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A Symbolic Prison: A Prisoner's Story as Masculinity Crisis Narrative in *Bronson*

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Communication
East Tennessee State University
In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Professional Communication

by
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May 2012

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Dr. Kelly Dorgan
Dr. Amber Kinser

Keywords: masculinity, symbolic convergence theory, communication, masculinity crisis

ABSTRACT

A Symbolic Prison: A Prisoner's Story as Masculinity Crisis Narrative in *Bronson*

by

Ben Shupe

For this project I analyze the film *Bronson*, focusing on its connection to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse or the belief that traditional notions of masculinity are in peril due to changing gender norms and women's social progress. I argue *Bronson* privileges a narrow, violent conception of masculinity through its presentation of violence and domination over other men. I use Ernest Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory to analyze how the film makes sense of the real life events it is based on in a way that appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. I argue that *Bronson* is a notable representation of masculinity because it recounts the life of an infamous criminal in a fashion that frames his actions as a resistance to effeminate men. The film's treatment of masculinity is problematic because it advances a restrictive notion of masculinity that involves violent, destructive behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Wesley Buerkle for aiding my discovery of gender studies as a field of communication inquiry, serving as the chair of my thesis committee, and mentoring me since the fall semester of 2010. I also want to thank Dr. Amber Kinser and Dr. Kelly Dorgan for their insight, which has helped me improve my project and grow as a scholar.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The 2008 movie *Bronson* caught my eye with its depiction of a charismatic criminal who relentlessly fights the guards in his prison. The film, which covers major events in the life of British prisoner Charles Bronson from the early 1970s to 1999, provides a seemingly sympathetic treatment of its violent protagonist and disturbing depictions of violence and domination against physically weaker men (Bronson, 2008). As the movie reached its climax, where the muscular Bronson stands naked next to his slender, effeminate captive, I realized I had been watching comparisons between an alpha male and physically weaker men. As the film closed with the protagonist stuffed into a small cage just big enough for him to fit inside, the man making noises that suggested suffocation or constriction, I thought of a familiar sentiment I had heard expressed in person and in various media: “men aren’t men anymore.” This is the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. *Bronson* appeals to such sentiments through depictions of violent masculinity and repression, which I argue speaks to the crisis discourse. For this project I am concerned with the ways media promote a narrow, traditional model of masculinity over less restrictive gender practices. *Bronson* is a useful text for this discussion due to its representation of different models of masculinity. I argue the film privileges the notion that traditional masculinity is in peril, presenting a violent character as a bastion of traditional manhood who rebels against effeminate men in an effort to preserve his masculinity. *Bronson* demonstrates the ways the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse can color perceptions of masculinity, in this case framing a destructive man as a sympathetic character who resists nonviolent conceptions of masculinity. Such images of masculinity are unhealthy because widespread adoption of violent conceptions of manhood endorses violent behavior. I provide a

preview of this discussion for the remainder of this chapter, including a brief overview of the text and issues central to this project. I describe the text of analysis, the masculinity crisis discourse, and the theory I use to analyze the text. I end with a preview of the remaining chapters.

Bronson

Here I introduce the motion picture *Bronson*, the text I use to illustrate the promotion of traditional masculinity in media. In this section I discuss the film itself, including the real events that it is based on and a brief summary of the film. I then share my initial reaction to the film and state what I feel it communicates regarding masculinity. *Bronson* is a film that depicts the life of Charles Bronson, an infamous British prisoner known for violent outbursts. Born Michael Peterson, Bronson was originally incarcerated for armed robbery but faced subsequent extensions of his sentence due to his attacks on inmates and guards (Bronson, 2008). He has spent much of his time behind bars in solitary confinement (Bronson, 2008). In 2008 Charles Bronson was the subject of a film bearing his name.

Bronson is based on the life of the infamous prisoner. Actor Tom Hardy stars and acts as narrator. The film moves very quickly through Bronson's life before prison, changing to a slower pace when depicting his experiences behind bars. This setting, the prison, is where the majority of the film plays out. A recurring theme is Bronson's many clashes with prison authorities. He is frequently shown fighting multiple guards at a time, eventually being overwhelmed after holding his own initially. Bronson often commits violence with his muscular body on display, usually appearing partially clothed or naked. His ideally masculine physique is accentuated by the presence of less traditionally masculine, arguably effeminate, men in the film, who at times are the authority figures trying to keep him under control. The film culminates with Bronson taking the prison art teacher hostage. He ties the man to a banister and paints his face. Bronson is naked

while he toys with his captive, his large, powerful body on display, in contrast to the comparatively small, slender hostage. It was this scene that piqued my interest in the film.

I noticed the film seemed to encourage the viewer to sympathize with Bronson by depicting him as a charismatic, entertaining figure. He narrates the film, at times shown on a stage wearing stage make-up and a suit, standing before a crowd. After Bronson is finished tormenting the art teacher, the scene switches to show the audience applauding. This seemingly sympathetic framing of Bronson bothered me, as he had spent most of the film digging himself in a hole through his criminal activity and fights with guards. The applause he received from the imaginary audience after his final hostage standoff was particularly revealing to me. This film did more than simply tell Bronson's story. There was a message about masculinity as well.

A passage by Robin Ackroyd from the introduction to Charles Bronson's autobiography is illustrative of the message I get from the film:

Charlie is a lost soul, a man from a different age. Ten thousand years ago he would have been the strongest man in the jungle; two thousand years ago, in Roman times, he would have been the unbeaten gladiator; two hundred years ago he would have been a circus strong-man. As I write, he is locked up 23 hours a day in a cell without so much as a window to open, with little natural light, no breeze on his face. (Ackroyd, 2008, p. x)

According to Ackroyd (2008) Bronson is a "lost soul." Why is he lost? Bronson is an anachronism. Ackroyd suggested in earlier periods Bronson would have been admired and rewarded for his strength and ability to physically dominate other men. However, in contemporary times he is locked away, no jungle to rule over, no Roman Coliseum in which to demonstrate his masculinity. While it would seem to be a good thing that men no longer have to prove themselves in the jungle or fight as gladiators, Ackroyd bemoans a contemporary society

that apparently lacks a role for Bronson to fill. The passage suggests this world does not appreciate the prisoner. It instead tries to stifle him by locking him in a windowless cell. I argue this view of Bronson as an admirable, repressed relic of masculinity is present in the film as well. Unable to remain in the outside world in which he is out of place, Bronson is put in prison where he indulges his violent masculinity. His actions, however, put him at odds with authority figures who seek to corral the unruly prisoner and his masculinity. Bronson resists by fighting guards and dominating physically weaker men. The film invites the viewer to see Bronson as resisting encroaching femininity, preserving his physically-imposing, violent masculinity.

Bronson tells the story of a prisoner who acts out violently against the system. However, the film also communicates a particular message regarding masculinity. The text portrays Bronson as a symbol of masculinity who faces continual attempts at repression from less masculine men. This positioning of a more traditionally masculine character as oppressed by less masculine figures is reflective of the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse.

