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From lonesome cowboys to geek masculinities: A study of documentary films on the financial crisis

ABSTRACT

Space is a vantage point from which masculinity can be critiqued and understood. Documentary film-makers employ specific mode(s) to relate space to masculinity by positioning themselves vis-à-vis the interviewees, and the interviewees vis-à-vis the viewers. A financial crisis may threaten the hegemonic masculinity embodied by Wall Street's lonesome cowboys and provide a chance for film-makers to critique this type of masculinity. This article analyses three documentary films, I.O.U.S.A., Capitalism: A Love Story and Floored, which were released after the 2008 economic crisis in the United States. The films contain three prototypes: the lonesome cowboy; white, working-class masculinity; and hypermasculinity. These films may portend a new masculinity that prioritizes intellectual bravado, geek masculinity.

KEYWORDS

hegemonic masculinity
hypermasculinity
Michael Moore
documentary films
financial crisis
space

INTRODUCTION

It should be obvious that Wall Street – the pillar of the US, if not global, financial markets – is masculine. Masculinities are shared understandings about what is considered manly behaviour, which influence and are influenced by

1. Seven documentary films were released after the crisis: *American Casino* (2009); *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009); *Chasing Madoff* (2011); *Floored* (2009); *Inside Job* (2010); *I.O.U.S.A.* (2008); *Life on the Edge of a Bubble* (2009). All directors (except for Moore) were contacted for an interview when their information was available.

individual behaviours, cultural ideologies and institutional practices. Wall Street is masculine in two senses. First, financial workers are overwhelmingly male (The National Council for Research on Women 2009). US investment bankers – the aristocrats of the financial world – are overwhelmingly white, upper-class men who attend three elite institutions (Harvard, Yale and Princeton) (Ho 2009). The Federal Reserve Chairs and US Chief Economists were also exclusively white, upper-class men until Janet Yellen broke the glass ceiling by becoming the Chair in 2014.

Second, the discourse of and about the financial market is gendered. Discourses are groups of statements, images and practices ‘seeking to explain the world in a particular way’ (Edgar and Sedgwick 1999: 116–17). The financial market is abstract, but discourses give it concrete images. For example, financial crises have been called ‘madam bubble’ in the past (Taylor et al. 2009). Today, the visual media rely on images to relay what the markets are ‘like’. For example, Corner (1998) demonstrates that televised financial news stories lack direct visualization; media producers use a sea of pedestrians to represent an economy. Peltzer (2015) sees the cinema as representing and retranslating the abstract financial market. Applying a gender lens, Lee and Raesch (2015) found that Hollywood films about financial markets marginalize women: not only are their roles stereotyped and limited but they also do not have important narrative functions.

Because the financial world is a domain of men that is fuelled by hegemonic masculinity (the authors will define this term later in this article), a financial crisis may signal a threat to this masculinity. For example, after the Asian financial crisis, western capital (re)feminized Asia by discrediting the region’s alternative approach to economic development (Ling 2002). Likewise, two Hollywood films, *Arbitrage* (Jarecki, 2012) and *Margin Call* (Chandor, 2011), released after the 2008 crisis showcase failing manhood in the West: the male protagonists are vulnerable, morally failing and cannot redeem themselves (Lee and Raesch 2015).

Documentary films provide images to describe, analyse and critique the financial crisis. Because film-makers have the abilities to visually illustrate the abstract financial market, they have an advantage over economists when seeking to influence the public’s opinions of a financial crisis. The public is unlikely to follow an economic explanation of what a crisis is, but it will understand what a crisis means through a tale of a working-class family losing their property (as in the case of Michael Moore’s *Capitalism* [2009]). Documentary film-makers may not rival investment bankers in terms of wealth, but they have the power to frame an issue. Patrick Creadon, a documentary director interviewed for this article, said ‘documentary films are in some ways becoming the definitive sort of final word on a certain story or a certain issue or person. [...] We [film-makers] have a lot of saying power’ (2014). To share their viewpoints, film-makers choose a documentary mode that implies how they position themselves in relation to the subject.

