose particular readings of race, gender, and class, while pretending that these differences are no longer at issue.[15] Despite its explicit discourse about race, even *Die Hard with a Vengeance* participates in this tendency. While its heroes speak of race almost obsessively, that dialogue is contained and ironized in the framework of the banter which characteristically binds the action film buddies together as it holds off more direct erotic interaction. Finally, of course, the power of racial difference to produce division is radically diminished in the face of *Die Hard with a Vengeance*'s concluding resolution, where Zeus is presiding over McClane's effort at reconciliation across the apparently more unbridgeable gap of sexual difference as he encourages his buddy to call his wife.

Die Hard and *Lethal Weapon* have in common the central thematics of accidental partnerships between white and black policemen. These pairings articulate very particular stories about race relations and male bonding within the specific narrative framework of the action film. At one level, action films participate in the same kind of logic that Philip Brophy attributes to contemporary horror films: that their textuality is "integrally and intricately bound up in the dilemma of a saturated fiction whose primary aim in its telling is to generate suspense, shock, and terror."[16] Like the horror films that Brophy studies, these action films produce a gratification based on "tension, fear, anxiety, sadism and masochism" (5). And these characteristics must account for both the popularity of the two genres and the critical contempt that goes along with that popularity. But perhaps equally important, this gratification seems intimately bound to the repetitive quality of the action film genre. Susan Jeffords highlights "the pattern of internal amnesia" that she contends is "typical of male action film sequences of the 1980s."[17] For Jeffords, the sequentiality that emerges in these films produces a pattern of increasing externalization: emphasis on the body as spectacle, at the expense of "internal character developments" (246). But, even as these films repeat the

spectacle of the male body as a machine for generating and undergoing aggressive assault, even as they repeat some fantasmatic body/mind split *as* spectacle, we might ask: what exactly do they keep forgetting in order to remember it? For, clearly, the forgetting is deliberate.

Paul Smith describes another structuring tendency for action films, one that implicitly seeks repetition as well, we might suggest. Smith contends that "the pleasure proffered in action movies can be regarded, then, not so much as the perverse pleasure of transgressing given norms, but as at bottom the pleasure of reinforcing them."[18] Fundamentally, it may be the case that these films rely as much on reinforcing norms as on transgressing them, but it seems most important that they require *both* moves. And this requisite suggests a pleasure in repeating the instability of the "law" in order to maintain it. But the "law" in this case comes to look more and more like a law that secures sexual difference and racial difference in order to secure itself through them. In the end, the objects of repetition—remembered and forgotten—are sexual and racial difference.

As each action film resolves the fantasmatic problem, it reproduces a troubled and unstable legacy—to be repeated in its sequels—both direct and indirect. So, *Lethal Weapon* generates the next two *Lethal Weapon* films, but it also reproduces the buddy formula, whose major threads— race, gender, and sexuality—are realigned in numerous subsequent biracial buddy films. *Die Hard,* on the other hand, begets direct sequels in *Die Hard 2* and *Die Hard with a Vengeance,* this latter recalling *48 Hrs.* (1982) in the resistance of the black partner to the white one's police business and in the hostility between the two. *Die Hard* also shadows *Passenger 57* (1992), where Wesley Snipes substitutes for Bruce Willis, as the renegade loner trapped in an airplane with a hijacker. And the *Die Hard* formula is rewritten in *The Last Boy Scout,* a film whose plot is organized around Willis again, metonymically attracting residues from *Die Hard. The Last Boy Scout*'s Joe Hallenbeck presents a degenerate and failed version of McClane; his wife respects him less than Holly McClane did her husband, and she betrays him sexually rather than professionally. Hallenbeck's degraded masculinity and paternity play off Damon Wayans's character, former football star Jimmy Dix, a far more active and erotically charged sidekick than the portly desk cop, Al Powell.

In their formative commitment to repetition, these action film series display a feature that also is central to the horror genre, as Brophy describes it: "you know that you've seen it before; [they] know . . . that you know what is about to happen" (5). For both the *Die Hard* and *Lethal*

Weapon series the "already known" is the saturation of action film codes. But the reassurance secured by saturation may be disrupted, at least for some viewers, by a competing form of excess, the tendency to push the limits of the plausibility upon which the genre depends. Reviewer Stanley Kauffman calls this tendency "permissive realism." "An action melo-drama," he writes, "starts with the most finicky realism—of setting and detail and dialogue—and continues so for a while, then ends in a blaze of wildest fantasy" ("Stanley Kauffman on Films," *New Republic,* April 13, 1987, p. 24). Kauffman displays a sophisticate's contempt for the formula, as do many reviewers of action films.

Many reviewers seem disturbed by "permissive realism," or implau-sibility, particularly where racial bonding is concerned.[19] The problem seems to be that racial figurations are a false detail, an unnecessary—even a cynical—excess added to the already excessive quality of the action. Re-viewers are often irritated by the films' calculatedly liberal presentation of race as a reassuringly anodyne and marketable contingency; but they are irritated primarily by the obvious calculation and the implausibility it produces. What they do not discuss is that race looks like an excess in these contexts because it cannot be reduced to a contingency; it is some-how constitutive of the films' logic, or of one of their logics. Saturating the action code, these films profit from the suspension of referentiality to treat social difference as unproblematic, as already managed. But the very force of shocks and violence offered by the films indicates that these issues remain intensely problematic and irreducible to narrative throw-aways.

Racial coding in these films cannot be exhausted, contained, or fully saturated. Thus, race comes through incoherently in films that set out to remap the inadequately charted social territory of race relations. Their incoherence seems based in the radical contradictions between their ab-stract conceptual "maps" of race and the "territory" constituted by the actual concrete practices and power relations that structure our social ex-perience of "race."[20] The map/territory model of racist ideology advanced by Philip Cohen produces the following effects:

> a certain image of the body politic is constructed in terms of a set of constant topological relations (enclosure, separation, connected-ness) which structurally exclude and define the Other. In doing this, the racist imagination, as we here see, is highly mobile, selecting and combining "bits and pieces" and organizing them into certain fixed

> chains of associations (codes). In this way, each map draws a specific picture of the terrain where racism describes its material effects. At this second level, a set of discourses and institutions fix designated subjects (races) to specific positions within a topography of power. It is here that the political geographies of class and ethnicity are formed and transformed. (*Multi-Racist Britain* [London: Macmillan, 1988], p. 57)

It is precisely the bits-and-pieces effect as it is articulated in these films that produces their ideological incoherence.

But *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* handle race in very different ways. *Lethal Weapon* makes only one allusion to it, in an irrecuperably free-standing vignette. When Riggs and Murtaugh approach the house of a suspect they plan to question, they are immediately recognized as police by a group of small black children, who announce their arrival. When the suspect's house blows up as they approach it, the children make it clear that they see Riggs and Murtaugh as the magical agents of the explo-sion. Later, when Murtaugh tries to question one of the children about a man he has seen near the house, the child asks: "My mamma says police-men shoot black people. Is that true?" This question, and the reference it makes to the law's preferred place of inscription, the bodies of black men, is left suspended as the action races forward. However, the later *Lethal Weapon 2* is able to speak about race more directly, if obsessively and con-fusedly. Indeed, in one of the film's weirder moments, when Riggs raps out an inspirational ditty to Murtaugh, he captures the generative equa-tion of both *Lethal Weapon* films: "We're back. We're bad. You're black. I'm mad." The implicit equation is generative because it encapsulates the film's characterological formula as well as the fundamental asymmetry that the film holds to and cannot surmount: blackness appears on the same level as madness, the term here operating in both senses—as un-containable rage and as insanity. So both cops are deviants. But they are nonetheless not in the same position, since Riggs and Murtaugh together form the quintessential and generative figure for the biracial buddy plot as Ed Guerrero describes it: "It seems that with the biracial buddy formula Hollywood put the black filmic presence in the protective custody, so to speak, of a white lead or co-star and therefore in conformity with white sensibilities and expectations of what blacks, essentially, should be."[21]

In their reticence about race the *Lethal Weapon* films recast their drama around questions about the law, and around the figure of Vietnam as a

haunting legacy (all the adversaries in the first film are Vietnam vets gone bad). As a couple, Riggs and Murtaugh figure the legacy of Vietnam in the split between the "good" Vietnam veterans and the "bad" ones. Constructed as the figure of urban violence and aggression unleashed, Riggs, a former Special Forces assassin, is a murderous borderline psychotic at the beginning of *Lethal Weapon*. It is ostensibly for the purpose of surveying and containing his aggression that his superiors assign him to Roger Murtaugh, the stable family man and lawful authority, who is also the good version of a Vietnam vet and the all-purpose father figure. In the film's oedipalized drama, Murtaugh literally brings Riggs "home" into his own stable nuclear family, and Riggs takes him on as a father. These operations reduce and "domesticate" the significance of the characters' difference, while implicitly proposing a return to benign paternal authority and the suburban middle-class family circle as a therapeutic solution to post-traumatic stress disorders. In a more spectacular gesture of displacement, the adversarial figures in the second film are all South Africans, controlled by the consulate and, by extension, by the South African government, so that the perpetrators of racism are located elsewhere, "outside," in a comforting counterbalance with our own U.S. racism, which is made to appear manageable by contrast.

Die Hard repeats *Lethal Weapon*'s central conflicts about the limits of the law and its agency in a narrative that "speaks" compulsively, although tacitly, about race. However, both of these narratives are centrally structured so that the action bypasses racial issues, pushes them to the periphery, as racial difference is redistributed, along with racial conflict, far from the film's erotic center. In both cases the erotic center is also the site— subject and object—of aggression: the white male star.

Die Hard systematically redistributes racial difference.[22] On every level of this masculine struggle for control, there is a representative of that difference, each of which is oddly, but firmly, both detached from the direct combat and de-eroticized. The German thieves "masquerading" as terrorists have a black American comrade who is their computer hacker, the technophile, who sits in control of the building's "brain," its central computer. Argyle, the limousine chauffeur who has conveyed McClane to Nakatomi Plaza, spends the entire film waiting patiently for McClane to call him with further instructions. Shown contendedly sitting in the limousine he has parked in the building's basement garage, Argyle, a sanitized version of black urban youth culture, both hints at and holds off a difference that is here physically contained. The music he plays on the

limo tape deck marks his cultural distance: "Don't you have any Christmas music?" McClane asks. "This is Christmas music," Argyle answers, referring to the rap song whose lyrics McClane cannot decipher.