The Crisis

I argue *Bronson* appeals to the idea that traditional male gender norms are imperiled by the encroachment of femininity. I refer to this phenomenon as the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. For this project I treat the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse as a sustained cultural conversation about traditional masculinity's perceived decline in the face of changing gender norms. This discourse often manifests itself in media, like *The Man Show* or the all men's channel Spike TV (Tragos, 2009). *Bronson* is another manifestation of this discourse, notable for its depictions of violence against effeminate men. In this section I briefly describe the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. Then I discuss the ways *Bronson* relates to crisis

sentiments. This discourse involves attitudes relating to traditional gender norms and reactions to changing gender norms.

The contemporary masculinity crisis discourse invokes, among other things, nostalgia for masculine norms of the past and a backlash against femininity. Today's crisis can be partially traced back to men's negative reactions to women's social progress in the 1970s (Robinson, 2001). Women's progress, and the related changes in gender roles and norms, led some men to feel uncertain about the roles they served (Darnell & Wilson, 2006). As a result, men expressed dismay toward what they considered an increasingly feminine society (Darnell & Wilson, 2006). In response to perceptions of a feminized world, men gazed toward what they saw as a manlier past (Tragos, 2009). For example, Morrissey (2004) compared then-current professional football player Brett Favre to the contemporary, supposedly less masculine man, framing Favre as a positive example of manhood:

They used to call someone like Brett Favre a “man’s man,” back when guys didn’t have to talk about their feelings or take Lamaze classes or know how to make chicken artichoke soup with fresh tarragon. Modern enlightenment has rendered the “man’s man” invisible, or at least forced him to cover up with a sarong. So how do you do justice to someone as tough as a cowboy’s squint, someone whose beard stubble could sand rough wood, someone with a look that hints at a general unhinged quality? What do you call him? A person’s person? Doesn’t quite capture it. A player’s player? Sounds more like the king of the nightclubs. A metrosexual’s metrosexual? Uh, you tell him that. The passage suggests masculinity no longer belongs to men. The “man’s man,” as Morrissey suggested, existed in a time when men were not generally saddled with “feminine” responsibilities such as dealing with emotions, childrearing, and cooking. The phrase “man’s

man” suggests a man whom men can claim, someone shaped by “proper” masculine ideals. The new man, suggests Morrissey, is not a man’s product. Perhaps he is a woman’s man. Why else would he attend Lamaze classes and cook? This passage also hints at the loss of male privilege. The author suggested Favre resembled past men who did not have to help with cooking or childcare. Particularly revealing is the statement that “modern enlightenment” has made this man “invisible.” I argue changing gender norms are a primary element of the “modern enlightenment” to which Morrissey refers. This shift, according to the author, has led to a steep decline in the prominence of the man’s man, a decline so steep as to leave contemporary society lacking the vocabulary to describe him. This nostalgic gaze toward strong, ideally masculine men is reflected in *Bronson*.

In the film the positioning of Bronson against comparatively weaker or less masculine men is striking. His resistance to authorities in the form of violence against and domination over physically weaker men suggests a comparison between these men and Bronson, an exemplary tough guy. Finally, the repression Bronson faces at the hands of men who are individually weaker and less masculine, particularly the presence of an effeminate-appearing warden, appeals to fears men feel regarding a perceived feminization of men and society.

The contemporary masculinity crisis discourse represents a negative reaction to changing gender norms. Men who feel masculinity is in a state of crisis feel nostalgia for traditional masculinity embodied by strength and toughness. Men who believe masculinity is threatened by femininity, through women’s social progress or men’s assuming of traditionally feminine qualities, see traditional masculinity as a desirable alternative to contemporary men, who they see as feminized. *Bronson* offers up its protagonist as a model tough guy who must fight

repression from the ranks of lesser men. To examine the ways *Bronson* tells this story to the audience, I use Symbolic Convergence Theory.

Symbolic Convergence Theory

Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) is a general communication theory that deals with the communication of group consciousness. The central claim of SCT is that groups of people share creative interpretations of reality and arrive at a shared viewpoint of an issue (Bormann, 1985). These interpretations are identified by the theory as fantasies, often appealing to a situation a group is in or feelings group members feel toward a particular issue (Bormann, 1972). According to SCT, group members share various recurring themes, called fantasy themes, describing characters, settings, and actions contained within shared fantasies (Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 2001). Fantasy themes combine to form a rhetorical vision, the viewpoint shared by the group (Bormann, 1985). SCT explains the formation and maintenance of group consciousness through the sharing of compelling fantasies and rhetorical visions. This framework is useful for analyzing the way *Bronson* sends messages about masculinity.

Within the framework of SCT, fantasies help people make sense of certain real life events or issues. Fantasies generally involve events or stories occurring away from the immediate context of the group that are relevant to something the group is going through or an issue the group is dealing with (Bormann, 1972). I argue *Bronson* makes sense of its protagonist's life in a way that appeals to the masculinity crisis discourse by offering a fantasy in which traditional masculinity faces harsh repression from less masculine men. The traditionally masculine protagonist must fight in order to maintain his masculinity. I develop this analysis of the film and its relation to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse for the remainder of this project.

Preview

Because I want to discuss the ways *Bronson* promotes narrow concepts of masculinity over alternative models, I guide my analysis by asking how the film appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. It is important to explain how *Bronson* appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse as a discourse that promotes strict gender roles. In addition, because the film uses violence to portray rejections of femininity, I ask how *Bronson* promotes violent masculinity as a rejection of femininity. This question is important because violence is the main strategy the film uses to promote a narrow conception of masculinity through rejections of femininity.

In Chapter 2 I provide more details of the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse, a discourse that promotes strict gender roles, and touch on previous crises. I review previous scholarship focusing on representations of masculinity in media and the issues studies have dealt with. Past research shows media often privilege or rearticulate normative concepts of masculinity. I argue such narrow concepts of masculinity are unhealthy and the advancement of such a cause problematic.

In Chapter 3 I describe Symbolic Convergence Theory, a useful framework for analyzing the film and the ways it promotes strict gender identities. In addition, I discuss the theory's central propositions, history and development, terms and components, past studies, and debates over the validity of the theory. I argue SCT is a useful theory for analyzing *Bronson* and the way the film appeals to the masculinity crisis discourse. The theory explains how people can develop a view of events or issues through the use of fantasies. I argue the film employs fantasy themes and presents a rhetorical vision that sends a particular message about masculinity.

In Chapter 4 I examine the themes describing characters, actions, and setting in the film, what messages the themes send regarding masculinity, and how they come together to form a rhetorical vision. Character themes establish Bronson's masculinity through depictions of his body and temperament, as well as through comparisons with other characters. Setting themes describe a world that does not offer many opportunities for Bronson to enact his masculinity, with prison serving as a sort of refuge where he can engage in violence and receive recognition for it. Finally, action themes illustrate Bronson's many acts of domination over other men and his struggle against authority figures who would repress his masculinity.