This article analyses three documentary films released after the 2008 financial crisis: *I.O.U.S.A.* (Creadon, 2008), *Capitalism: A Love Story* (Moore, 2009) and *Floored* (Smith, 2009).¹ Only one of the films was made by a well-known film-maker, Michael Moore’s *Capitalism*. The other two were interviewed via phone: Patrick Creadon, the director of *I.O.U.S.A.*, and James Allen Smith, the director of *Floored*. Because Moore has given media interviews and is the subject of a lot of literature, the authors drew upon information in the media to understand his approach and reasons as to why he makes documentary

films. The film-makers' responses helped explain *why* and *how* they chose the subject matter and decided on the plot structures of the films.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The documentary film-makers considered herein use masculinities and space to illustrate an abstract concept – the financial market – with concrete images. Both masculinities and space are resources to make these stories compelling.

Documentary

Some scholars see documentary films as a new form of investigative journalism, which is otherwise slowly dying in a media industry that is obsessed with 'breaking news' (Lewis 2010). Corner (2015) believes that documentary films do a better job of drawing on a range of contexts than news stories. Yet, documentary displays a tension between 'its interest in using film and television to photograph the living scene [...] and its interest in making claims *about* aspects of reality' (Corner 2015: 171, original emphasis). This is particularly true about documenting an abstraction such as the financial market.

Bill Nichols defines documentary as 'a form of cinema that speaks to us about actual situations and events' (2001: 142). In this definition, documentary does not make a claim to truth and that narration does not necessarily depict what 'really happened'. Nichols adds that the film-maker's viewpoint 'shapes this story into a proposal or perspective on the historical world directly, adhering to known facts, rather than creating a fictional allegory' (2001: 142). Facts and figures – while truthful on their own – are used to create the film-maker's specific point of view. Actual happenings and real people are the core of documentary film, but the presentation is tailored to engage and entertain an audience while informing them from a particular angle.

Film-makers choose among a number of documentary modes to tell their story. This article focuses on the expository and interactive (or participatory) modes, as these are the ones used in the films studied here. Most films

Documentary mode	Expository	Interactive
Narration	'Voice of god' that directly addresses the viewer	The film-maker directly speaks to the viewer
	A narrator may also appear as a 'character' in the film	
Voice-over or monologues	Direct relationship between images and voice-over	Emphasis on monologues and dialogues
Interviews	Only in support of the film's argument	Multiple viewpoints contributing different information to the topic
		No definite argument; leaves the audience to decide
Narrative structure	Conventional (such as chronological)	Logical continuity through editing
Presence of the camera and crew	Not acknowledged	Acknowledged

Table 1: A comparison of expository and interactive (participatory) documentary modes (Bruzzi 2000).

use more than one mode, but there is usually a primary mode along with a secondary mode in specific sections of a film. As both Bruzzi and Nichols illustrate in their respective discussions, each mode employs explicit techniques to speak to an audience in a specific manner (Bruzzi 2000; Nichols 2001). Table 1 presents the techniques used in the expository and interactive modes.

The choice of a documentary mode gives the film-makers the power to articulate masculinity to the audience by deliberately positioning, first, the film-makers in relation to the interviewees in physical space, and, second, the interviewees in relation to the viewer in physical space. Overall, the mode determines a general narrative structure through interviews and a conclusion.

Space

Space is integral to visual storytelling; it is part of the *mise-en-scène*, which is commonly defined as everything that appears in front of the camera. Scenes have to take place somewhere and characters and actions only exist within physical settings. Space constructs structures and legitimatizes social relations. Who has access to space is political (D'Arcus 2006; Jameson 1998) and therefore these spaces give meanings to masculinities.

Space is a gender relation; it governs which gender has access to which space. For example, women have long been associated with the private space; gay men have had to create their own space to avoid being harassed. Appropriate gendered behaviours are expected in gendered sites: a ballpark is masculine while a day-care centre is feminine. This article adds to the scholarship of masculinities by considering how the directors use space through employing a specific documentary mode in films about the financial market in ways that create certain types of masculinities.