Finally, Al Powell is firmly positioned outside both action and erotics; he is assigned to a desk job, and he is a stable family man. As such, he becomes a spectator, his gaze eternally directed toward McClane.[23] Similarly, Roger Murtaugh's sexuality is firmly contained by the family; he is connected to erotics only through his anxious fatherly surveillance of the flirtations between his daughter, Rianne, and Riggs. His role, then, is a spectator's: it calls attention to Riggs as a sexual object, abetting the displacement from homoerotic bonding to heterosexual erotics. This plot displacement is massively underwritten and overdeveloped in the Riggs-Murtaugh bonding's subsequent repetitions, which present joke structures organized by obsessional oscillation and collision between hints of homoeroticism and miscegenation, trading off the threat of the *wrong* pairing between the two thematic chains.[24] In *Lethal Weapon 3* these hints or "rumors" intersect along the oedipal plot. Riggs finds Murtaugh drunk on his boat, as he struggles to cope with his grief about shooting a friend of his son's in a drug-related gang incident, and as he repeats the film cycle's motif of his perpetual efforts to follow through on his resolution to retire. Riggs takes this opportunity to bring their relationship to a new phase, declaring his love for Murtaugh and his dependence on him, but moving directly into a confidence about his erotic life, which occasions the scene's recourse to the screwball comic energy that has become the *Lethal Weapon* signature. "I think I might have just slept with the wrong person," he confides, only to be interrupted by his partner's eruption of rage—culminating in an almost slapstick physical attack—as Murtaugh assumes the "wrong" person to be his own daughter, Rianne. But they sort out the confusion by passing through another confusion when Riggs gives his lover's name: "Sergeant Cole." "Sergeant Cole from traffic?" "No, Sergeant Cole from homicide, Sergeant Cole from traffic's her uncle." This nexus of threats circulating around "inappropriate" object choices becomes a central feature of the biracial action genre, it seems, as *The Last Boy Scout* repeats *Lethal Weapon*'s miscegenation "gag" in the suggestive relationship that it poses between Jimmy Dix (Damon Wayans) and Joe Hallenbeck's daughter, Darien.[25] Again and again, jokes seem to highlight the ways that the threats of miscegenation and homoeroticism tend to slide into each other. But the joke structures end up strictly compartmentalizing and containing those threats.

We should also notice that *Die Hard* mobilizes the differences among its intradiegetic spectators to structure its action literally, so that the police assault on the Nakatomi building, for instance, is a sequence constructed by alternating close-up reaction shots in a rhythm of black characters and white characters that is reproduced in the film's final action sequence. These discrete and parallel figures help to anchor the competing zones of the film's action and to represent different versions of black masculinity. Presented in such strict symmetry, however, they act as spatial markers, and they produce a good object/bad object structure that duplicates the one that organizes the film's lawmen.

But it is precisely this structure that feeds into the film's irony. *Die Hard* plays with reaction shots, as opposed to point-of-view shots, to ironize the film's territory, and ironize it in a way that calls attention to our viewing habits in a highly televisual landscape (which may account for the film's thematized aggression toward television), but that also lets us examine our investment in an identification with "knowingness," precisely the identification that television privileges. Analyzing the relative weakness of point-of-view shots in television, John Caughie asks, "could it be that the reaction shot forms an equivalent figure for the ironic suspensiveness of television?" Reaction shots, he argues, "disperse knowledge . . . registering it on the faces of a multiplicity of characters whose function may only be to intensify the event." And this gesture is connected to a certain "ironic knowingness" that characterizes our position as spectators of television.[26]

Interestingly, however, the symmetrical, specular pair that matches McClane and Powell as a couple retroactively consolidates the meaning of that couple through class interests. Powell and McClane are practical street cops, workingmen united by their opposition to the professional managerial cops, the deputy chief of police and the FBI. The symmetrical opposing couple is the FBI agents, the black Agent Johnson and his white partner, *Special* Agent Johnson—a designation that might put us in mind of the dominant culture's ever-present focus on "special interests," a focus that admits no recognition of its own specialized interests. On introducing himself and his white partner to the deputy police chief, Agent Johnson adds the quip, "no relation." Now this is a commonplace racial joke. But what does it really mean? It pretends to draw humor from an apparently "obvious" redundancy with what the eyes can see. However, it also recalls the history of slavery and race relations in the United States. On the one hand, it appears as a disavowal of white men's rape of black

women, which often produced two lineages with the same last name and a different racial alignment. On the other, it suggests the bizarre coincidence of property and patronymics articulated through the historical weight of slaveholders' surnames, whether imposed or adopted, borne by slaves and their descendants. Johnson and Johnson[27] are the combined figure of an uncomfortable and repressed racial proximity through U.S. history.

Die Hard seems to be about establishing the possibility of another relation across the racial divide—a relation of which Johnson and Johnson are one version—while explicitly denying any relation at all. However, the split that is established here is recoded as one of age and history. When a hysterical Special Agent Johnson expresses his excitement about their imminent helicopter strafing of the skyscraper's roof, it is in the following form: "This is just like fucking Saigon, ain't it?" The younger, black agent replies: "I was in junior high, dickhead, how would I know?" Even as the spectator may share the younger, hipper Johnson's contempt for the militaristic "special" agent, the historical enforced nonrelation between races is simultaneously recoded as a generational, or aesthetic, divide in this hybrid couple. Notably, however, it is recoded both at the expense of the Vietnam veteran whose relationship to that history is presented by this throwaway episode as psychotic and as a historically inaccurate version of the racial imbalance that marked U.S. forces in Vietnam.

This film offers no single message concerning race, since race is always subjected to split or competing readings. Racial difference is redistributed across other social differences, which are articulated together in a melange of filmic codes. If *Die Hard* rewrites the western, it does so in a peculiarly hybrid form—as a disaster film. A glance at reviews confirms the sense of pastiche. David Ansen calls *Die Hard* a "super slick, precision-tooled, post-modernist *Towering Inferno*."[28] If *Lethal Weapon* is "*Mad Max* meets the Cosby show" for Richard Schickel,[29] *Die Hard* might be called "*Predator* meets 'Moonlighting'" (in reference to director John McTiernan's earlier film, and Willis's most important television credit). What is important here is the sense of pastiche and interfering codes—the implausible pairing of extremes—something which doubles the hybrid buddy relation that is central to the film's diegesis.

Another layer of interference—between the highly visible technical feats paraded by these films and their ironic commitment to a kind of postmodernist code of pastiche—allows for a systematic appeal to a

layered audience, a simultaneous and highly profitable capture of varied audience segments. These films' continuous violent action and grittily humorous aggressive dialogue assure their appeal to the young male audience for action films. Meanwhile, they offer an ironic, self-conscious visual and discursive framework that is precisely what allows some reviewers to see *Die Hard* as "good trash." This means, I think, that the film is a good reader of the collective sensibilities of the professional-managerial class, which it attracts along with the youth audience, luring both with its glossy production values and obvious technical and financial expenditure—a particular postmodern gratification at seeing a kind of profligacy with both apparatus and capital.[30] This kind of gratification is no doubt related to a certain market as well, the one that allows for and even demands such layering of audiences as a prerequisite of a film's success.[31]

Hybridization is an organizing figure of *Die Hard,* applying to male bodies as well as to male buddies. The centrally foregrounded, combative male body (the cultured state of its nature emphasized in musculature) is uncanny, since it appears simultaneously as a machine of destruction and as constantly eroded and mutilated flesh; it is both hyperphallicized in its straining musculature[32] and feminized as it is placed in the masochistic position—object of the murderous male gaze as well as of painful assaults. As the film's editing works consistently to structure an alternation between extremes—claustrophobic proximity and monumentalizing distance—the camera's parallel work alternates high and low angles that, respectively, miniaturize and monumentalize that body.

Die Hard's most persistent image, and one of its most gratifying, is the shattering of glass—computer screens, high-rise exterior windows, office windows. In a sense, the frame, as both enclosing and shattered, becomes a central figure of the film, one that is consolidated in the shot which closes the sequence in which McClane meets Al Powell, who has been sent to investigate an alarm at Nakatomi Plaza. After shots are fired at Powell's cruiser, and we watch Al clamber out of it, the film cuts to a shot of McClane above, Ramboesque, overlooking the street cop; he is photographed from a low angle that complements the high-angle long shot that miniaturizes Al. And McClane is framed by the shattered window he has shot out. This shattering image is doubled in the space of the building; it is unmappable, partitioned into tiny fragmented enclosures that are broken down by close-ups of clustered details.

Shattering effects also operate in parallel through what we might call,

following Michel Chion, the film's auditory space. Chion contends that in recent American films like *Die Hard* we can see a renewal of the auditory dimension. "In these movies," he argues, "matter—glass, fire, metal, water, tar—resists, surges, lives, explodes in infinite variations, with an eloquence in which we can recognize the invigorating influence of sound on the overall vocabulary of modern-day film language. It is certainly looking as if an epic quality is returning to cinema, making its appearance in many films in the form of at least one fabulous sequence."[33] As the force of ambient sound fields helps to reorganize the screen space and to disorient us within it, the emphasis on noises also supports the action film agenda of interrupting the primacy of speech by means of another form of shattering and fragmentation.[34] Further, according to Chion, this field of sound actively reshapes cinematic space "with the new place that noises occupy, speech is no longer central to films. Speech tends to be reinscribed in a global sensory continuum that envelops it, and that occupies both kinds of space, auditory and visual" (156).

On the level of montage as well, *Die Hard* produces a shattered space composed of rapid cuts between noncontinuous locations, so that the action, too, is fragmented into self-enclosed vignettes. In Fred Pfeil's admirable phrase, the film's "action is simply taking place *here*—and *here*—and *here*—in spaces whose distance from one another is not mappable as distance so much as it is measurable in differences of attitude and intensity" (3).

Such effects force us to read the film as a drama of looks and framing, a drama intimately bound to the male body's subjection to related forms of violence and mutilation, plotted through a masculine struggle for control and authority.[35] In the parallel love plot, McClane's most intense and intimate interaction with Al occurs when he confesses his failures with his wife while pulling shards of glass from his bloody feet. Al functions as a substitute for McClane's wife, Holly, when McClane asks him to pass on to her his confession and his apology, the "I'm sorry" that he could never bring himself to say. This scene is orchestrated as a kind of narcissistic and masochistic display. Because McClane is sitting in front of a mirror, we see him both as subject of pain and as body in pain.

Lethal Weapon's most intense "love" scene echoes *Die Hard*'s: it is the moment when the film cross-cuts between shots of Riggs and Murtaugh as they are tortured, the parallel spaces linked only by the sound of their groans and screams. This sequence produces some of the greatest affect the film offers, and it is also the closest the film comes to a "love scene,"

producing as it does a kind of reciprocal "passion." Significantly, *The Last Boy Scout* offers a pointed intertextual reference at the moment when Joe Hallenbeck and Jimmy Dix solidify their newly established bond by going home together for a few drinks. When they enter the family living room, Hallenbeck's daughter, Darien, is avidly watching the torture sequence from *Lethal Weapon* on videotape. The daughter's rage and contempt for her father come out in her brutally vulgar taunts ("you're an asshole"; "he thinks he's fuckin' Ward Cleaver"), which play against the background sound of Riggs's grunts and groans.