In the conclusion I discuss the implications of this project, arguing that promoting violent masculinity is problematic because this gender role is restrictive and destructive. I also address imagery from the film that falls outside the scope of SCT yet reinforces my reading of the film as a struggle for traditional masculine power in the face of effeminate authority. I also touch on the sparse yet troubling representations of women in the film.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the first chapter I argued *Bronson* appealed to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. Here I elaborate on the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. In this chapter I review literature on masculinity, including work that describes the contemporary masculinity crisis, accounts of previous “crises,” and previous research on representations of masculinity. I begin this chapter by discussing the contemporary crisis in masculinity and preceding movements. Then I discuss previous research on masculinity in media and the general trends evident in the literature. I end the chapter by describing my own research plan and discussing the potential negative consequences of enforcing narrow male gender roles.

The Contemporary Masculinity Crisis

Contemporary media messages indicate the presence of a masculinity crisis discourse. Messages across different media, including television (e.g. Palmer-Mehta, 2009), radio (e.g. Darnell & Wilson, 2006), and print (e.g. Gillis, 2005), indicate there is a feeling among men that their gender is becoming too feminine and that a return to more traditional notions of masculinity is a must. This crisis has led to the privileging of strict masculine gender roles and the rejection of effeminate men. Kimmel and Kaufman (1994) noted this crisis has had effect in North America, Australia, and Western Europe. While different factors, like shrinking economic opportunity, contributed to the emergence of the crisis discourse, research demonstrates feminist movements often receive blame for the crisis (Kimmel, 2006, p. 218).

Several scholars have attributed the masculinity crisis discourse to antifeminist reactions expressed decades ago. Robinson (2001) studied rhetoric of masculine repression from the 1970s. A discourse among men of male repression arose in response to feminist criticism of male

power. The dominant theme of “men’s liberation” speak was a repression of masculinity carried out to meet feminist demands (Robinson, 2001, p. 135). The men who bought into this model of repressed manhood considered sexual and violent impulses as natural for men.

Critics felt feminists who criticized traditional models of masculinity were “tinkering with elemental impulses” (Robinson, 2001, p. 136). Proponents of what they considered men’s liberation at the time argued these natural impulses inevitably made their way to the surface, meaning the repression of such forces would lead to an unpleasant release. They claimed these explosions of repressed masculinity would result in destructive behavior, a danger to the repressed men and people around them. Positioning “unrepressed masculinity” as the natural or true version of manhood served to not only privilege traditional masculinity but also to classify effeminate men as less than real men (Robinson, 2001, p. 136).

Antifeminists continued to frame feminism as a movement of emasculating repressions. Prominent voices against feminism claimed men were oppressed, using role “reversals” to frame men as victims of the newly empowered woman (Kimmel, 2006, p. 198). Such reversals included claims that men were subject to sexual harassment from women and husbands were commonly abused by their wives (Kimmel, 2006, p. 198). Others claimed feminists had established equality between the sexes and then went beyond it, putting men in a subordinate position (Kimmel, 2006, p. 198). The notion of oppressed men fuelled feelings of emasculation.

Men pushed back against what they considered the emasculation of culture engendered by feminist demands. They sought to reclaim what they saw as lost manhood. Some attended meetings open only to men during which they edified mythical warriors as examples of real men (Faludi, 1991, p. 316). For example, speaker Robert Bly lamented the supposedly weak men he felt served as role models for men (as cited in Faludi, 1991, p. 317). Bly compared the

supposedly weak models of masculinity to those present in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, suggesting men had moved away from role models he considered more positive (as cited in Faludi, 1991, p. 317). Books and magazine articles instructed men to say no to women's influence and act the way they were supposed to: "The pieces rouse men to assert themselves, to acknowledge that they're tired of pretending, tired of being asked to change, to become more 'thoughtful,' more 'relationship-oriented.' They encourage men to stick their heads (either one) out the window and shout to women that they're mad as hell and aren't going to take it anymore" (Bordo, 1999, p. 233).

Despite such calls to action that seem to encourage all men to assert themselves, the masculinity crisis discourse appeals mainly to white men. When discussing the crisis discourse, scholars usually locate the crisis within white culture. Arthur (2004), among others, described the crisis as a backlash against social and political changes that led to perceived declines in white male privilege. Ashcraft and Flores (2000) addressed the masculinity crisis as experienced by corporate professionals, which they referred to as "white/collar" masculinity in order to emphasize the predominantly white nature of the subjects portrayed in relevant media texts. The films they analyzed, *In the Company of Men* and *Fight Club*, portrayed dominant, white male characters mentoring other men in order to help them recuperate their masculinity. In a striking display of the racial limitation of the crisis discourse, the mentors were predominantly white men, with the rare nonwhite pupils getting little attention from the white leaders in both films (Ashcraft & Flores, 2000). The roots of the masculinity crisis, along with media representations, indicate this is a predominantly white discourse.

Messages promoting traditional conceptions of masculinity over the supposed feminization of men continued into the 21st century. The current manifestation of a masculinity

crisis is found in various media messages portraying men standing up to encroaching femininity or holding on to real masculinity in the face of a feminized culture. Whole radio and television stations, like Canada's MOJO radio and television's Spike TV, have been created as spaces dedicated solely to men (Darnell & Wilson, 2006). Comedy Central's *The Man Show* thumbed its nose to feminism and feminized culture with the satire of independent women and the adoration of buxom cheerleaders who silently supported the male hosts of the show (Palmer-Mehta, 2009). Even food advertisements drew from men's feelings of crisis: a fast food commercial depicted men eating burgers to defy small meal portions and other feminine trappings supposedly forced on them by women (Buerkle, 2009). Today's masculinity crisis is not new. Examining masculinity crises of the past reveals similar trends to the current situation.

Past Crises

The contemporary masculinity crisis is not without precedent. Western society experienced masculinity crises in France and England, spanning the 17th and 18th centuries, and again in Europe and America, during the 19th and 20th centuries. While these crises differed in scope, both periods presented challenges to male authority, which aroused fears of feminized men. These previous occurrences of perceived crisis among men underscore the impact changing gender roles can have on men.

Upper class French women in the 1600s questioned the status quo of gender relations, setting the first masculinity crisis in motion (Badinter, 1995, p. 10). These early feminists demanded greater freedoms in the areas of education and marriage. They were perhaps the most vocal in their opposition to arranged marriage. French feminists of the day advocated marriage based on love or preference, not arranged pairings. This vision of a romantic relationship between husbands and wives emphasized the husband's love for his wife. French feminists of the

time sought a “limitless submission which bordered on masochism” (Badinter, 1995, p. 11). This conception of marital relations was meant to reverse gender power relations that saw a domineering masculinity dictate terms in relationships (Badinter, 1995, p. 11).