Masculinities

Gender is the social construction of biological sex; it is the set of shared understandings about what it means to act like a woman or a man. In Judith Butler's famous formulation, we are born with some set of biological characteristics, but the 'girling' of a girl occurs in the moment when the doctor says, 'It's a girl!' (1993: 232). What makes a woman seem womanly is her having repeatedly been declared or assumed to be a woman and her repeatedly behaving in the ways society expects women to act. But gender analysis is not just the analysis of females. Men have a gender, and masculinities are created by shared social understandings about what is manly behaviour.

One thing that masculinities do is help distribute power; they 'creat[e] and reinforce[e] hierarchical relationships among people' (McGinley and Cooper 2013: 188). We know that masculinities have been part of men's systematic domination of women. Claims about the natural or God-given role of men as the public face of the family underwrote locking women into the private sphere. Crucial masculinities scholar Michael Kimmel captures the goal of masculinity when he says the hegemonic, or dominant, masculine figure is 'a *man in power*, with power, and a man of power' (2005: 184, original emphasis). Put another way, masculinity is demonstrated through 'intellectual mastery, technological prowess, and rationalized control' (Harris 2000: 784–85). According to Kimmel, the four general rules of the currently hegemonic masculinity in the United States include: (1) never acting feminine; (2) accruing power, success, wealth and status; (3) holding your emotions in check;

and (4) exuding an aura of daring and aggression (2005: 30–31). Men perform their identities in these masculine ways in order to accrue power.

Because masculinities are about accruing power through specific means ‘manhood is a relentless test of how close you are to the ideal’ (Cooper 2008: 647). The constant pressure to live up to the rules of hegemonic masculinity, and the inability to ever fully and finally do so, leads to masculine anxiety. That is why masculinities are so focused on the domination of others. When they exemplify the rules of masculinity, men – and sometimes women – can gain a sense of masculine esteem, of enhanced self-worth by means of enhanced manliness.

While men – as a group – have power over women – as a group – not all men are equal. Pre-eminent sociologists and masculinities scholars Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt have said that in a given cultural context there will be hegemonic masculinities. In the United States, the hegemonic masculinity is that which has traditionally been associated with white, Christian, straight, upper-class men (Kimmel 2005: 25). These masculinities will be more pervasive, influential and honoured than others, such as gay men’s masculinity.

Although there is an idealized masculinity in the United States, masculinities must be described in the plural because they are always cross-cut with other identities. In addition to a gender, every individual has multiple identities, such as race, class, sex orientation and so on, that intersect with their gender and influence how they see themselves and are seen by others. Identity is thus fluid and contextualized. Consequently, there are many types of masculinities. Straight white men who are also working class, straight upper-class men who are black and white upper-class men who are not straight are all examples that there are power differentials among men.

When trying to establish their masculine esteem, people use others as contrast figures. Almost all masculinities use women and femininity as their opposite poles. Racial minority, gay and other non-normative men have been depicted as too feminine, too masculine or both (Kimmel 2005). For instance, non-hegemonic masculinities are often described as ‘hypermasculine’. Hypermasculinities are exaggerated versions of the aggressiveness and physicality implicit in hegemonic masculinity (Cooper 2009). ‘Cat-calling’ construction workers and lewd rap artists might be considered hypermasculine, but non-hegemonic men gain their own forms of esteem from adopting hypermasculinities: they are deemed more salt-of-the-earth, more sexually potent and so on.

Finally, individual men and women can bask in the reflected masculinity of social institutions. As feminist legal scholar Nancy Ehrenreich has noted, however, our citizenry seem to ‘feel emasculated [...] when their sense of the strength and “maleness” of their country is threatened – such as by the events of September 11, 2001 [...]’ (2005: 132). Similar to a security crisis in which a plane destroyed a symbol of America’s masculinity, a financial crisis may threaten hegemonic masculinity as well (Ling 2002). What types of discourses promote or weaken hegemonic masculinities? How do documentary film-makers’ choices about how to use space support certain masculinities? To answer these questions, this article analyses three US documentaries that were released after the 2008 financial crisis. The three documentaries are *I.O.U.S.A.* (Creadon, 2008), *Capitalism: A Love Story* (Moore, 2009) and *Floored* (Smith, 2009).