Meanwhile, the mutilation of McClane's body in *Die Hard,* obviously designed to mobilize castration anxiety, is articulated through a gaze structure that organizes the action by situating point of view. This film foregrounds the shot–reverse shot formula despite the fact that almost no one is able to look at someone else. It is a structure of amputated looks. Because McClane is caught barefoot when the terrorists arrive, his feet become his most vulnerable point. The camera often focuses on this weakness, anticipating the moment when Hans, the leader of the gang, capitalizes on it by shooting out all the glass in an office in order to cripple McClane. McClane's cut and bloody feet become a central focus; the camera above follows his slithering motion and the sinuous trail of blood he leaves on white tiles. Like Oedipus, his hero barely has a leg to stand on. And the film takes up this pun. In their most personal conversation, McClane inquires whether Al has left street duty because of "flat feet." But Al has retreated to the office because he no longer is able to shoot a gun. And here is one of the film's fascinating throwaways, which will reappear to be activated at its close: Al is unable to wield a gun because he has shot and killed a young boy, a reminder of a familiar urban scenario in which very young men are shot by nervous cops. What is not mentioned is that most of these victims are black. Here, the black cop is made responsible, is made figuratively to shoot himself in the foot, to bring about his own incapacitation, as both the subject and the object of the law's violence. At the same time, Al becomes the site of the most explicit figurative castration, one that is inscribed on McClane's feet as well.

But a close look at an alternating inscription of the male body through point of view and framing tells another story also organized by sexual difference. McClane's argument with his wife sets in place a curious gaze structure that the rest of the film plays out. (Situated at the main plot's point of departure, their domestic dispute structurally takes on explosive proportions; it blows up the whole building.) This sequence shows

McClane in the bathroom washing up; the camera is situated at his waist level and behind his right elbow, capturing him from a low angle in medium close-up. In contrast, Holly is in medium long shot, framed by the doorway through which McClane is looking. As the shot–reverse shot produces the structure of their exchanges, McClane is framed from a point-of-view level with the desktop in a series of verticals that place him at the left of the frame in the doorway. As the camera moves in on him, he is squeezed to the left, filling the frame from top to bottom, but confined to that position. Literally, he is nearly pushed out of frame, off-screen, and contained visually, as if by his wife's rage. Her departure leaves him in medium close-up monologue with his own image, again from a waist-level point of view.

The displacement of point of view that is never quite even with the characters', and the splitting of space that is dramatized here, continues throughout the film, except in moments of equal intensity between men.[36] Holly, however, is not an equal adversary; she is visually and thematically constructed as a phallic career woman who cuts her husband down or out of the picture.

A contrasting sequence is one of the film's last: the love-at-first-sight recognition scene between McClane and Powell. Just after Holly and McClane upon her rescue have embraced for the first time in the film, we cut to the outside for the denouement. McClane and Holly are framed together in close-up, looking out into the crowd. Al is centered in frame in medium long shot from their shared point of view. But as we move in on Al, Holly disappears and McClane and Al come together into a close-up of their embrace; they squeeze her out of the frame. The next shot restores her; she appears behind and between them for an introduction: "This is my wife, Holly Gennaro." "Holly McClane," she corrects. Her voluntary name change signals her submission to marital law.

But the resolution here is overtaken by the erupting threat of McClane's primary physical adversary, Karl, reanimated and firing his machine gun. Rapid cross-cutting has McClane hitting the deck and henceforward framed horizontally. The camera then moves to Karl, and on to a close-up of a gun, isolated and suspended in the frame. Then it returns to McClane, to Karl, to the gun. The end of this sequence is marked by the camera's slow arc up and in from its previous low angle on the gun; this ascending arc reveals that Al is the shooter. The ensuing shots construct reciprocal riveted gazes between Al and McClane, offering the film's most intensely fascinated looks that are not murderous. And these looks estab-

lish an erotic intensity at the moment of restored phallic power.[37] Al's restoration is problematic, however. When the next shot shows Argyle's limousine bursting through the garage gate, McClane must intervene to keep Al from exercising his renewed, and already hysterical, vigor on another black man: "He's with me." So the white cop prevents another black-on-black murder in a fantasmatic reinscription of contemporary history.

Die Hard's and *Lethal Weapon's* unrelenting rhythms of battle scenes driving toward a final vicious combat between white adversaries set up a logic wherein the hero's ability to represent the law depends on his body's becoming the site of sadomasochistic aggression. It is precisely this operation that allows that body to be displayed as spectacle. But what kind of spectacle is this? Again, the gaze structure is telling. In *Die Hard's* constant circulation through amputated or suspended looks, looks that are not returned or are mirrored in darkened windows, the shot–reverse shot structure most commonly links adversaries. Allies are shot in the same frame, not looking at each other, and separated by subsequent shots. Most of the film's main events are shown from the noncommunicating and competing points of view of a variety of characters as well as from the unlocatable point of view of the hypermobile camera. For instance, the police assault on the building is a sequence constructed of shots alternating among black characters and white characters—cutting from Dwayne and Al to Theo in the computer room, to Hans, to McClane, back to Al, to Argyle, etc.—in a rhythm of black and white.

Before the film's end, the only sequences of shot–reverse shot structures linking characters who inhabit the same space are adversarial ones that encode specular violence. Here, the male gaze is riveted on another man, and the gaze is strongly marked with point of view, which implicates the spectator in the exchange. For instance, when McClane finally encounters Hans, we see him monumentalized from a low angle that is coded as the crouching Hans's point of view. And we see Hans from the high angle of someone standing over him as McClane is. When the figures are at eye level with each other, the frame is canted so that their bodies create strong and dizzying diagonals. McClane is tilted to the right and Hans to the left. The next shot–reverse shot sequence abruptly reverses them, switching their respective sides. Such a sequence codes specular violence and stabilizes point of view at the same time that it splits it between characters. The male body's image is as shattered as the space, which may account for the persistent mirroring effects that

the film presents (Willis looking out a window into the night, looking through his own reflection), fragmented in close-ups, held in claustrophobic frame.[38] Within this structure, McClane is distinguished by his frequent looks at his own image as he tries and fails to see the outside, and by his looks into the camera. In this context, Al Powell is symmetrically coded as one long reaction shot.

But the momentary stabilization of point of view is quickly disrupted. Our gaze is most commonly situated with the camera's—in dizzying mobility, sweeping across action scenes, or following the characters' motion, or pulling away to scrutinize the body from extreme and implausible angles directly above or below it, zooming in to fragment it in detail. This disrupted and disrupting gaze raises the issue of authority, the law, and the sadomasochistic fantasy implicated in the spectacle of the male body.

All of this eroticized aggressive tension culminates in the face-to-face battle between McClane and Karl. Again, the camera operates to attribute point of view and to destabilize the space (as it does in all action sequences—shooting from either above or below Willis's body, tracking wildly with the action). As it tracks the violence through the scene where McClane crawls to the bathroom to pull glass from his feet, close-ups fragment the body in combat. At the same time, the camera often sweeps effortlessly across the space, as it does when it follows McClane's and Karl's battle, which ends with the hero hanging Karl up by a chain in a kinkily self-conscious reference to the sadomasochistic flavor of this violence. This vicious battle, as well as the ironically sexual suggestiveness built into the title, *Die Hard,* and, finally, the camera's interest in Willis's body indicate something about the erotic economy of the whole film.[39] That particular combination of effects motivates Fred Pfeil to specify one of the central questions that the *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* films raise. "What," Pfeil asks, "is the boundary line between the diehard assertion of rugged white male individualism and its simultaneous feminization and spectacularization?" (29). As Pfeil goes on to suggest, these films may be structured to leave such a question unanswerable. But if that is so, then its persistent, even obsessive, rearticulation is itself of some interest.

Writing about the problem of masculinity as spectacle, Steve Neale suggests that for the male body to appear as the object of another man's look in Hollywood films, "that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed."[40] "Mutilation and sadism," he goes on to argue, may be "marks both of the repression involved and of a means by which the male body may be disqualified, so to speak, as an object of

erotic contemplation and desire" (8).[41] This may be the source of our fascination with combat scenes: they manifest the force of repression of the erotic, while offering the body to the gaze, but a gaze that is mediated through the looks of other characters as long as the narrative marks those looks "not by desire, but rather by fear, or hatred, or aggression" (12). At the same time, the bodies on display are figured in highly stylized fashion in combat scenes that freeze the narrative, much as song-and-dance numbers do in musicals, and, similarly, that recognize "the pleasure of display," while "displacing it," in Neale's words, "from the male body as such and locating it more generally in the overall components of a highly ritualized scene" (12).

If the spectacle of the male body involves aggression as a means of covering up or warding off the erotic gaze, in *Die Hard* it operates within a particular context—a "crisis" of masculine authority and a crisis of the body's limits. Such a coincidence is not without reason. It is, in fact, intensely motivated if we remember that masochism can be a means of subverting the law, of becoming a law unto oneself.

As critics such as Kaja Silverman and D. N. Rodowick have suggested, any examination of the gaze in relation to authority or phallic privilege needs to explore not only the aggressive, sadistic aspect, but also "the significance of authority in the male figure from the point of view of an economy of masochism."[42] Describing male masochism as a means to "ruin" "the paternal legacy," Silverman argues that the masochist subverts the paternal authority that ordinary masculinity in some way accepts.[43] "The prototypical male subject," she argues, "oscillates endlessly between the mutually exclusive commands of the (male) ego-ideal and the super-ego, wanting both to love the father and to be the father, but prevented from doing either" (195). On the other hand, the male masochist as spectacle "acts out in an insistent and exaggerated way the basic conditions of cultural subjectivity, conditions that are normally disavowed; he loudly proclaims himself before the Gaze even as he solicits it, exhibits his castration for all to see, and revels in the sacrificial basis of the social contract." Thus, contends Silverman, "the male masochist magnifies the losses and divisions upon which cultural identity is based, refusing to be sutured or recompensed. In short, he radiates a negativity inimical to the social order" (206). But this negativity is also related to a ruse that attempts to outwit paternal law since it puts a heterosexual man in the feminine position, but without a change of object. And when that ruse is read, as Silverman reads it, through Freud's essay, "A Child Is

Being Beaten," it appears as the result of elaborate convolutions that produce the subject of the fantasy as subject, object, and spectator. And for the spectator, according to Silverman, the fantasy provides that, "masculinity, aggression and sadism are definitively elsewhere in the scene, concentrated in the figure of the punishing father surrogate. Like the child in the primal scene, the shadowy onlooker is more mastered than mastering" (204). So the spectator position is "irresolute" (205).