A small group of men complied with the feminist proposal, adopting “a feminine and refined style”: “long wigs, extravagant feathers, band collars, chin tufts, perfume, rouge” (Badinter, 1995, p. 11). This style caught on with men who wanted to appear “distinguished” (Badinter, 1995, p. 11). Upper class men pursued this effeminate style instead of partaking in traditionally masculine activities like hunting. These men also exhibited politeness and overall gentle behavior, deviating from the traditional model of a more controlling masculinity. This model of upper class masculinity gained influence through the 18th century, which was suggested by the negative reactions it generated. Such reactions also occurred in England, another site of masculine crisis during this period. When, in addition to marital and sexual equality, English women expressed desires for gentler, feminine men, English men considered these desires to be the impact of French influence (Badinter, 1995, p. 12). The effeminate man in England was depicted as a vain pervert, while traditional masculinity was considered patriotic due to the perceived influence of France on the development of feminized men. This period of feminism ended near the end of the 18th century, coinciding with western society’s renewed emphasis on gender difference (Badinter, 1995, p. 13). Men would again experience crisis nearly a century later.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, rapid industrialization led to another masculinity crisis in Europe and the United States. Kimmel (2006) described the crisis in the U.S. as the decline of the self-employed man, caused by the emergence of large scale industry (p. 57). As a result of an increase in large businesses, the number of farmers, independent craftsmen,

and other self-employed men declined (Kimmel, 2006, P. 57). The situation was the same in Europe. More men performed relatively simple tasks alongside unskilled workers under the supervision of managers (Badinter, 1995, p. 14). Management exercised tight control and, for many men, work no longer required what were considered manly traits: “strength, initiative, and imagination were no longer necessary for earning their living” (Badinter, 1995, p. 15).

Employment in large scale industry disheartened men because freedom and control over one’s enterprises were important aspects of manhood (Kimmel, 2006, p. 58). Working for wages felt like dependence, not taking control of one’s livelihood: the workplace was no longer a proving ground for manhood.

Not only had the nature of work itself changed to the point that it no longer satisfied many men’s needs to assert masculinity, women contributed to men’s anxiety by demanding a place in the public sphere. In Europe and America, women established a presence outside the home by pursuing higher education and entering the workforce (Badinter, 1995, pp. 13, 18). Newly empowered women threatened men’s identities, causing some men to wonder if they would be left to carry out what they considered feminine tasks, such as parenting, which women supposedly abandoned (Badinter, 1995, p. 14). The increased presence of women outside the home led to a feeling that society had become feminized and, in turn, so had men (Badinter, 1995, p. 16). Fears over the perceived feminization of culture engendered a backlash against women’s advancement. The main resistance to women’s progress was expressed as a concern for the family. Women who sought a life outside the home were accused of endangering the family unit by abandoning child rearing duties and increasing divorce rates (Faludi, 1991, p. 64). Men fought what they considered the feminization of culture by protesting women’s emergence from the home. Excluding women from the public sphere was not enough to quell concerns over a

feminized culture. Men also had to find ways to demonstrate their masculinity outside of the workplace.

Men tried to claim masculinity through participation in sports, hunting, or other traditionally masculine activities (Kimmel, 2006, p.92). One masculine character-building pastime of the era was dude ranch camping. In America what was once the western frontier had been repurposed as “a gigantic theme park, safely unthreatening, whose natural beauty was protected as in an art museum” (Kimmel, 2006, p. 92). These ranches served as a space where men escaped the city and its feminizing workplace and rediscovered masculinity in the outdoors (Kimmel, 2006, p. 92). Despite the sporting activities available for proving one’s masculinity, Badinter (1995) argued World War I provided men with the best chance to prove their manhood, ending this period of masculine crisis (p. 15).

These earlier periods of masculine crisis, while differing in size and scope, demonstrated the effects encroaching femininity, or perceptions thereof, can have on masculine identity. In both cases, the feminine threatened male superiority. Feminist reforms in 17th century France resulted in a class of men who defied traditional notions of masculinity in order to meet women’s demands. Men encountered a similar trend in response to the feminists during the latter decades of the 20th century (Robinson, 2001). In addition, the growth of industry at the end of the 19th century changed many from heroic producers to dependent consumers, a supposedly feminine position (Brod, 1995). In both cases men resisted what they considered the pernicious effects of cultural feminization by emphasizing traditional masculine norms. I now turn to past studies of masculinity in media that often deal with the maintenance of normative masculinity.

Past Representation Studies

Media representations of masculinity contribute to traditional masculinity's strong cultural position. This section provides an overview of previous scholarship focusing on representations of masculinity. The representations discussed span different media channels such as radio, film, and television. The following studies focus on three distinct issues regarding representations of masculinity. The first trend I discuss is the privileging of the masculine in media texts, particularly aspects of hegemonic masculinity. The second trend involves that of media texts that mock masculinity and the subversive possibilities such incidences of mocking do or do not present. The third trend is that of media texts addressing the contemporary masculinity crisis.

Privileging Masculinity

Representation studies demonstrate traditional conceptions of masculinity are often privileged in media. This has been accomplished through positive treatments of real and fictional characters that embody characteristics of normative masculinity. In addition, research shows traditional masculinity can be rearticulated through unexpected avenues like traditionally marginalized men. Finally, media texts dealing with problems arguably linked to traditional masculinity do not implicate masculine gender norms as problematic.

Some previous scholarship focuses on the privileging of the masculine in media texts, particularly representations of hegemonic masculinity. Hatfield (2010) described hegemonic masculinity as an ideal vision of masculinity that offers its adherents more social power than other men. Hegemonic masculinity derives its power from the domination of women and other men, namely men who do not meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity (Hatfield, 2010). This vision of masculinity has been represented in media as desirable and deserving of reward.

Trujillo (1991) analyzed representations of professional baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan in sports reporting as the reproduction of hegemonic masculine values. Sports reporters heralded Ryan as a symbol of male physical strength. In addition, reporters remarked at Ryan's career achievements and work ethic, portraying him as a patriarchal figure who stood above his wife and teammates. Reporters also invoked notions of frontier manhood in their descriptions of Ryan's Texas heritage and ranching experience. In addition, reporters celebrated his whiteness and his heterosexuality. Trujillo felt sports contributed to the reproduction and reinforcement of gender norms, particularly hegemonic masculinity. Reporters representing Nolan Ryan as a model of desirable, hegemonic masculinity contributed to the maintenance of the ideal. The maintenance of ideal masculinity is evidenced by subsequent media representations.

Another example of the privileging of hegemonic masculinity in media is Hatfield's (2010) analysis of the popular situation comedy *Two and a Half Men*. In the show, two brothers, Charlie and Alan, share a home. Charlie and Alan embody different conceptions of masculinity, driving the narrative of the show in which Charlie is usually rewarded while Alan is punished (Hatfield, 2010). Charlie embodies hegemonic masculinity through his high income, ownership of the home the brothers live in, and his ability to attract women. Alan performs a less powerful masculinity. He is subordinated to Charlie by his financial dependence. In addition, Alan has little success maintaining relationships with women. His sexuality is frequently questioned on the show. As the events of the show unfold, Charlie's actions consistently lead to positive outcomes while Alan is generally punished, even facing repercussions for his brother's womanizing (Hatfield, 2010). Charlie's hegemonic masculinity is also rewarded on the show when Alan's son frequently asks Charlie for advice, advice that is usually helpful. Hatfield argued the trend of positive outcomes for Charlie and negative outcomes for Alan present

hegemonic masculinity as a desirable state of being and a standard to which viewers should aspire. *Two and a Half Men* reiterates the social power ascribed to hegemonic masculinity while presenting “effeminate masculinity” as a less-than-legitimate conception of masculinity (Hatfield, 2010, p. 546). Hegemonic masculinity is an ideal arguably few men are able to meet. However this ideal is maintained by the “fantasy figures” that do meet the criteria (Hatfield, 2010, p. 528). Hatfield felt positive portrayals of hegemonic masculinity coupled with negative pop culture representations of alternative forms of masculinity had the potential to slow progress toward more egalitarian conceptions of gender.