***I.O.U.S.A.* – LONESOME COWBOY MASCULINITY**

I.O.U.S.A. makes cowboy masculinity central to truth-telling. This cowboy masculinity is defined by fighting for justice for the Little People without asking for rewards. Journalist Glen Greenwald implicitly defines cowboy masculinity in his analysis of presidential contests from 1980 to 2004. Republicans often sought to depict Democrats as wimps, while depicting themselves as ‘swaggering tough guys in the iconic mould of an American cowboy’ (2008). An economic crisis is seen as a crisis of morality and masculinity (Molony 2014). As presented in *I.O.U.S.A.*, this masculinity reinforces a hegemonic masculinity and then challenges it.

Director Patrick Creadon started to produce the film in 2006 when the Dow Jones Index was at an all time high; after the housing market crashed, the topics of national debt and the financial future of Americans resonated with the public anxiety. The film was intended to be about the past rather than the present, but the crisis made it a story of the present (personal communication). Funding came from the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, whose mission is ‘to increase public awareness of the nature and urgency of key fiscal challenges threatening America’s future and to accelerate action on them’ (2015). Thus, the documentary has an agenda to critique US macroeconomic policies, such as international trade and government spending.

Creadon needed to communicate said agenda while fulfilling two roles of documentary film: first, any film has to ‘entertain’ in order to reach an audience; second, a documentary must be journalistic to ‘fill an ever-increasing void that is being left behind where mainstream journalism used to reside’ (personal communication). As a piece of investigative journalism, *I.O.U.S.A.* sets expectations of relevant historical facts and interviewees who illuminate different sides of arguments. The evolving storyline is fluid. For instance, an editor created a montage of various presidents speaking about deficits and national debt and that became the film’s opening because, according to Creadon, it ‘set up the whole movie’ and aims to prompt immediate action to stop debt accumulation. The use of expository mode in this opening scene positions the viewer as a not-very-knowledgeable individual who benefits from guidance.

The two lonesome cowboys in *I.O.U.S.A.* are David Walker – a former US Comptroller General – and Robert Bixby – the Executive Director of the Concord Coalition. Even though they are not policy-makers in Washington, both have strong claims to the hegemonic masculinity because they are influential white males.

To raise consciousness among the misinformed and ignored American public (aka The Little People), Walker and Bixby travelled around the country on a ‘fiscal wake-up tour’ to right a wrong and save the nation. Though not on horseback, the men in the Sports Utility Vehicle are message bearers of fiscal responsibility.

Country music, which is associated with working-class whites (especially with those in the south), is used in the soundtrack to show the men’s attempts to get off the ‘high horse’ of the politician inside the Washington DC beltway and inform the public in a more direct way via local media. The use of music in an expository mode is one tool to guide the audience to read the protagonists as the cowboys.

Creadon also uses the interactive mode at times when he talks with the subjects in front of the camera. In those moments, the two cowboys are contrasted with the individuals – The Little People – in their own space. This makes the audience respect the interviewees because they must be doing

something right, which the audience can learn from. It also includes the filmmaker into the same circle of masculinity as his subjects – he marks himself as a cowboy as well, because he is a trustworthy person who steps in to seek out the truth for the viewer.

Despite Walker and Bixby wanting to wake up the nation to assume fiscal responsibility, the cowboys reinforce a hegemonic view of how histories should be understood and experienced. They do not interrogate the public history of finance in the United States, which they mark by the traditional delineation of presidencies and major events, such as wars and recessions. How everyday citizens – particularly women, people of colour and immigrants – experienced the events apparently does not matter.

Perhaps because masculinity is legitimized by a hierarchal other, women were secondary in the documentary. The chronological structure also created difficulty when seeking to include female viewpoints because men were historically the ones in power and thus need to be included in the factual retelling of vital information. The only female interviewee, a retired school-teacher and now a waitress, Kay Harms, appears 40 minutes into the documentary. Creadon met her at a catered event while travelling the country and found her articulate (personal communication). She shared personal experiences and opinion. This isolated incorporation of women's views makes men (appear) powerful in three ways. First, the film suggests that male knowledge is universal while women's is specific and situational. Second, the film suggests that while men may make mistakes, the country has flourished under their leadership because of their bold moves and their strength to see through difficult times. Third, her being the only female interviewee in the film suggests that women do not have relevant things to add to the topic under investigation. Nonetheless, women's absence was arguably a result of a production constraint and the effect of constructing powerful men in this manner in the editing process an unintentional by-product.²