In an operation that is also central to *Lethal Weapon, Die Hard* seems to work out a sadomasochistic structure that mobilizes the fantasmatic possibility of identifying with paternal authority, or with its whipping boy, since McClane's body attains its status as law through mutilation and torment. And this fantasy is dispersed throughout the film, in struggles where authority preserves itself through a mobility between identification and desire. Spectator pleasure is split between the sadistic and the masochistic, since we are able to identify with authority while seeing it punished in the person of the hero.[44] This fantasy is abetted by the unstable authority of the camera, placing us, alternately, within the action, with the aggressor or victim, or outside the action, overseeing the whole scene.[45] Here, the dominant white culture's violent fantasies are *not* projected onto black men as though returning to that culture from the outside. Rather, figuratively, they are directed recursively back onto the subject's own body.

This motivated relation between sadomasochistic fantasy and the law is connected to the necessity of figuring a "crisis" of masculinity through embodiment. Traditionally in Hollywood cinema, it has been representations of women of any race, and men of color that have done the work of embodiment, that have stood for the body.[46] And significantly, in films like *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* the spectacle of the mutilated white male body emerges in a context where a white woman and black men are posited as the ambiguously threatening equals of the white male, as well as the primary spectators for this combat. This context suggests that the spectacle of white men blowing each other away before a black male onlooker acts to displace aggressive impulses back from the Other onto the same: onto white men who are specular adversaries.

Die Hard's very particular version of the anxieties generated by the fantasmatic threat of racial and sexual equality obscures their source by saturating its entire textual field with anxious fantasies about bodily and structural demolition, redistributing the anxiety through the disaster motif. Even while working to manage this "crisis," the film overesti-

mates it by projecting it to the scale of the building. And this overestimation is one of the film's characteristic moments of hysteria, which produces a certain hilarity. Figured as the double of McClane's body, the building offers a hysterically phallic gigantism that offsets his dwarfing or miniaturization as a "bug" in its internal system. Once the building's infrastructure has been disabled, crippled (as McClane's feet have been crippled), it becomes a hostile landscape. Consequently, it is also a figure for the maternal body, terrifyingly overwhelming to the human body, and subsequently punished from the inside, internally demolished by McClane's explosive rage. And the film's tension is built and channeled through anxiety about seeing and being seen as the camera follows McClane's progress through hidden channels in the building—exploring an unmappable interior. No doubt this is another inscription of the good object/bad object fantasy structure that we have seen elsewhere.[47]

The limitations of sight here give rise to an entire economy of prosthetics within a nightmare of complete technological dysfunction, where an ordinary office building becomes a terrifying prison since it is virtually unmanageable for the scale of the human body without electronic prosthetic devices—elevators, computers, telephones, television, and video technologies. In this landscape McClane is thrown back on the lowly CB radio (which has been consistently associated with working-class culture in the movies), the remaining operative technology of the film, a technology that sustains a network of contacts between men, where they are all partially blinded, anxious spectators, propped on the prosthetic of sound, and thereby caught up in a highly charged, eroticized circuit that both brings them together and holds them apart.

The struggle for authority here overlaps with a continual struggle for control of available technologies, situated within the context of a fantasy that "terrorists" with enough weapons technology could hold off the police, who effectively just throw arms technology (tanks and helicopters) at the problem, turning it into a war games exercise. In short, this is an anxious fantasy about mismanagement, about the failure to arrive at the appropriate measure of technology. Parodically rewriting details from its two predecessors, Die Hard with a Vengeance locates technological anxiety in New York City's public telephones through the characters' desperate struggles to gain access to them and the constant uncertainty about their working.

Technological anxiety reaches a peak near the end of Die Hard, when McClane crosses the building's main lobby, now nearly destroyed by ex-

plosions. Its sprinklers are operating at full force. Together with the plantation in the fountain areas, these sprinklers and the several small fires burning nearby create a scene that resembles a jungle where McClane is a Rambo-like guerrilla. In this ironic image of the cultural dissolving into the natural, the building becomes a jungle landscape, or at least a Vietnam War movie set. And here, as at so many points, one can laugh at the film's excess; indeed, the film's relentless jokes produce a series of shocks, bursts of laughter, that compete with its fearful ones.

These shocks participate in a general structure that systematically undercuts all positions, and all images, that are available for spectator identification in the film. Importantly, here the film rehearses a collective mythology of mourning for the decline of American masculinity, linked to the failure of U.S. will and heroism through the Vietnam War. At the same time, the film undercuts this nostalgia by highlighting its artificial and mediated quality, reminding us of the ways that war was experienced as spectacle, as televisual event.

Mass media and communications technology remain central to Die Hard's ironies. The film has opened with a celebration of leisure technologies, as Argyle, the chauffeur, points out to McClane the special features of the limo they are riding in, "CD, CB, TV, telephone, VHS . . . ." For all that, Argyle remains completely oblivious to what is going on in the building above him until he sees it repeated on television news. So he must watch TV to find out what is going on in the space he inhabits. Television has been powerfully present from the beginning here, in the icon of Bruce Willis, already strongly coded by his television role as the wise-cracking David Addison from "Moonlighting."[48] Further, Willis's straight-on gaze at the camera and his monologues set him up as a kind of parodic anchorman.[49] But the figure of television is charged with ambivalence: television is action, not just information. It intervenes in the events, since a television news reporter invades McClane's domestic space to interview his kids and thereby allows Hans to identify him and his wife. This subplot ends the film, with the same reporter approaching McClane after the end of the crisis. We watch on video as the newly realigned Holly McClane—whose class alliance with her husband has been reaffirmed in the loss of her Rolex watch—shows her solidarity with him by punching the reporter, thereby intervening directly in television.

Television in Die Hard also emblematizes popular discourse, the already spoken, that circulates in the cultural field and that this film consumes and recycles. For instance, McClane chooses the name "Roy Rogers" as

his radio handle. In a conversation about McClane's identity, established through television references such as "Mr. Mystery Guest," Hans suggests that McClane is "just another American who saw too many movies as a kid, an orphan of a bankrupt culture who thinks he's John Wayne, Rambo. . . ." Later, Hans will return to these allusions in their final confrontation: "This time John Wayne doesn't walk off into the sunset with Grace Kelly." "It was Gary Cooper, asshole," McClane retorts.

Now this last scene replicates the one it refers to in *High Noon* (Fred Zinneman, 1952), a film that is written into *Die Hard* on a number of levels in a tight, intertextual correspondence that works up a pastiche of the western hero.[50] But the intertextuality also contributes to a narrative structure in which the film's foreign terrorists trash American culture, just as they, and McClane, trash the Nakatomi corporate headquarters. And the in-joke here is brilliant: the building in which the film was made is Fox's new headquarters in Century City. Hollywood trashes itself? Perhaps, but the context is very particular.

One of the complications of this context involves the film's obsession with television. The television subplot is related to the question of the camera's authority throughout since, ultimately, this fragmented, partitioned space is stitched together only by editing. The camera empowers our gaze to go anywhere, to penetrate all the recesses of the building. Within this structure, the gaze is strongly attributed to the building itself, and diegetically figured in the emphasis on the video surveillance apparatus of its security system—another television.[51] The mobility and omnipresence of our look, then, is linked to both television and to the building. Such a mobility from compartment to compartment, replicating the familiar television talking-heads coverage of disasters, produces the camera, and our look along with it, as figures of authority. But these figures are themselves completely unstable. And what emerges is an emphasis on your own eyes, your own reading—a reading that must be individual and renegade like McClane's.

The unstable authority that *Die Hard* inscribes in the gaze structures and the mobility provided by its camera reappears in the struggle for authority over popular culture and the national identity it imagines, but this authority also is implicated in the film's play between proximity and distance. In its radio representation, the voice is closer, truer than the eye; the radio has the greater authority. Image and voice continually cut each other up or off—to resist the construction of continuous action or shared space.[52] If the office building is effectively disabled and sealed up by the

interrupted flow of power—the violent cutting of wires and circuits—the visual space is slashed and shattered by radio communication—the voice substituting for the gaze to link spaces and characters through affection and aggression. Radio links contribute to a destructuring and restructuring of space, an allegory for the destructuration of the social body. This allegory seems to construct race relations so as to recode intimately linked histories as long-distance, remote-controlled relations, as if people who do not look at, or see, each other in the concrete world of everyday practice become more real for each other on radio or television.

Considering *Die Hard*, we might be moved to ask in a rewriting of Baldwin: is it really necessary to blow up a building, to immolate a series of adversaries as well as a whole arsenal of technologies, just to apologize to your wife and say hello to a black man? Something else must be at work to bring to bear all this affect on such banalities. And *much* else is at work. For one thing, this gleeful fantasy of corporate and technological destruction rehearses populist anticorporate sentiments alongside technophobic ones in the context of international trade conflicts, with the Germans and the Japanese as competing foreign interests.

Die Hard is fundamentally organized by a multiculturalist fantasy. This is a film that takes as one of its questions the following: what does a multicultural society look like? It is significant that it, like *Lethal Weapon*, is set in Los Angeles, a city that, together with New York, stands for the "alien nation" within the United States. These are places that are fantasmatically produced as sites where "anything can happen," where difference is the rule, and where difference always appears as novelty. But Los Angeles and New York are sites of containment as well, precisely to the extent that those fantasies persist, even in the minds of people who live there.

Die Hard produces yet a closer containment; after all, the conflict and reconciliation of realigned differences take place in a universe that is contained within a skyscraper, one building. But *Die Hard*'s multiculturalism is another problem altogether; its discourse is aware of this irony and so pushes the action to this extreme since, effectively, the film says that postmodern urban multiculturalism consists in a perpetual recoding and realignment of differences of gender, race, ethnicity, and class, all of which are both equal and autonomous. The film establishes no relations among these differences. Instead, they are made to appear as equally weighted or charged and nonintersecting, or as intersecting only coincidentally, as in the pairing of FBI agents Johnson and Johnson.

Significantly, *Die Hard with a Vengeance* takes a different approach to

social conflict, as it does to social space. This is the first film of the series to launch its plot into urban public space, by contrast to the strictly contained interiors of the first two films, which confine McClane to sealed spaces. As a consequence, this film is able to articulate race and space in such a way that the visual aspects of the narrative sometimes directly contradict the discursive level. Initially, the film takes pains to construct Zeus as overly preoccupied with race, as racializing everything. He explains his reluctance to have anything to do with McClane's struggle against Simon: "That's a white man with white problems. You deal with him. Call me when he crosses 110th." McClane's position insists that "race" must be dismissed, overridden, or transcended in the face of a common threat: "This guy doesn't care about skin color, even if you do." But McClane's suggestion that Zeus shares his option to put race matters aside is directly contradicted at the visual level in the public space. Zeus's subsequent adventures in the urban space undermine that position and prove him the shrewder analyst of the thoroughly racial coding of urban geography. His movements are consistently disrupted and often blocked by bizarrely racialized encounters with white people. These encounters seem to depend on the mere *sight* of him, as when a transit cop pulls a gun to prevent him from making a phone call, or when a Wall Street professional accuses him of disliking whites because he does not want him as a fare in the cab that he and McClane have commandeered. Zeus's progress through the city and the narrative is thus marked in a way that contrasts strictly with his white partner's. McClane, we remember, has had only one public encounter that appears racially charged, and that one has been staged by Simon's orders to wear the offensive sign that interpellates the black community. For Zeus, however, each meeting that involves difference is racially charged. Yet this happens in a filmic universe that still fantasmatically "charges" him with the weight of race.