Media can even reiterate traditional masculinity while communicating messages of equality. Barounis (2009) discussed media representations that suggested slow progress toward egalitarian conceptions of gender. Barounis analyzed the films *Murderball* and *Brokeback Mountain*, arguing both films used traditional forms of masculinity to legitimize marginalized people, namely the disabled and homosexuals. First, *Murderball*, a documentary film that follows quadriplegic rugby players in their quest for sports glory, deployed notions of violent, powerful masculinity to portray empowered disabled men. The subjects of the film rejected traditional notions of the disabled as figures deserving of pity, performing an athletic, physically-powerful masculinity that emphasizes heterosexuality:

The documentary eschews sentimentality in favor of a more hard-edged realism that foregrounds its subjects as ordinary specimens of a male sports world. When they’re not giving (or getting) a beating on the court, they’re drinking and having sex with women, or bragging about drinking and having sex with women. (Barounis, 2009, p. 56)

Performances of hegemonic masculinity made this radical representation of disabled men possible. The subjects of *Murderball* enact a radical performance of disability through

conventional conceptions of masculinity. Barounis also analyzed the film *Brokeback Mountain*, arguing it too used conventional ideas of masculinity to present an alternative vision of a marginalized group. The film portrayed homosexuality as a way for the protagonists, Jack and Ennis, to remain able-bodied, strong men. For example, Ennis's decision to share a tent with Jack on a cold night, in the interest of self-preservation, led to the pair's first sexual experience. The film contrasted the wilderness in which the two maintained a homosexual relationship with the domestic setting, where they had wives and children. The heterosexual, domestic setting threatened their able bodies with threats like the military draft, proximity to sick children, and work-related injuries. *Brokeback Mountain* used conventions of traditional masculinity to portray homosexual men in a way different from stereotypical visions of physically-weak and effeminate gay men. Barounis argued that while there are positive aspects to both films, mainly the unconventional portrayals of the disabled and homosexuals, the films recycled restrictive gender norms in order to do so. The use of restrictive gender norms to articulate alternative identities affects the subversive quality of any performance through exclusion. For example, *Murderball's* portrayal of tough, active disabled men came at the expense of able-bodied women and disabled women. Able-bodied women played a minor part in the film. Their presence seemed to serve the purpose of affirming the central characters' heterosexuality. Disabled women were underrepresented in the film. As for *Brokeback Mountain*, Barounis argued the alternative portrayal of gay men as able-bodied tough guys came at the expense of heterosexual women, who were associated with weakness. As mentioned earlier, hegemonic masculinity's power is grounded partially in the subordination of women and other men. The subordination or lack of representation of alternative masculinities and women suggest a persistent privileging of hegemonic masculinity, even though the texts commit transgressions against conventions of

sexuality and physical ability. Such contradictions in texts suggest the need to carefully read what may appear to be subversive or progressive representations as some restrictive norms may remain intact.

Other representations appear to amend traditional masculinity while actually changing little. Mazzarella (2008) identified a potentially confusing text in the reality television series *American Chopper*, a show focusing on a family of motorcycle builders. While the show depicts men displaying emotion, a quality typically associated with femininity, Mazzarella argued the program advanced only a slightly-modified hegemonic masculinity. The modified form of normative masculinity allowed men to show emotion in order to cast them as sympathetic characters and conceal ideologies of gender dominance. While *American Chopper* portrayed men in touch with their emotions, the program constructs the workplace as a site for men only. Women are largely absent from the program. Finally, the program portrays the subordination of men who embody personality characteristics that are not considered traditionally masculine, such as an interest in art. Mazzarella argued *American Chopper* contained superficial modifications to hegemonic masculinity that held the potential to blind viewers to persistent power relations and gender inequality present on the show.

Hegemonic masculinity was also left relatively unscathed by Jim Rome's sports-talk radio show. Nylund (2010) critiqued the show as a site of reinforcement for values of hegemonic masculinity. The show communicated hegemonic masculinity through an aggressive tone that included some homophobic talk. However, in response to overt homophobia from individual callers speaking on the show, Rome expressed anti-homophobic sentiments. Unfortunately Rome stopped short of criticizing larger power structures that encouraged homophobia and strict gender roles, instead treating homophobia as though it were only located within individual bigots, not

symptomatic of a sports culture that promoted strict gender roles. Thus, hegemonic masculinity went largely unquestioned.

Henson and Parameswaran's (2008) critical reading of the television talk show *Dr. Phil* revealed another example of persisting hegemonic masculinity. While the show depicts a man performing emotional-care work, Dr. Phillip McGraw reshapes this traditionally "feminine" domain in the style of hegemonic masculinity:

On the surface, McGraw's talk show performances appear to offer a new version of masculinity that is attentive to the emotional needs of women and children, but our analysis reveals that the show's consistent promotion of Dr. Phil as a successful man, virtuous gentleman, and a redeemer of delinquent men only inflates the currency of a narrow model of traditional White masculinity. (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008, p. 288)

Dr. Phil performs hegemonic masculinity, maintaining a strong, authoritative position while providing task-oriented, tough-minded counseling. Dr. Phil promotes his brand of therapy as an alternative to what he considers soft or pitying self-help. The positioning of Dr. Phil as a voice of strength in a world of supposedly coddling, soft care providers can be read as a symbolic promotion of hegemonic masculinity. Critics feel this brand of sensationalized therapy represents a bastardized version of counseling that overlooks patients' needs and forgoes professional standards (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008). The authors emphasized the importance of careful readings of texts in order to find veiled hegemonic masculinity: "the ever-changing and insidious nature of hegemonic masculinity requires the ongoing attention of scholars if we want to better understand its different incarnations" (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008, p. 306). Henson and Parameswaran's description of masculine ideals as "insidious" is fitting as studies demonstrate the reproduction of masculinity's privilege in media.

Another way media texts can contribute to the privileging of masculinity is by diverting criticism of conventional masculinity using different strategies. For example, Braithwaite (2011) analyzed detective novels with female protagonists, aimed at female readers. Recurring themes of men committing violence are present in these texts. However, the novels stop short of critiquing masculinity and masculine values. The male aggressors within these texts are generally victims of past abuse, grounding their violent behavior in something other than problematic aspects of masculinity (Braithwaite, 2011). Consalvo (2003) found a similar overlooking of masculinity as potentially problematic. The author analyzed news coverage of the Columbine High School shooting. News reports characterized the perpetrators as deviant and their actions as not necessarily representative of any larger cultural issues, such as masculinity and its construction in schools. Consalvo added that news media sought other potential explanations for the violence at Columbine, like the influence of video games and music. The result was that traditional concepts and practices of masculinity were excused from having any connection to the violence at Columbine High. Atkinson and Calafell (2009) discussed yet another way hegemonic masculinity can evade culpability for men's harmful actions. The authors argued hegemonic masculinity makes use of a "gray area" that creates confusion between victims and perpetrators and allows men to escape blame for their actions (Atkinson & Calafell, 2009, p. 3). Atkinson and Calafell applied the concept of the gray area to *Star Wars* films, focusing on the character Anakin Skywalker. They argued the character benefitted from the gray area and avoided blame for his violent and immoral actions. Skywalker was depicted as lacking autonomy when committing immoral and violent acts while under the influence of nefarious characters. The authors concluded with brief descriptions of other films in which male protagonists committed violent acts due to circumstances beyond their control. Viewers could

remain sympathetic to such characters due to the gray area, which excused their actions.