Because *I.O.U.S.A.*'s purpose is to critique macroeconomic policies, it is not overt about the relations between social class, masculinity and the financial crisis. An unintentional implication could be the viewer should not worry much about how class relations are reproduced through the power structure. The physical spaces that the film privileges are outside of Washington DC's halls of power. The film's discourse creates a vantage point of a figurative outsider, the cowboy who listens to country music. But those authoritatively present in the films are almost exclusively male. The film's chosen structure thus effectively fulfils the movie's purpose of arguing for new fiscal policies, but at the expense of promoting specific masculine cowboy imagery and a male-centred understanding of the financial crisis.

CAPITALISM: A LOVE STORY – WHITE WORKING-CLASS MASCULINITY

Moore has been creating a working-class man image in his documentary films since the debut *Roger & Me* (1989). An attack on the hegemony of Wall Street – and indeed capitalism – seems to be an appropriate task for him to continue crafting his working-class masculinity, even though Moore's wealth has disqualified him from being a working-class person. In his films, the self-made, blue-collar workers are seen to exemplify the American myth of individualism, stoicism and persistence. The businessman is seen as effeminate and anxiety-ridden (Banet-Weiser 2014).

2. The authors of this article could not come to a consensus on the extent to which Creadon is responsible for the absence of women in *I.O.U.S.A.* We, however, agreed that Creadon intended to include more women, but found many were too shy in front of the camera or did not make for great characters. Thus, at times, it appears he did not include them as a gesture of respect, while at other segments, their personalities or opinions would take away from the entertaining value of the film. The criteria of what makes a good interviewer may be a gendered knowledge that directors learn from other films. On the other hand, one could say that Creadon failed to remedy the absence of women because the financial market is masculine. Moreover, since viewers do not know about the production constraints, they may conclude the film has a bias against women.

Capitalism: A Love Story (Moore, 2009) responds to the 2008 financial crisis by gathering stories of homeowners losing their properties to banks, by questioning the incestuous relationship between the government and the banking elites and by offering triumphant stories of citizens' rebellions against corporate greed. In order to critique capitalism, he chooses to visually trespass white male capital-controlled space to conquer the feminine space and to reinstall hierarchal gender roles of the 1960s.

In a *Guardian* interview Moore explained that his films 'don't have instant impact because they're dense with ideas that people have not thought about' (McGreal 2010). Media scholar Corner (2015) said Moore invites the viewers to join him on a journey that requires little prior knowledge on the part of viewers. Moore believes his overarching message in *Capitalism* to be one that will take Americans some time to digest: 'Capitalism is an evil, and you cannot regulate evil' (McGreal 2010).

Moore is the most well-known of the three film-makers here. The media have helped establish his working-class-man persona. This image is polarized from both political and film scholar lenses. He 'has been hailed by the left [...], denounced by his right-wing opponents [...], and compared by film critics to such a disparate figure as Sergei Eisenstein' (Porton 2004: 3). From a mass audience perspective, he is 'an entertainer, who is now part of pop culture himself' (Porton 2004: 4). Fellow film-maker Creadon said, '[Moore] tells movies where I think he [...] is preaching to the choir. He [...] often times [is] very antagonistic to the people who are in his films' (personal communication).

Moore first created his working-class image with the release of *Roger & Me* (1989). He is a 'self-proclaimed champion, defender of the working class' (Tibbets 2004: 86). His appearance confirms this blue-collar image with 'ample girth, trademark baseball cap, tattered tennis shoes, and blue jeans' (Tibbets 2004: 86). Visually, he contrasts to the Wall Street men in suits with slick hair. In order to finance the first film, he did not go to a studio or a bank; instead he hosted Bingo nights in his home town and even sold his bed.

Space is essential to Moore's working-class identity because in *Capitalism*, he is shown not being welcomed on sites where capital circulates and accumulates. Moore believes that rich, white men control both capital and space. Utilizing the interactive mode, he communicates it as his duty as a blue-collar male to trespass upon those sites while on camera, which include the headquarters of corporations and investment banks, stock exchanges, Capitol Hill and the White House. In *Roger & Me*, he repeatedly approaches the then chairman of General Motors, eventually walking into the building, past security and thus demonstrating his boldness and strength by not following established rules and norms.