Die Hard's fantasies about social difference, however, are diffused as they are mapped onto figures of international cultural difference, where the central opposition is American/foreign. This opposition bears upon the question of what it means to be an American. But uncertainty about the nature of "Americanness" seems linked to gender as well. McClane's wife, Holly, who has gone back to her maiden name on taking this job, explains her choice by arguing that the Japanese corporation does not deal well with married women. The character of the Nakatomi corporation, embodied in Joe Takata, Holly's boss, comes across when McClane comments at the office Christmas party: "I didn't know the Japanese cele-

brated Christmas." Takata's response is, "Hey, we're flexible. Pearl Harbor didn't work out, so we conquered you with electronics."

Anxieties about career-minded women are here linked to anxieties about the "flexibility" of Japanese capital, fantasized as a protean and often disguised invader of U.S. corporate interests. But this conflict is written into a plot that pits fake "terrorist" politics against corporate interests and that succeeds in displaying as "contingent" the face-off between the two main rivals of the United States on the level of economics, trade, and technology, Germany and Japan. The Germans' victory effectively eliminates the Japanese presence in the film and within the literal corporate structure as figured by the skyscraper. Within this framework, then, to be American is to be a *bricoleur,* a behind-the-scenes guerrilla. The film offers the cliché of American individual initiative and inventiveness and plays it against the extratextual fantasies it relies on: German precision and bloodlessness, and Japanese regimentation and conformity.[53] These oppositions, like all oppositions in the film, are caught up in *Die Hard*'s persistent ironies.

The German "terrorist" gang itself stands for a kind of hybridism; it includes an Asian man, a group of blond Aryan types (including the Russian dancer turned actor, Alexander Gudanov), and a black American. Hans, played by the British actor Alan Rickman, is so saturated with despised American culture that he can perfectly imitate an American accent. Finally, while the gang behaves like terrorists, employs "terrorist" discourse and tactics, and musters an arsenal of technology to that end, its motives turn out to be purely economic. But there is a further ironic undercutting here; the money that the gang is after is not cash, but bearer bonds, the most rapidly and freely circulating form of capital—its protean postmodern incarnation.[54]

Interestingly, within the logic of having things both ways, Hans once *was* a terrorist who has been expelled from his group. So the fantasy here involves seeing terrorism tip over into lust for capital, retroactively calling into question political motives for action. Thus, these events and images may be contained once again within the framework of a struggle between the authentic will and motives of the rebellious individual, which are opposed to the inauthentic slipperiness of capital in circulation.[55]

But for all the pleasure we may take in seeing corporate capital, high technology, and masculinity, or, for that matter, terrorism, put into crisis, the spectacle is most interesting for the context in which it locates that

crisis. In the end, this film's pleasurable effects—its narrative and visual destabilization of authority, the spectacular excesses of its demolitions, its ambivalent combination of violent affect with a seamlessly ironic wise-cracking dialogue, its frame of sophisticated self-consciousness— still work toward resolution in a figure of restored white male authority, a figure valorized by his feminist wife and his black buddy.[56]

Certain issues are necessarily occluded or mystified in this process. As if by accident, the film has negotiated threats that are presented as split between white women and black men—between feminism and racial equality, foregrounding the former and repressing the latter, "hiding" it in the best place, in plain sight. And it has negotiated these threats precisely by mapping them into competing plots, as if they had nothing to do with each other, as if social differences were autonomous and never intersected. But the excessive, hysterical pitch of the film's action belies the amount of anxiety that these differences produce, while it safely locates its discharge in a place where it is undisturbed by real historical and political considerations, in the process guaranteeing that its real anxieties appear to be peripheral because they are represented as already managed. Anxieties about racial and sexual difference are also recoded in anxieties about technology and its management, about the security of the divide between body and machine. All of these elements are mobilized in colliding or parallel plots, as if they were not fully politicized and overdetermined in relation both to each other and to a particular historical moment. Through its apparent commitment to ambivalence, the film erases overdetermination.[57]

But the crisis of white, heterosexual masculinity represented here remains—socially as well as cinematically—overdetermined by social differences. Otherwise, that crisis would not emerge in narrative and visual frames that are so referentially bound to contemporary social and cultural conflicts. Die Hard's peripheral negotiation of race within a dystopian fantasy seems completely coherent with liberal discourses of pluralism and multiculturalism: failing to specify the power relations that are mapped onto differences, it depicts difference as a state of permanent emergency. Despite its happy ending, we cannot forget that its picture of a multicultural society looks like a disaster, one that brings down the house, quite literally. Within this film's escalating spectacle of disaster, difference becomes yet another special effect, as the question of multiculturalism is written into another question that buries the issue of race in culture and ethnicity: what does it mean to be American? In this con-

text, the answer is, it seems, that being American means being a *bricoleur* and a good manager, a manager of crisis, in a culture depicted as in a constant state of emergency. And the best manager wins; he is the familiar renegade individualist.

Now, if films consume, transform, and shape popular discourses, they inevitably do so ambivalently, offering up possibly progressive impulses and indicating points of resistance as well as managing resistance and anxiety. Whatever meanings they put forward, these are structured into a context that includes a market, in this case an audience for action films, and that conditions their reading, primarily by framing the images and narratives in such a way as to suggest that they require little reading. And these films' tendency toward serial repetition may be intimately related to the ways that they deemphasize, or even discourage, reading.[58]

If we ask what pleasures are involved here, and more generally in popular culture, we have to ask about the status of trash, both in the sense of a film's throwaways, what it codes as insignificant, and in the sense of texts that offer themselves as trash, that reflect on their own trashiness and commitment to the market. They read our desires within an explicit enunciative framework that says, "this doesn't mean very much." And if, as readers of our fantasies, these objects present them ambivalently, consequently satisfying more of us, that does not mean that as critics we can afford to remain cheerfully content with our own ambivalence. While film's meanings are always negotiated and negotiable, we cannot overlook the pressures of their internal negotiations: their trade-offs, exchanges, and intersections as well as their structuring contradictions.

Hollywood has been able to rework the massively successful blackwhite buddy plot relentlessly, with only minor adjustments. But the formula has its limits. For one thing, the white guy cannot be the "buddy," cannot be remanded, in Ed Guerrero's phrase, to "the protective custody" of a black male lead. And this may have to do with the ways in which "the black body . . . becomes . . . a representational sign for the democratizing process of U.S. culture itself," as Robyn Wiegman has it.[59] Here, we might want to add that this sign functions in this way only when viewed from a particular perspective—that of the dominant white middle class, of course. But the political and representational landscape that sustains Hollywood's reworking of the biracial buddy plot also generates colossal failures, like *Ricochet* (Russell Mulcahy, 1991), a film designed for the blockbuster frame, but whose central subjects were apparently incompatible with its format. While it examined the fictional production and

destruction of a black professional's public media image, this film's ironic take on the blockbuster form itself also tried to mobilize collective anxieties about "media manipulation." However, it remains unclear in what interest the film undertook its critique, what exactly it meant to subject to ironic scrutiny: its hero, played by Denzel Washington, its own discourse, or a media discourse from which it seeks to differentiate itself.[60]

By contrast, *The Last Boy Scout* exaggerates the action film's commitment to surface—where any pretext for wildly implausible and prolonged violence suffices and where dialogue consistently reduces to ironic patter, a steady rhythm of aggressive jokes bouncing back and forth. Willis's slickly impenetrable patter is balanced by Wayans's appearance as body/image/prop in a structure that arranges them as symmetrical across a certain rhythm of look exchanges. This film replays *Lethal Weapon*'s successful formula of overlaying a black-white buddy plot on a father-son dynamic that is powerfully eroticized. But now we are dealing with the white father and with his abject degeneracy, which his daughter characterizes as she ventriloquizes her mother's contempt in her vulgar references: he is a fuck-up, an alcoholic, all but unemployed. This story repeats *Die Hard*'s paternal redemption plot, but the antihero has to come back from much farther away—he is the paternal abject. Consequently, his family cannot serve as a refuge for Dix. Rather, Dix's interventions must reconstitute the white family, salvage it from its deterioration.

As in *Die Hard,* the main character in *The Last Boy Scout* drives circuitously toward a reconciliation with his wife. And again, Willis's character ends by saying what his wife "wants" to hear. In this case his wife has told him what he should be saying to gain the respect he has lost by tolerating her infidelities: "fuck you Sarah. You're a fucking bitch and if the cops weren't here I'd spit in your face." Unlike *Die Hard,* this film balances Willis's irony and patter with that of Damon Wayans, who comes bearing the iconic baggage of his television roles on the sitcom, "In Living Color," which were noted for their outrageous jokes about race and homosexuality.[61] But Wayans is a prop, as Darien keeps pointing out; she wants to exhibit him to her friends.

Ricochet, on the other hand, invites us to focus on the black male body, drawing and sustaining our gaze across the hostile looks of white psychotics. Both films are Joel Silver and Michael Levy productions from 1991. (*Ricochet* was released in September, while *The Last Boy Scout* appeared in December; the tie-in between them persisted in the videocassette market, where Silver's *The Last Boy Scout* is previewed on the

Ricochet tape.) *Ricochet* suspends our gaze on Nick Styles (Denzel Washington), a policeman turned district attorney, in an elaborate relay of public looks: the look of the television, of Styles's boss, of the woman district attorney, of the police. At another level, Styles is framed for the gaze of his high school buddy, Odessa (Ice T), who represents the view "from the street" and voices a contempt for the mass-mediatized, middle-class black man, alienated from the community that must finally rescue him. Finally, he is framed for Blake, his primary adversary, in the glare of the hateful and stalking gaze of psychotic white supremacy, with its overtly erotic edge. In short, a lot of things are ricocheting here. *Ricochet* is a borderline film—savage and vicious. And the most vicious of its over-the-top ironies concerns the production of the African American middle-class male as an image that it posits for everyone to criticize and condemn.[62]

In its ironic zeal the film pushes the action film blockbuster formula over the top, as it plays the homoerotics embedded in the male adversaries' struggle, along with the mutilation of the male body that has become so central to the genre, to a near camp extreme. In what may have been meant as an aggressively critical challenge to its audience, the film gleefully punishes its hero, delivering him up helpless to an antagonist who drugs him, strips him, and has him sexually assaulted by a white prostitute in a process that Elizabeth Alexander aptly describes as "pornographizing" Styles ("We're Gonna Deconstruct Your Life!," p. 159). Where *Passenger 57* remains a relatively neutral, moderately successful vehicle for Wesley Snipes, *Ricochet* seems to have become an occasion for the mainstream market to respond negatively to the question: can you build a blockbuster around a black male star? But it does so by violating the action genre's terms through its excessive punishment of the hero whose embodiment it highlights. This "aberrant" film, a commercial failure, even as it fails to rework the formula in a manageable form may be the exception that teaches something about the rule. That is, it reshuffles the familiar elements in a manner that does not "take" commercially, perhaps because the transparency of its ideological lures constitutes their ruin.[63]

In the case of *Die Hard,* on the other hand, internal negotiations among competing plots allow for a false symmetry among sexual, racial, and cultural difference, and for the containment of the first two as marginal and contingent to the third. The competing plots consistently work through reciprocal undercuttings, where, for example, the threat of corporate and

technological power undercuts the threat of racial and sexual equality, and the lust for money is shown to undercut not only the political motives of terrorism, but just about any other motives at all, and where, finally, McClane's wisecracking irony about the whole situation undercuts all other positions. Within a structure of such constant undercutting, we are left with an ideological paralysis, a paralysis that the film fantasmatically "cures" by a return to "individual will," specifically, a parody of manly heroic will at that.