Atkinson and Calafell felt the gray area and representations of men avoiding responsibility for immoral acts had the potential to promote “permissiveness” of such acts by men, further cementing male privilege and dominance (p. 17).

Masculine hegemony often benefits from media representations of masculinity. Positive portrayals of manly figures reinforce traditional or hegemonic masculinity as something men should strive toward. Seemingly progressive portrayals of men, such as disabled men or men who perform emotional care work, can still appeal to normative notions of masculinity. Finally, media dealing with social problems to which traditional masculinity contributes has failed to interrogate male gender norms as problematic. These representations contribute to traditional masculinity’s dominant position.

Mocking Masculinity

In contrast to representations that overtly value traditional or hegemonic masculinity, some media texts deliver comedic representations of manhood with varying effects. Media can use comedy to subvert traditional masculinity. On the other hand, comedic representations can rearticulate normative notions of gender under the apparently harmless guise of comedy.

Palmer-Mehta (2006) focused on the animated comedy *King of the Hill* as a site of masculine parody. Palmer-Mehta focused on the relationship between the character Hank and his son Bobby. Hank represented traditional masculinity while Bobby performed a conception of masculinity that generally fell short of his father’s expectations. As Hank pressured his son to embody a more normative concept of masculinity, Bobby frequently questioned the conventions through innocent misunderstandings. While Palmer-Mehta left open the possibility that Bobby’s inability to meet masculine norms could serve to denigrate nonnormative masculinity, the author

claimed Bobby acted as a “wise fool” who illuminated arbitrary gender norms with innocent questions about taken-for-granted gender rules (p. 189). For example, when Hank encouraged Bobby to “give 110 percent” while playing baseball, saying he would win if he did so, Bobby asked what would happen if his opponents exerted the same effort. His questioning undermined the traditional expectation that men achieve success, pointing out the fact that someone has to come up short. While this example illustrates the possibility for subversive mockery of dominant masculinity, other studies of mocked masculinity in media are less positive regarding the true nature of the parodies.

While *King of the Hill* used comedy to question normative masculinity, other comedic representations of masculinity can reiterate gender norms. Hanke (1998) analyzed popular 1990s television comedies *Home Improvement* and *Coach*. The author found these shows depicted traditional masculinity using bumbling, laughable characters. While these depictions can be considered parodies of traditional, hegemonic masculinity, Hanke concluded the shows constituted “light parody” with little subversive potential (p. 89). Instead, principles of hegemonic masculinity are propagated through these texts, such as traditionally male interests or humor at the expense of women and men who are considered less masculine. Hanke argued these programs disguised normative statements on gender with humor. Messner and Montez de Oca (2010) suggested a similar motive for humorous representations of masculinity. The authors critiqued alcohol advertisements that depicted men as “losers” (Messner & Montez de Oca, 2010, p. 466). The men in these ads appeared outside of the workplace, engaged in sexual “voyeurism,” and scorned relationships with women who did not meet ideal standards of beauty (Messner & Montez de Oca, 2010, p. 466). While the “loser” image of men does not reflect hegemonic masculinity, the ads did contain misogynist themes, which the authors argued were

presented under the pretense of humor. Scholars have noted humorous representations of masculinity and the subversive potential, or lack thereof, of such representations.

Scholars have noted humorous representations of masculinity and the subversive potential, or lack thereof, of such representations. Some comedic characters can be used to question hegemony. On the other hand, comedies can reiterate traditional masculinity's privileged social position through seemingly harmless humor. The ability to reiterate strict gender roles through humorous media, which may on the surface seem innocuous, highlights another way traditional masculinity can maintain hegemony through media.

Representations of Crisis

The final trend in representation studies I discuss is that of media texts directly addressing the masculinity crisis. Studies show the crisis discourse can manifest itself in media in different ways. Representations portray men reasserting traditional masculinity in different ways.

Arthur (2004) identified the feature film *American Beauty* as a covert performance of the masculinity crisis. Arthur argued the film advanced a regressive agenda relating to gender while masquerading as a liberal project that encouraged viewers to uncover beauty in unexpected places. Protagonist Lester Burnham's apparent mission to find joy in a life can be read as a restoration of white male privilege. The film revolves around Burnham's dissatisfaction with his suburban, middle class life. His troubles stem from an unsatisfying work environment and what he considers a controlling wife. Burnham makes bold decisions in order to change his life, like quitting his job, using recreational drugs, and trading his sensible sedan for a conspicuous muscle car. He also begins asserting his will in the home. His struggles are removed from a larger political context and are framed within his own troubled household. Burnham's efforts to

transform his unsatisfying existence are thus presented as a personal mission instead of a regressive quest for male domination (Arthur, 2004). He engages in conspicuous consumption to express his masculinity, displays aggression, and pursues sexual intercourse with a teenage girl. However, the film manages to cast Burnham as a sympathetic figure because “it softens the hard edges of anachronistic masculinity to make them appealing within a liberal context of self-discovery and emotional honesty” (Arthur, 2004, p. 141).

Other media texts address the masculinity crisis more plainly. Ashcraft and Flores (2003) analyzed representations of men negotiating the masculinity crisis in the films *In the Company of Men* and *Fight Club*. The authors focused on these films as accounts of men from white collar jobs attempting to resolve the perceived crisis. Ashcraft and Flores argued the film characters’ positions in white collar corporate culture positioned them to react to the masculinity crisis in a way different from working class men. *In the Company of Men* follows two white collar businessmen who feel dominated by women in the workplace. The authors explained white collar men had to perform a balancing act between two opposite poles, the primitive and the civilized, or “hard and soft” in order to maintain their dominance (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003, p. 6). The primitive side of white collar masculinity involves associations with physical strength and power, while the civilized side connotes intelligence and bodily control presumed absent from the primitive. White collar men must maintain a position of balance between the two poles. To be too primitive is to be unintelligent and immature. To be too civilized is to be feminine and soft. This balancing results in “chronic anxiety” for white collar men, argued Ashcraft and Flores (p. 6). *In the Company of Men* frames the professional world as a sort of wilderness in which men battle for supremacy. The balanced white collar masculinity in this film involves a civilized control over one’s body and emotions while retaining a primitive ruthlessness that enables a man

to scheme his way up the corporate ladder. In contrast, *Fight Club* framed the professional setting as a feminizing force that had to be destroyed. *Fight Club* also included a white collar balancing act. This film's protagonist balanced the primitive obsession with physicality and violence with civilized moral codes and alliances. Ashcraft and Flores concluded the analysis by suggesting the results demonstrated normative masculinity as an adaptable construct with staying power.