Moore repeats the same tactics in *Capitalism* but was stopped by male security guards in every instance. He drove an armoured van into investment banks' headquarters in New York City and held out empty bags telling the security guards that he was here to collect the money owed to the American people. In order to advance his control of physical space, he wrapped yellow 'crime scene' tape around marble columns outside buildings declaring he was seizing the property. He knew his actions would not result in anything and thus could be interpreted as a spectacle, as entertainment for the audience, which also makes him a likeable underdog character.

The men who control capital flows are portrayed to be safe-guarded in their modern fortresses – phallus-shaped buildings with imposing outlook. The power of these men – not interviewed by Moore – was implied by the

low-angle shots of the buildings from the ground. Moore, who does not have full access to capital and power, is dwarfed by the buildings.

In contrast, Moore has no problem with gaining access to spaces where capital is drained, such as foreclosed homes and closed factories. It can be assumed that he was welcomed into those spaces because he is a famous film-maker who champions the working class. Additionally, in these sites Moore is neither shown walking into the private spaces on-screen nor interviewing the Little People. He remains an invisible character in the background. This change in production technique – from interactive to expository – implies that he did not have to ‘struggle’ for access and acceptance or confront authorities who guard upper-class white male capital.

The peace and serenity of the private homes are shown to be disrupted by the police and debt collectors, but not by the film-maker. In some instances, the Little People themselves shoot their own footage. In the first scene, which takes place in a foreclosed home, the audience is invited to join the family members to watch through the half-drawn blinds as the police come to the door. We hear mutters and whispers of family members telling each other ‘[the police] are coming’. Both the grainy image and the date and time of the recording in a corner imply a ‘low-tech’ recording technology and a shared private moment.

In addition, private moments are shown in scenes of companies benefitting from dead employees for purchasing life insurance unbeknownst to the deceased employees and family members. The audience is asked to share some silent moments to grieve with the family members, to sit with them in the dining room, to look at framed photos on the wall and to watch homemade videos of the deceased loved ones. Those whose capital is being drained are portrayed in the film as private, law-abiding citizens whose presence relies on the film-maker’s camera. These citizens are invisible and silent if not for Moore’s intervention. However, he may have falsely depicted their responses as uncensored and unstaged. For instance, a tear is good evidence of an authentic subject, yet Moore staged these events by planning to shoot such scenarios and then choosing the most persuasive footage for his film.

Thus far, this article has shown how Moore has displayed his *working-class* identity through space. He displays working-class *masculinity* by using montage technique of older footage and current footage. He showed that middle-class and working-class families are the most hard hit in contemporary society. As a result, gender relations transform; more women work outside home to make ends meet. Moore sees gender relations as having changed for the worse. He sees the 1960s family with a stay-at-home mother as the epitome of the American Dream. In the documentary, he shows old newsreel of the idealized middle-class family with a stay-at-home mother and a working father. Moore summoned his father – a former General Motors factory worker – to walk with him and remember the ‘good old days’ in an urban wasteland that used to be an assembly plant. Moore reminisced, ‘I remember mom brings the kids to pick you up. Everyday at 2:30 p.m.’ (2009). Black-and-white pictures of male workers outside a factory illustrate this seemingly happy childhood. To remember the past, he used an interactive mode of multiple viewpoints that complement one another by augmenting the visuals with the voices. Thus, Moore shapes a singular viewpoint that comments on the overarching topic of capitalism as well as gender relations.

Moore’s own gender politics also seem to present a paradox. He wants to be politically progressive, but his ideal moment is one when many women were locked into the private sphere. The ‘good-old-days’ memory suggests

3. One former trader agreed to speak with Moore outside the New York Stock Exchange. Given the fact that he is an African American and a former trader, he may see he has nothing to lose by speaking with Moore. He functions as a contrast figure as discussed in the context of masculine esteem.

Moore's upbringing visualizes gender relations in a way where both men and women knew 'their place' and could harmoniously work together. Men and women had separate yet complementing tasks for the home and the work-place – both essential sites to make capitalism work.