And this is where we end up, if we accept the ironic posture that the narrative offers: laughing hysterically with McClane, but laughing nonetheless. Even if we consider that we are laughing at ourselves, we need to ask where we think we are in all of this, for such a position is a strikingly postmodern one, coherent with prevailing academic theoretical and critical discourses. And these discourses are at risk, argues Fred Pfeil, of maintaining a radical retreat from the arena of political change. He suggests that we need to take critical positions on the objects that address us, to study that address itself—since we can find ourselves both at its point of enunciation and its point of reception—in the following way. "With a properly historical and materialist understanding of the social origins of postmodernism and poststructuralism within late capitalism and consumer society, and of our own place within it, and our equivocal, complicitous fascination/revulsion with both this structure of feeling and the particular social universe which is our own—we might be able to move on to the real strategic task of constructing new political subjectivities and wills."[64]

Because popular films read, consume, and even offer partial analyses of fantasies and anxieties circulating in the social field, they are always ambivalent, and their address to us is ambivalent. If we recognize that films may tell us what we are really thinking about—are really anxious about, collectively—then we have to assume that we do not automatically understand these anxieties any more than the films do, because surely the unconscious is at work in the social field as well. Strategically, then, we cannot settle for the satisfactions of just identifying ambivalences. Rather, we need critical reading strategies that remain alert to our own seductions. If cultural studies wants to continue privileging ambivalence and negotiation, we need to be specific about what is being negotiated and what is presented as not up for negotiation, as having been already negotiated. Specific cinematic stagings of fantasies and anxieties allow particular conflicts to emerge together in ways that the film does

not analyze, or even admit, but rather offers as coincidence. What is most interesting to me is not how films try to supply answers or resolutions, but how they formulate the questions, and how those formulations close off other questions. By substituting coincidence for overdetermination as the articulation among differences, then, popular cinema works to cut its own meanings, as well as our readings, adrift from the social conflicts that obsess it. Only if we critically rework these films' internal overdeterminations can we begin to see how they might formulate our questions otherwise, how they might answer differently to social fantasies.

Silence," pp. 38ff. The title suggests more secrets disclosed, and the interview is manifestly fascinated by identity questions, moving from Davidson's sexuality, his relationship to cross-dressing, to inquiries about the race of both of his parents.

22 Paul Gilroy has recently examined the market status of "difference" in the following terms, which seem particularly apt in this context. "It has been suggested that the new global culture of capitalism we inhabit somehow thrives on difference, skillfully turning it into nothing more than a powerful marketing tool. I dispute that. It is not difference itself that is a seductive adjunct to the sale of soft drinks or clothes, but the safe recuperation of supposedly absolute otherness into a domesticated diversity which creates both pleasure and excitement" ("Mixing It," *Sight and Sound,* September 1993, p. 25). In the context of U.S. culture's contemporary fascination with figures of sexual and racial difference, this film's exploration of "identity," sexuality, and "difference" exemplifies the effects that Gilroy is reading.

23 In his analysis of the contradictory spectator identifications that this film invites, John Gabriel describes certain moments of D-Fens's acting out that provide for gratifying "fantasy-identifications." "The D-Fens character thus provided a rich repository for moments of recognition and identification," he writes, "a series of collisions between the film's structure (expressed through narrative, cinematography and casting) and audiences' backgrounds and experiences. Such collisions resulted in a sense of release on the part of the audience." "What do you do when minority means you? *Falling Down* and the Construction of 'Whiteness,'" *Screen,* Summer 1996, p. 134.

24 As Carol Clover has put it, in the film's universe, "even Average White Men have trouble telling each other from the enemy, it seems." "White Noise," *Sight and Sound,* May 1993, p. 9.

25 Gabriel reports that the viewers he interviewed "built their strongest attachments to D-Fens, and in particular to his role as consumer, as motorist, as customer and citizen" (134).

26 See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992). hooks discusses the erotic lure of a "bit of the other" in the following terms: "Commodity culture in the United States exploits conventional thinking about race, gender, and sexual desire by 'working' both the idea that racial difference marks one as Other and the assumption that sexual agency expressed within the context of racialized sexual encounter is a conversion experience that alters one's place and participation in contemporary cultural politics" (22).

27 One of Prendergast's colleagues endorses this reading, questioning him as he leaves his own retirement party at the point when a stripper has begun to perform. "What, are you afraid of women too?" asks the colleague. Another replies, "Of course. Have you seen his wife?"

28 Gabriel suggests that the obsession with home that this film shares with D-Fens "provides a space for one of the many appeals for a return to the way things used to be, part of the universal and recurrent cinematic theme of 'going home' explored in such films as *Fatal Attraction*" (137).

29 In this respect, *Falling Down* efficiently epitomizes a process that Jim Collins describes: "Our knowledge of what constitutes 'our culture' at any given moment depends on the accumulation of views. . . . The resulting configurations do not form a planned or very well-managed pluralism, but a discontinuous, conflicted pluralism, creating tension-

filled environments that have an enormous impact on the construction of both representations and the subjects that interact with them." *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 27.

30 These essays exhibit a curious shifting between the terms "black" and "African American." I have endeavored to systematize their use as much as possible, according to the following logic. "Black" appears in discussions of representations based in fantasies about color and by opposition to "white." "African American" indicates a conception of race as cultural, and it also refers to real human subjects rather than figures.

1   Mutilated Masculinities and Their Prostheses

1 This essay was written a few years before I had the opportunity to read Fred Pfeil's masterful analysis of several of these films. *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (New York: Verso, 1995). Because Pfeil treats many of the same issues, I have registered his readings frequently, and have indicated where my reading coincides with and diverges from his. Generally speaking, our approaches are quite similar, although, where Pfeil contends that "these films translate racially coded actants into gender-coded ones" (17), I have focused on the reversibility and reciprocity of this process. In the end, I think, my analysis foregrounds this volatile system of trade-offs and highlights its overdeterminations in such a way that it is no longer a question of direction, or of destination, for such translations. Indeed, I prefer to think of these operations more as negotiations or *transactions.* Further, I have placed more emphasis on the complexities of the films' erotic economies in the interest of avoiding the collapse of sexuality into gender. Finally, I have set my readings of the *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* films in the context of the relentless repetition and variation on their formulas. It seems to me that the tendency to repetition is somehow foundational to these films. Equally important, because that repeatability has led to more and more extravagant, ironic, and perverse renderings of the black-white buddy scenario, as in *The Last Boy Scout,* the repetition and its play on the genre itself may be as important as any of the particular forms it takes. Two recent films present particularly challenging repetitions, however: *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995) makes racial friction a central theme, and *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (Renny Harlin, 1996) pairs Geena Davis and Samuel L. Jackson in a wildly and explicitly ironic reading of the action-buddy genre that foregrounds race and gender.

2 *Lethal Weapon 3* will violate the formula and thus conclude with an open question: what can happen to the buddies if Riggs is able to enter into a relationship with an adult woman? It is important to note that this woman is Riggs's female double, herself a lethal weapon, whose body is the site of aggressive spectacle and martial skills display; she is, like Riggs, subjected to near fatal assault by the conclusion of the film.

3 On the question of the law and its relation to oedipal desires in the western, see the work of Raymond Bellour, particularly Janet Bergstrom's interview with Bellour, "Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis," *Camera Obscura* 3–4 (1979), esp. pp. 87–103.

4 This essay was originally written before I had seen Yvonne Tasker's fascinating volume on the action cinema, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Tasker characterizes action cinema's treatment of the hero's body in the following terms: "Within the action cinema, these male bodies also tell powerful stories of subjection and resistance, so that muscles function both to give the action hero the

power to resist, at the same time as they confirm him in a position that defines him almost exclusively through the body" (79). In the framework of a monograph on action film as a genre and its social and industrial context, Tasker is able to provide a much broader synthetic analysis of the history surrounding the recent burgeoning of the genre. In the interest of studying context, consumption, and what she describes at one point as the "elusive qualities of atmosphere and tone which are crucial for an analysis of spectacle-based cinema" (60), Tasker spends somewhat less time on close textual reading than I do.

5   Tasker is also particularly interested in the ramifications of the black-white buddy pairing: "the narrative relationship between the white hero and his black informant allows for both the display of the hero's body, largely dispensing with the work of investigation, and the enactment of relations of racially defined dominance and subservience. Indeed the two are intimately bound together, so that the suggestion and demonstration, through the performance of the narrative, of the superiority of the white hero over his black informant functions to allay an anxiety attendant on the sexualized display of the white male body" (40). For my own part, I am not sure which anxiety functions to allay which, and I am attempting to explore the apparent "passivity" of the figure that Tasker names "the informant" as an *active* feature of the spectacle that the buddy pair itself offers.

6   Of course, the classic study of the centrality and persistence of this bonding trope to American literature is Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1960). Fiedler argues that race and sexuality intersect in the construction of gendered national identity in assertions like the following: "whatever the symbolic necessities which demand that the male *hierogamos* be inter-racial as well as homoerotic, that marriage takes on, by virtue of crossing conventional color lines, a sociological significance as well as a psychological and metaphysical one" (366).

7   In this connection it is noteworthy that the extravagantly affected comic figure of Leo, the mob accountant who becomes a protected witness and a sidekick to the buddies in *Lethal Weapon 2*, reappears in *Lethal Weapon 3*. This time, his function as a relay for homoerotic joking is secured. Indeed, his look continually constructs Riggs and Murtaugh as a potential couple, so that the joking energy is now split between perspectives that are both internal and external to the pair. For example, in *Lethal Weapon 3*—which brings the homoerotic plot *home*—when Leo enters Murtaugh's house and finds him taking a bubble bath, his smirky inquiry, "Is Riggs under there too?" is blatantly suggestive of oral sex.