Rogers (2008) analyzed more recent representations in advertisements linking diet and masculinity. The advertisements presented the masculinity of the subjects as precarious or in doubt, signifying the masculinity crisis. The men in two of the ads resorted to beef consumption as an act that recuperated their masculinity while they simultaneously rejected all that was feminine. In another ad a male protagonist is caught buying vegetables and tofu at the grocery store, embarrassed by a disapproving look from another male customer who bought beef. The protagonist, embarrassed by the disapproving gaze of his fellow man, reasserted his own masculinity by buying a Hummer sport utility vehicle. Although the man did not alter his diet, his food choice was still framed as important to his masculinity. Buerkle (2009) made similar observations regarding fast food hamburger advertising. Men in a hamburger commercial were shown defiantly rejecting supposedly feminine foods and perceived trappings of domesticity, like minivans, in favor of a large hamburger and the company of other, like-minded men. Buerkle demonstrated the consumption of beef as a backlash against femininity. These depictions of men celebrate traditional or hegemonic masculinity and contribute to the continued hegemony of normative conceptions of masculinity.

The contemporary masculinity crisis discourse manifests itself in media in different ways, suggesting men can reiterate their masculinity in different ways also. Despite differences in

representations, these examples indicate a sustained idea that traditional masculinity is in peril. These depictions of men celebrate traditional or hegemonic masculinity and contribute to the continued hegemony of normative conceptions of masculinity.

Previous studies of media representations of masculinity mainly frame masculinity as a privileged category of identity that shows no signs of going out of style with producers of various media. Scholars demonstrated overt privileging of traditional notions of masculinity in media through representations that reward and celebrate masculinity, coupled with other representations that absolve masculine power structures of guilt in contributing to social problems. Other representations poke fun at hegemonic and traditional masculinity, arguably providing a disguise for misogyny and pro-masculine expression in addition to subversive performances. Finally, representations of masculinity also address the perceived masculinity crisis and offer expressions of masculinity's triumph over the feminine. These studies demonstrate the presence of the crisis discourse and rejections of femininity in media. The text I analyze for this project is another representation that appeals to the masculinity crisis discourse.

Introducing *Bronson*

In this section I explain my research plan, particularly the issues I am interested in and the text I chose for analysis. I will analyze the 2008 film *Bronson*, a movie about the well-known British prisoner Charles Bronson. First I explain why I think the film is a significant representation of masculinity. I then conclude this section with an explanation of the cross-cultural nature of the masculinity crisis and its applicability to a British film.

I chose *Bronson* as my text of study because the film invokes the masculinity crisis in a way that values violent reactions to perceived threats to traditional masculinity. The film symbolically invokes the masculinity crisis by juxtaposing the imprisoned Bronson with

effeminate authority figures. With portrayals of cruel treatment from authority figures and life in a harsh environment, the film excuses Bronson's violent behaviors and subordination of other men. In addition, it is important to note that *Bronson* is not simply a retelling of true events. Not only does the design of the film involve creative work, the events of the film are not completely faithful to Charles Bronson's own account of his life behind bars (Bronson, 2008). The fact that the film deviates from the real life account of Bronson's experiences, or at least the accounts Bronson published, supports the notion that the film communicates specific values relating to gender. These values are relevant across national borders.

Most of the literature I have cited so far comes from the United States. However, the masculinity crisis discourse is present in England as well. Ross (2010) acknowledges the masculinity crisis within British culture (p. 14). As an example, the male protagonists of the British film *The Full Monty* deal with unemployment and the role uncertainty often identified with the masculinity crisis discourse (Farrell, 2003). Benwell (2004) identified the "U.K. men's lifestyle magazine" as a site of popular media rejection of perceived effeminacy, another trend indicative of the masculinity crisis discourse. The presence of a perceived masculinity crisis in Britain suggests that *Bronson* is not culturally external to the discourse. Thus I argue the treatment of masculinity in *Bronson* is indicative of the crisis discourse.

I analyze *Bronson* as a text that communicates a restrictive conception of masculinity within a context that justifies its violent nature. This film contains themes of resistance to effeminacy, which indicates *Bronson's* place within the masculinity crisis discourse. This project contributes to the body of knowledge on representations of masculinity by demonstrating the media's ability to cast criminal violence as an acceptable expression of masculinity.

A Tight Fit: The Disadvantages of Narrow Conceptions of Masculinity

As with the promotion of violence as an acceptable expression of masculinity, the promotion of narrow conceptions of masculinity is also problematic. In this section I address the potential drawbacks of the crisis discourse's propagation of masculine ideals that are restrictive and difficult to fulfill. The disadvantages of narrow gender roles are well illustrated by Butler's (1990) notion of gender as an external performance and Badinter's (1995) discussion of the pitfalls of hyper masculinity.

Butler (1990) questioned traditional binary gender categories as restrictive and exclusionary. She argued the normative gender categories, when enforced on bodies, "carves up genders into masculine and feminine" (p. 90). Her rich description of the way normative genders act on bodies suggests harm or discomfort. Butler argued gender was not a natural or essential quality of bodies; rather it was a performance that one achieved through a culturally-learned set of behaviors. According to Butler, gender was not to be found within the body but within one's behavior. With the external or arguably arbitrary nature of gender in mind, it is easy to see narrow conceptions of gender as out of reach for many. If such unattainable ideals are promoted as an essential identity men must strive for, the potential for negative consequences is clear.

Just as Butler (1990) conceived of gender as a set of behaviors, Badinter (1995) discussed hyper masculinity as an extreme enactment of a normative masculine identity. Men who fear effeminacy and are insecure in their masculine identities may resort to radical differentiation strategies between genders, or hyper masculinity. Badinter explained the acquisition of a secure masculine identity was a lifelong struggle for some (p. 129). In order to differentiate themselves from women and obtain a feeling of security in regards to masculinity, some men eschew all feminine traits and practices in the pursuit of elevated levels of masculinity, or hyper masculinity

(Badinter, 1995, p. 129). Hyper masculinity involves eschewing any characteristic or behavior that could be considered feminine, such as showing emotion. Hyper masculinity also includes asserting one's superiority over other men, exhibiting total self-reliance, and displaying superior strength (Badinter, 1995, p. 130).

This image of supreme masculinity is difficult to live up to. The promotion of this ideal has the potential to make men feel insecure when they fail to meet the standards: "...they find themselves prisoners...of an obsessional and compulsive masculinity that never leaves them in peace" (Badinter, 1995, p. 133). The pursuit of elevated levels of masculinity can be dangerous to men's health. Proving one's toughness can involve risky behaviors like participation in dangerous sports, general risk-taking, or downplaying the importance of proper health care (White & Young, 1999). Referencing the dangers of hyper masculinity, Badinter (1995) argued masculinity would have less negative impact on men's health when it ceased to be defined in "opposition to femininity" (p. 142).