Looking back wistfully on the 1960s, working-class white masculinity wanted change along class lines, but not necessarily along race and gender lines. Its idealized moment was built upon racially segregated suburbanization (Massey and Denton 1988) and locking white women into the domestic sphere. In *Capitalism: A Love Story*, then, we see that white, working-class masculinity is one that has yet to satisfactorily work through its relationships with racial progress and feminism. When calling for an elimination of capitalism, Moore implicitly calls for a re-installment of gender hierarchy and a devaluing of women as workers and professionals (Banet-Weiser 2014).

FLOORED – GEEK MASCULINITY VERSUS HYPERMASCULINITY

This film takes a specific viewpoint on the financial industry not covered by the other two films: a microcosmic focus on one particular evolving space, the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT). Director James Allen Smith, who formerly held a 'tech' position in the pit, saw the film's goals as 'show[ing] real people in real situations' and 'the public a side of traders they never expected to see' (personal communication 2014). He hopes the audience shares his view that the trading floor is a 'beautifully romantic thing', particularly when traders adapt to technological change.

Smith's definition of documentary film differs from *I.O.U.S.A.*'s director Creadon. He thinks,

the documentary film is a point of view; that's what makes it different than what journalism should mean [...] Documentary has always been about story telling. [...] Sometimes [the point of view] may be skewed; sometimes it may not make sense to certain people, but the documentary film-maker can usually say 'well, that's what I saw and that was my perception'.

(personal communication 2014)

Using an expository mode, *Floored* aims to communicate the tense situations the film's characters experience where money can be won or lost in a second. Given his personal involvement in this topic, he is unlike the other two filmmakers who could be defined as outsiders to the financial market.

Smith's personal involvement with the topic also explains the romantic undertone present in this film. Since the technology boom of the late 1980s, geek masculinity has changed from being intellectual but weak to being intellectual and financially potent, albeit in a nerdy way. In contrast to depictions of intellectuals as pitiful, which predominated three decades ago, such as in the film *Revenge of the Nerds* (Kanew, 1984), today, being geeky means being potentially wealthy, as exemplified by Bill Gates.³ Some traders blame computer trading for destroying the well-honed and honoured craft of outcry trading. The geek has taken over from the jock; the male who is not associated with masculinity in the schoolyard has triumphed over the hypermasculine and valorized athlete.

Despite being a geek, Smith sympathizes with the hypermasculine traders depicted in his film, who have lost their means in online trading. Smith was 'shocked and godsmacked by [the CBOT traders] and by what they actually

do. The sort of athleticism and the just outright sort of testosterone driven like work that they do on these trading floors just kind of blew my mind' (personal communication). An example of Smith's homage to hypermasculinity is the last scene, in which he dubbed the sound of sirens in the background with George W. Bush's speech about the economic meltdown in the foreground. From there, he cuts to two online traders in an office saying, 'the world is on fire' while staring intently at the sharp declining slope on the computer screen. This sober and introspective ending, again utilizing expository mode to shape a particular viewpoint, may echo an earlier scene in which an angry trader accuses people of cheating on the computer. The film suggests the hypermasculine trader is right, the hegemonic male (Bush) is wrong and the geeks are helpless and passive.

Smith implies that the pit is one of the few places where working-class men can make a lot of money without having an education. Being successful in the pit is being rich and being able to leave with the money. Because educational background is irrelevant on the trading floor, working-class men believed they could level the playing field with the 'big boys' in the pit by being street-smart. Their masculinity is not the same as Moore's even though both come from the working class. Smith's traders – and he himself because of his choice of the expository mode – do not look out for the Little People; they do not challenge the men in charge; they only want to join them.

The overarching impression of the film is that Smith seems to prize a street-smart, working-class masculinity over the geek masculinity implied by technologically enhanced trading. While nearly all traders seem to gain the masculine esteem of aggressively pursuing wealth, the implication of being more working class is that one is more in touch with one's own physicality. The hypermasculine traders have to withstand the physicality of the pit by standing out in the crowd and by being aggressive. Colourful, loud and sometimes tasteless jackets help traders to get noticed more easily. In the hierarchy created by financial market masculinity, physicality still rates as more masculine than technology-driven success.