8   Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 141.

9   This is an image that *Die Hard with a Vengeance* takes up, perhaps as an occasion to satirize the earlier film's liberal discourse of racial tolerance as it ambiguously both promotes and undercuts Zeus's (Samuel L. Jackson's) criticisms of McClane's racial assumptions.

10   James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, collected in *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), p. 599.

11   In view of *The Long Kiss Goodnight*'s dynamic reworking of the conventions governing this seemingly inexhaustible genre, we might speculate that it is becoming a more and more critical form. Written by Shane Black, whose signature amounts to a generic marker by now, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* ironically recalls Black's earlier *Lethal Weapon* films, along with *Die Hard*, and melds them with resonances from *Thelma and Louise* by casting Geena Davis as Samantha Cain, alias Charly Baltimore, a professional assassin, and Samuel L. Jackson as Mitch Henessey, her somewhat reluctant ally.

12   In one of their first exchanges McClane addresses Zeus as "Man," evoking the quick retort: "Are you trying to 'relate' to me? Talk like a white man." Here the word "relate" itself becomes a code word for white posturing in encounters with African Americans. In a later moment Zeus criticizes one of McClane's typical assumptions. When McClane expresses surprise that he does not know how to fire a gun, Zeus admonishes him, "Look, all brothers don't know how to shoot guns, you racist motherfucker." ·

13   In an exchange that seems to quote more or less directly from *Home of the Brave* (Mark Robson, 1949), at a pivotal moment of anxiety, when the two men are arguing, McClane stops short of uttering an insult. Zeus insists that McClane was about to use a racist epithet. McClane, on the other hand, insists that he was about to say "asshole." And he goes on to accuse Zeus: "Just because I'm white, you don't like me. Have I oppressed you? Have I oppressed your people somehow?"

14   Yvonne Tasker suggests something similar when she argues that "in recent action cinema, problems of location and position are increasingly articulated through the body of the male hero" (77). Further, Tasker associates this articulation with the "sexualization of working class male bodies" (79).

15   Fred Pfeil formulates these relations somewhat differently, putting the emphasis on their transcodings: "these films' black-white racial code turns out to be transmitting messages that are as much about gender as they are about race, its woman-man code turns out to fuel its reactionary politics with the high octane of anti-professional, anti-corporate *ressentiment*" (20).

16   Philip Brophy, "Horrality," *Screen* 27, no. 1 (1986): 5.

17   Susan Jeffords, "Can Masculinity Be Terminated?" in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 246.

18   *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 167.

19   See John Simon, "Good Citizenship, Dubious Packaging," *National Review*, September 30, 1988, p. 59, on *Die Hard*: "So the encoded message here is interracial brotherhood, with which one cannot quarrel, except for the calculated way it is presented in this altogether cynical movie." See also Richard Schickel, on the contemporary action film genre that *Die Hard* represents: "Like that other fantasy form, the evening news, shoot-to-kill movies require the services of an anchorman, someone who can ground implausible events in an attractive, recognizable reality." "Is There Life in Shoot-to-Thrill?" *Time*, July 25, 1988, p. 65. And Terrence Rafferty, who objects to the way that *Die Hard* features "the fattest, most Teddybearish black cop congratulating the white protagonist on his guts and independence." "The Current Cinema: All Sizes," *New Yorker*, August 8, 1988, p. 78.

20   Philip Cohen describes the operation of racism within representation as follows: "What the map unconsciously represents is the desire for mastery which produced it, a desire to render the world as real and natural, by denying the existence of the Other as a locus of the unknown. From this omnipotent or Archimedean reference point the map constitutes a network of discrete meanings which are articulated to specific terrains of experience. These territories are always and already delimited by specific contexts and conjunctures; they are staked out by relations of power which are themselves traversed by human intertextuality." *Multi-Racist Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 56.

21   *Framing Blackness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 128.

22   On this account I would argue that it participates in the "randomizing" of racial differ-
ence that Pfeil attributes more specifically only to *Die Hard 2* (*White Guys*, p. 13).

23   This organization of a set of intradiegetic viewers is a familiar one. Think of "Miami Vice,"
where the blond Sonny's radiance burns all the brighter when caught in the gaze of his
coworkers, who are all black and Latino, with the significant exception of comic foils Stan
and Larry, the ill-dressed, rumpled specialists in surveillance devices. It is no accident
that they do surveillance; their job is to stay out of view.

24   These trade-offs clearly participate in the films' tendency, as Pfeil describes it, "to trans-
late racially coded actants into gender-coded ones," where the "perfect adequacy of this
all-male couple" renders all women superfluous (*White Guys*, pp. 16–17). Yet I want to
leave more room for the consideration of sexuality and not subsume it under gender
coding.

25   If the condensation of energies here were not clear enough, the dialogue between Dix and
Hallenbeck highlights it, as Hallenbeck responds to Dix's coy suggestion that he might
"take your daughter out," with "I'll stick an umbrella up your ass and open it."

26   John Caughie, "Playing at Being American: Games and Tactics," *Logics of Television*, ed.
Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 54. Caughie com-
pares television and film: "the specific conditions of television produce the possibility of
more ironic forms of attention than the conditions of, say, the cinematic. Less intensely
fascinating in its hold than the cinema, television seems to insist continually on an atten-
tion to viewing as mental activity and 'knowingness' (almost a 'street-wise' smartness),
rather than to the obedience of interpellation of the affect of the 'always already' " (53).

27   No doubt one thinks of the Johnson & Johnson Company, famous for baby powder,
among other products, and at the same time the possible reference to Johnson Publica-
tions, the largest publishing corporation owned by African Americans, which is respon-
sible for *Essence* and *Jet*, among others.

28   "Reactivating Action Heroes," *Newsweek*, July 25, 1988, p. 58.

29   *Time*, March 23, 1987, p. 87.

30   Such special effects even form part of the film's framing discourses, its advertising, and, in
the case of *Lethal Weapon*, its videocassette jacket copy: "Hot LA days and nights explode
in one show-stopping action scene after another, culminating in a no-holds-barred battle
between Riggs and his Angel-of-Death nemesis (Gary Busey)—an electrifying sequence
incorporating three martial arts styles and requiring four full nights to film." Again, this
copy stresses the important appeal of a massive technological apparatus supporting the
film and an excessive expenditure on this level. Tellingly, in this case, such expenditures
are invested in the staging of bodily combat.

31   In this connection we would do well to bear in mind Fred Pfeil's contention that the
professional-managerial class is implicated at all levels of cultural production; that is,
the critics and producers of mass culture effectively belong to the same social class and,
therefore, most mass culture in some way addresses cultural critics: "the professional-
managerial class of the West [is] . . . both author and primary target for most postmod-
ernist work . . . mainstream and avant-garde." "Potholders and Subincisions: On the
Businessman, Fiskadoro and Postmodern Paradise," *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, ed.
E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 77–78.

32   See Richard Dyer, "Don't Look Now" (*Screen* 23, no. 3–4 (1982): 71). Dyer describes the in-
stability of the male image as related to the discrepancy between the real penis and the

imaginary phallus: "The penis can never live up to the mystique implied by the phallus.
Hence the excessive, even hysterical quality of so much male imagery. The clenched fists,
the bulging muscles, the hardened jaws, the proliferation of phallic symbols—they are all
straining after what can hardly be achieved, the embodiment of the phallic mystique."

33   Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York:
Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 155.

34   But equally important for Chion, the impact of this kind of ambient sound on cinema
also resides in its capacity to recall the silent cinema: "Noises are reintroducing an acute
feeling of the materiality of things and beings, and they herald a sensory cinema that re-
joins a basic tendency of . . . the silent cinema" (156).

35   As Pfeil has pointed out, we may also read in these effects a "rhyme" between "bodies
and buildings" (*White Guys*, p. 29). On the question of authority in a related argument
about *Predator 2*, Yvonne Tasker suggests that it may be articulated with race: "If black-
ness signifies, and is signified through, marginality in *Predator 2*, then whiteness signifies
and is signified through, an authority that is not to be trusted" (52). Something similar
obtains in *Die Hard*; indeed, we might explore suspicious authority in connection with
white racial identity as a more general figure in popular culture.

36   Chion reminds us that true POV shots actually are relatively rare: "The notion of point
of view in this first spatial sense rests on the possibility of inferring fairly precisely the
position of an 'eye' based on the image's composition and perspective. . . . Let us recall
too that point of view in the subjective sense may be a pure effect of editing" (90). For
an exhaustive study of point-of-view structures, with a particular emphasis on disrupted,
delayed, suspended, and misleading points of view within an overall cinematic tendency
to *suggest*—but not entirely to fulfill—the strictly subjective shot, see Edward Branigan,
"The Point-of-View Shot," in *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjec-
tivity in Classical Film* (New York: Mouton, 1984), reprinted in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and
Methods, II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). According to Branigan, "What
is important is not the camera as an absolute reference point but the relation among cam-
era, character, object and a perceiver's hypothesis about this relation" (679).

37   Pfeil also analyzes this key moment of restoration that is common to *Die Hard* and *Lethal
Weapon*. In his reading, "the black man seems to receive from the white man's hands . . .
something very like virility itself" (*White Guys*, p. 13). And this, he continues, is a story
whose corollary is the "proto-sexual healing of the white man by the black" (13). For Pfeil,
this healing is "more accurately, *gendered* healing, *feminine* healing" (13). For my own part
here, I would prefer not to specify the restorative and therapeutic codes as so stably gen-
dered in the interest of following the free play of erotics that these films exploit.

38   On "shattering" in relation to sexuality, see Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October*
43 (1987): 199–223.

39   I am grateful to Henry Abelove for pointing out the kinkier inflections of this sequence.

40   "Masculinity as Spectacle," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 8.

41   This protective deflection of erotic contemplation into a scene of aggression may account
for the intensity of the male agonistics that structure so many films. As Neale continues:
"hence both forms of voyeuristic looking, intra- and extradiegetic, are especially evident
in these moments of contest and combat . . . in those moments at which the narrative
outcome is determined through a fight or gun-battle, at which male struggle becomes
pure spectacle" (12).

42 D. N. Rodowick, "The Difficulty of Difference," *Wide Angle* 5, no. 1 (1981): 8.

43 *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 212.

44 First of all, the anxiety and pleasure of the male body's destruction are bound in spectacular fight scenes, which depend on a number of effects, the most significant of which is probably the split between actor and character. Mel Gibson and Bruce Willis are bearers of a certain media history and iconography as figures (the former representing almost paradigmatically the male body as masochistic site, given that his career was in some sense launched by the *Mad Max* films, whose whole narrative tends toward the mutilation and erosion of the male body, toward its increasing "prostheticization"). At the same time, this iconic history guarantees their intactness as actors. Part of the charge is the play at destruction of beauty, in the context of its guaranteed reconstruction. But the charge is also lodged in our film literacy, which assures us that the actor's body is not at risk because of doubles and special effects.

45 Paul Smith specifies the effects of the tensions involved in masochism: "Masochism . . . would be a closed space where masculinity sets the terms and expounds the conditions of a kind of struggle within itself—not a struggle necessarily for closure, but a struggle to maintain in a pleasurable tension the stages of a symbolic relation to the father—a struggle in which, ironically, the body becomes forgotten" (166).

46 On this question, see Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), in particular chap. 2, "Paul Robeson: Crossing Over."

47 It would be worth examining the ways in which this effect may be related to the one that Tania Modleski finds in *Lethal Weapon*: "As much as the film is engaged in the denial of the body's vulnerability, then, it is equally engaged in disavowing the realm of the psyche—the source of desire and inward-turning aggression (masochism) capable of undermining the subject's control" (142). The "body in pain is thus turned into a manipulable machine, and in the process the films manage both to render the psyche its due (through the use of psychiatric techniques and mechanisms for controlling psychotic behavior) and to deny its force. Indeed, the films try very hard to render the body/machine and the psyche, as the realm of the irrational, into a binary pair" (143).

48 This very sort of intertextuality is what allows Richard Schickel to put his finger on the link between a crisis of authority and a crisis of masculinity when he grumbles contemptuously that "Bruce Willis has based his career on apologizing for being a man" ("Is There Life in Shoot-to-Thrill?" p. 65). This comment is especially appropriate, since the central conciliatory gesture of the film (although it is transacted between McClane and Al) is McClane's request that, should he die, Al tell his wife that he is sorry for his inability to be supportive of her career. Such apologies, we should note, seem to be marketable—Richard Schickel's view notwithstanding—only when presented in representational contexts that seek to correct, often excessively, for any erosion of masculine authority.

49 For Yvonne Tasker, Willis's reliance on voice distinguishes him from some of the hulkier action heroes: "The strong silent type finds his complement in the kind of wise-cracking action hero played by Bruce Willis in films like *Die Hard, Hudson Hawk* (1991) and *The Last Boy Scout* (1991). Whilst these are still big-budget spectacular films, Willis is known for his voice as much as his body, and his role in these films as a wise guy enacts a different kind of masculine performance to that associated with the bodybuilder. The relationship between the body and the voice is central to the action cinema's articulation of male identity" (74).

50 Interestingly, *High Noon* is written into *Die Hard* on a number of levels. The hero has lost his wife because he will not step down from his job as a law enforcer; both wives have the role of castrator, trying to disarm the man. The course of the action reunites the couple as allies against a third party. In both films someone who is against the use of guns takes one up in order to save the hero (in *High Noon*, it is the wife, Amy, here reencoded in the figure of Al). *High Noon* is also the story of a solitary hero, whose role is contested and betrayed by the townspeople who refuse to help him against a gang of outlaws, just as McClane is here betrayed, interfered with, and constantly questioned by the police. The failure of alliance is dramatized with the framework of a drama of sight. Gunfights are about the inability to see around corners. Amy's attack on her captor goes for his eyes.

51 Of course, more recently, both film and television have become virtually obsessed with this figure. Examples include *Thelma and Louise,* Carl Franklin's 1993 *One False Move,* the Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society* (1994), and television successes in the mold of "Cops," a show that has made the obsession part of its generic definition.

52 Significantly, the confusion of space here appears to be coherent with the spatial effects that Chion attributes to sound: "Spatially speaking, a sound and its source are two different entities. In a film the emphasis may fall on one or the other, and the onscreen-offscreen question will pose itself differently, according to which thing—the sound or its cause—the spectator reads as being 'in' the image or 'outside' it. For sound and cause, though distinct, are almost always confused. But surely this confusion is inscribed also at the very heart of our experience itself, like an unsettling knot of problems" (79).

53 Takata is juxtaposed to Hans in an ironic specularity—the German identifies Takata's suit: "John Philips, London. I have two of them myself." This symmetry culminates when the German blows Takata's brains out. But the symmetry also locates the two "foreign" powers on the side of fashion, leisure, and consumerism, and therefore as powers whose authority is satisfyingly challenged by the authentic will of the workingman, McClane. This image might be linked to a corollary anxiety at the time about Japanese investments in this country.

54 I am grateful to Khachig Tololyan for pointing out the significance of these bonds as well as of the structure of relentless undercutting that prevails in the film.

55 I thank Barry Cannell for offering this concise assessment of the equations that the film produces.

56 Indeed, even the tiniest of the film's details contributes to its nearly seamless proliferation of ironies. For example, Holly's Rolex watch, the symbol of her corporate success (introduced at her first reunion with her husband), nearly kills her. When McClane blows Hans out the window near the film's end, Hans grabs Holly's arm, and dangles for tense moments, gripping the watchband that neatly shackles her wrist. Only when McClane is able to unhook the despised symbol from her wrist is she saved from a plunge to her death. Hence, the fashionable terrorist drops off with the symbol of corporate fashion and achievement to which he has been clinging.

57 Such a configuration of differences, it seems to me, is only possible within the kind of multiculturalist ideology that currently prevails in U.S. institutions, primarily educational and social ones, where the term "multicultural" conflates race and ethnicity and winds up dissipating specific differences in a fantasy of ambient differentiation, a sort of infinite color spectrum, in which we are all imagined to participate in equivalent ways. Philip Cohen addresses the underpinnings of such an ideology, and its attendant dan-

gers, when he describes the British context in *Multi-Racist Britain*. The egregious error of "multiculturalism," according to him, is a conflation of race and ethnicity. "Race is the object of racist discourse and has no meaning outside it; it is an ideological construct, not an empirical social category; as such it signifies a set of imaginary properties of inheritance which fix and legitimate real positions of social domination or subordination. . . . The notion of ethnicity, in contrast, lacks any connotation of innate characteristic whether of superiority or inferiority. It is a myth of origins which does not imply a congenital destiny; unlike race, it refers to a real process of historical individuation—namely the linguistic and cultural practices through which a sense of collective identity or 'roots' is produced and transmitted from generation to generation and is changed in the process" (23–24). Unless we maintain the critical distinction between these categories, we obscure real historical power relations as well as the analyses necessary for progressive social change.

58 On the issue of reading practices and legibility in contemporary film, see Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991): "If many contemporary viewers have an increasingly distracted relationship with the images they appropriate in one way or another, today that relationship and those images seem more and more structured to resist legibility and interpretation" (52).

59 "Black Bodies/American Commodities," in *Unspeakable Images*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 325.

60 This confusion is no doubt related to an effect that Elizabeth Alexander describes as characteristic of this film: "*Ricochet* raises some very important questions about what it means to look at black men from any number of subject positions simultaneously. Mulcahy builds this multiplicity of perspectives into the film; Styles is the object of our ocular desire throughout, no matter who we are." "We're Gonna Deconstruct Your Life!" in *Representing Black Men*, ed. Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 158–59.

61 The film's use of Wayans seems to represent a variation on Hollywood's use of "black iconicity," as Ed Guerrero characterizes it: "A further implication of the narrative isolation of the black star involves the fact that they are packaged the way Hollywood has always packaged stars, as supreme icons and incarnations of the rootless, de-cultured 'individual' in industrial consumer society. Specifically, in the case of black stars, this amounts to dominant cinema's effective erasure of the star's identification with a black collective consciousness and sense of politics" (126–27). Damon Wayans, however, seems to capitalize on an ambiguous relationship to both community and politics, one that we would be hard pressed to pin down.

62 Elizabeth Alexander puts it this way: "*Ricochet* is a movie whose camera work asserts that we all want to look at black men, whether we are gay or straight, black or white, male or female. The desire to look is veiled in the trappings of bourgeois success—we 'watch' Styles's ascent—but the real reason for looking, no matter who we are, is the sex of it" (161).

63 Alexander's reading of the film is somewhat more optimistic than mine. She concludes this way: "However, perhaps the movie can lead us to an intracommunity questioning of another order: How does fear of the complexities of one's own desires, as well as conservative, upwardly mobile black family discourse, truncate imagining other forms of family and community? Where is a model of black male sexuality and self-pleasure that can

narrate itself without a concurrent narrative of dominion that mimics the very system it abhors?" (170).

64 *Another Tale to Tell* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 77–78.

2 Insides Out

1 Other 1990s examples of this seemingly inexhaustible thematics include *Presumed Innocent* (Alan Pakula, 1990), *Final Analysis* (Phil Joanou, 1992), *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1993), *Romeo Is Bleeding* (Peter Medak, 1994), *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992), and *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, 1994).

2 Masculine debilitation or incompetence has become an obsessive topos in recent films. In *Pacific Heights* (John Schlesinger, 1990), Melanie Griffith's businesslike handywoman character must single-handedly defeat the psychotic tenant, while her husband lies on the couch downstairs, literally crippled by a broken shoulder, while in *Sleeping with the Enemy* (Joseph Ruben, 1991), battered wife Julia Roberts is forced to blow away her murderous ex-husband after he has flattened her current lover—the sensitive man—with one punch. More and more, these updated female gothic plots offer the woman a choice between a powerful and effective male agent, a bastard, and a sensitive but completely ineffectual man. Perhaps one of the most spectacular examples of this trend in recent cinema is *Presumed Innocent*, where the lawyer hero's investigation of his lover's murder leads him to the discovery that his wife has killed her rival across his own body, quite literally. She has staged the rape of her victim, using her husband's semen as the instrument that suggests a misleading scenario and that provides incriminating evidence against him. Implausibly enough, then, the wife's murderous rage makes her a sex criminal as well.

3 Another example would be *Internal Affairs* (Mike Figgis, 1990).

4 Perhaps the ironic culmination of this obsessive interest comes with *Unlawful Entry* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1992), where it is the cop who is the psychotic intruder violating the middle-class interior because of his violent sexual fixation on the wife.

5 Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, *Postmodern Education: Politics, Culture, and Social Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 177: "From the mid-1970s, there are simply no direct representations of working-class males (much less working-class women) in television. Representations are dispersed to beer advertisements . . . ; or to cop shows in which characteristic working-class culture is displaced and recontextualized in the station house, on the streets, in the bars where cops congregate. These are displacements, so we only see the remainders—conviviality, friendship that is overdetermined by the police buddy system, the obligatory partnership. . . . In recent films, displacement of class to the police continues, but is joined by displacement of sex (gender) relations to class as well." Aronowitz's argument goes on to foreground *Someone to Watch Over Me* as paradigmatic of this trend toward displacement. However, he does not pursue in any detail the question of why the police force has become the most readily available site for such displacements. Nor, for that matter, does he examine the transactions that implicate race and ethnicity along with gender and class here.

6 Of course, many of the anxieties surrounding the police have been played out all too regularly as the media covers incidents of police brutality, perhaps the most explosive of which was the Rodney King beating and its aftermath. It may not be stretching things to