Floored shows the prioritization of hypermasculinity in financial markets in several ways. First, it aggrandizes visible risk-taking and aggression. As the film states in its opening, the CBOT floor – like the professional wrestling ring – is the stage to display 'the most primal method of buying and selling' (Smith, 2014). The traders embody risk by bringing their own liquidity to the floor. The film demonstrates that the men could lose a house in one day. Engaging in such risky moves means one is tough, bold and strong. Yet, viewers are informed that some traders committed suicide after the 1987 market crash. Masculinity thus valorizes both risk-taking as a way of life and death as the price of failure.

Second, this form of hypermasculinity is anchored in the premodern kinship system that the urban white working class has long used. Traders have to find their cliques based on neighbourhoods (in this film, Chicago's North Side or South Side) or ethnicities (Italian, Irish and Jewish). Job openings are not advertised. Family members introduced each other to work at the pit: brother brought brother; father brought son. If a trader is not 'one of them', as said by a former trader, it is a 'living hell' (Smith, 2014).

Third, the financial markets suppress the feminine. The pit is – except for four women – all male. Likewise, consistent with the theory of hegemonic masculinities, many male traders treat women as commodities. One former trader said, 'money gets you [a] super chick' and Playboy playmates to him are 'every guy's dream' (Smith, 2014). Nature is something to be conquered as well: another trader indulged himself in big game hunting in Africa where

4. The director did not intend to exclude the wives but he found them dishonest and their answers remained on the surface (personal communication). The production challenges are not known by the audience who may then conclude the director is being intentionally biased. This illustrates the dialectical relation between the two senses of the masculine financial markets: the absence of women in the industry means it is hard to find the few for an interview; the discourse then appears to be from an overwhelmingly male point of view.

every kind of wild animal has a price on the catalogue. He did not have to hunt for the animals though; he only paid the tribal leaders to unlock the cage for him to shoot commodified pieces of nature.

Similar to the lonesome cowboys in *I.O.U.S.A.*, the hypermasculine traders prefer to be alone. In the film, the men are usually shown to be on their own, whether they are in their oversized mansions or their humble apartments. The traders are also the patriarchs who are supposed to financially take care of their family. The family – a private unit – is said to be the only thing that a trader could trust. However, in the film, only one family member was shown because the father and son both work at the exchange. One wife appeared in a picture on a mantelpiece; another was said to have left the family.⁴ When the men cannot bring home the bread, they apparently hide the financial situation from the children or they end their own lives. What men perceive to be bold and strong is actually a masking of weakness and insecurity. In this kind of masculinity, failure is more shameful than death. The way these men demonstrate bravado – which is suspended over a pit of insecurity – is consistent with the theory of masculinities. Pursuing hegemonic masculinity is anxiety-provoking. Within this analysis, Smith essentially is a geek as his form of masculinity appears to emphasize technological mastery. The geek is also lonesome – he interacts with the computer rather than the people.

CONCLUSION

In an earlier article, two of the authors of this piece found that Hollywood films about the financial markets marginalize women (Lee and Raesch 2015). This article further explains why. Both as physical spaces and in the discourses of its participants, the financial market is captured by hegemonic masculinities. This article adds to the literature on masculinities by advocating that space – both physical and discursive – is a vantage point from which masculinity can be critiqued. Consideration of documentary modes helps to make concrete how space and masculinity can be represented on-screen.

In light of the foregoing discussion, the authors suggest that the discourses on the financial markets are undergoing a change whereby a formerly hegemonic lonesome cowboy masculinity is giving way to a geek masculinity. The former primacy of the lonesome cowboy masculinity is seen in its exaltation in *I.O.U.S.A.* But it is also seen in the nostalgia for such a traditional masculinity in *Floored*. *Capitalism* can therefore be seen as a bridge critique. It challenges who is in charge, but not the gender system itself. That is seen in its nostalgia for the white, working-class masculinity that allowed women to stay home. *Floored* presents a more likely future, however, as it shows geeks as having taken over the markets. Those geeks use technical mastery as a source of masculine esteem. They push out the old Ivy League cowboys, but only in favour of the men of more recently (and more nerdily) pedigreed spaces, such as Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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