The contemporary masculinity crisis discourse and many media representations of masculinity promote restrictive notions of gender over acceptance of changing gender norms. This practice is problematic because it advances a model of masculinity that excludes many and poses potential danger. Privileging narrow conceptions of masculinity is an arguably unhealthy cultural practice, one that has the potential to at least cause psychological or emotional pain for men who cannot meet the masculine ideal. On the other end of the spectrum, men who expend great effort to achieve, display, and maintain a normative masculine identity risk venturing into the territory of hyper masculinity, where men can put themselves or those around them at risk. It is important to recognize Butler's (1990) assertion that gender is not a natural quality of bodies. Recognizing there is no natural male essence to aspire to may alleviate some men's feelings of

inadequacy in the face of narrow conceptions of masculinity. Widespread acceptance of the constructed nature of gender might end the perceived crisis outright.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

In this chapter I describe the theory I use to analyze *Bronson*: Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT). I argue the theory is a good fit for this project because it is well suited to answer the research questions. For my first research question I ask how does *Bronson* appeal to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse? SCT presents an effective approach to this question because it allows the researcher to analyze a text for the ways it makes sense of an event or issue. Thus the theory allows me to explain how the film makes sense of the story of Charles Bronson in a way that appeals to the masculinity crisis discourse. The second question I ask is how does *Bronson* promote violent masculinity and rejections of femininity? As I explain later in this chapter, analysis using SCT focuses on the characters, settings, and actions present in media texts. I can determine the ways the film promotes violent masculinity over femininity by analyzing the ways different characters are represented and what actions they take. I begin with a description of the theory, including a brief description of the theory's history and development. Then I discuss the core assumptions of the theory, common terminology, criticism of the theory, and past studies using the theory. I end by explaining how I will use Symbolic Convergence Theory.

Symbolic Convergence Theory

SCT focuses on the establishment of group consciousness through the communication of creative interpretations of reality, or what SCT scholars refer to as fantasies (Bormann, 1985, p. 130). The main argument that SCT makes is that groups arrive at a common consciousness through the sharing of fantasies that catch on with group members (Bormann, 1985). In this

section I describe SCT, provide a description of the theory, and provide some background on its development.

SCT has its origins in small group communication research. Bormann (1972) credited Robert Bales with discovering the sharing of fantasies in groups. While developing content analysis categories for small group communication research, Bales (1970) established one category called “dramatizes” (p. 105). Bales named this category for communication that presented “potential emotional symbols” to listeners (p. 105). Communication that fell under this distinction contained some dramatization, which may be a story or a simple recounting of facts. These messages carried additional meanings below the surface. Bales contended that while most people tend to interpret or “color emotionally” the things they talk about, stories or accounts that are brought up in a group setting are more likely to be emotionally charged or have deeper, subsurface meanings (p. 105, 106). According to Bales an account given during group interaction was likely brought up because it was appropriate for the situation. It may contain fitting symbols for emotions group members are feeling. Bormann (1972) gave an example of such an account that was relevant to a group’s situation. He described a scene in which students apparently needed motivation to complete their course work. In this scenario one group member shared accounts of students who took the same course in the past and benefitted from the difficult work. These accounts were compelling because they were relevant to the group’s situation. Bales termed such communication “fantasy” and outlined a method for recording fantasies present in group communication: fantasy theme analysis (p. 105).

Bormann (1972) expanded upon Bales’s (1970) work, arguing the dramatization or fantasizing that occurs in small, interpersonal groups also occurred in mass communication: “Group fantasizing correlates with individual fantasizing and extrapolates to speaker-audience

fantasizing and to the dream merchants of the mass media” (p. 396). Bormann and colleagues adopted fantasy theme analysis for their own work (Bormann et al., 2001, p. 276). As communication scholars completed more studies, they noticed trends among their findings that demonstrated dramatization as part of the nature of human communication. This discovery led researchers to develop SCT as a general theory of communication (Cragan & Shields, 1995, p. 31).

The central proposition of SCT is that group members share fantasies that catch on and lead to a shared consciousness (Bormann et al., 2001). Within the framework of SCT, fantasies are not simply make-believe, they are dramatic accounts, separated from the group’s immediate situation, that depict characters taking action or acting out scenarios (Bormann, 1972). The content of the shared fantasies is usually relevant to the group’s situation or appeals to certain feelings felt within the group (Bormann, 1972). Fantasies can involve fictitious actors and events, real accounts of group members’ past experiences, or reports of events recorded in history or the news (Bormann, 1985).

Whichever form fantasies take, they must be relevant to issues or challenges facing a group. Fantasies must fulfill “a group psychological or rhetorical need” (Bormann, 1985, p. 130). This emphasis on relevance is in line with Bales’s (1970) notions of group fantasizing. Bales argued fantasies brought up in a group are likely shared because they represent the group’s situation or relate to it in some way (p. 105, 106). Thus fantasies are symbolic: they deal with situations apart from the immediate context of the group that are representative of the group’s situation. Relevance is what allows fantasies to catch on, or the symbols to converge, thus explaining the phrase “symbolic convergence.”

To illustrate the sharing of symbolic fantasy, Bormann (1972) provided the example of a group of students preparing for a difficult class (pp. 397, 398). To spur the group to action a member of the group could address the issue directly by stating everyone wanted to perform well in the class and thus all group members should study diligently. On the other hand, one group member could share an account of an acquaintance's previous experiences in the class, recounting the student's hard work and resulting payoff. The latter method represents a fantasy because it involves an account separated from the immediate group context that is still relevant to the group's current situation. Fantasies that catch on become common themes, or fantasy themes (Bormann et al., 2001, p. 282).

Fantasy themes can catch on within the group and come together to constitute a shared consciousness, or rhetorical vision (Bormann et al., 2001). Rhetorical visions are the product of elements from fantasy themes shared by a group being assembled into a "meaningful whole" (Bormann, 1985, p. 133). A rhetorical vision is the result of shared fantasy themes that provide a broad perspective for the group that subscribes to it (Bormann et al., 2001). The basic proposition of SCT is that groups share fantasies that make up a common consciousness. To understand SCT more thoroughly, there are some core assumptions of SCT one must be familiar with.

Core Assumptions of SCT

There are several key epistemological assumptions of SCT. These assumptions guide the researcher by describing the type of meaning groups make through communication, providing justification for studying group dramatizations or fantasies, setting the scope of SCT in terms of types of communication covered by the theory, and establishing that different groups can come to different views of the same issue. The first assumption is that people construct subjective,

symbolic interpretations of reality through group communication. The second assumption is that meanings and motives can be found in messages. The third assumption is that fantasies can spread through different levels of communication, from interpersonal talk to mass media messages. The final assumption is that different groups can construct different rhetorical visions of the same phenomenon.

To the first of these assumptions, one must know what fantasy is in this framework. SCT focuses on the sharing of fantasies that represent subjective, symbolic views of reality. Fantasy can be considered a “creative” or “imaginative” interpretation of real life (Bormann, 1985, p. 130). Shields and Preston (1986) explained people make their own interpretations of reality through communication:

Through conversations, speeches, and messages, people build a shared view of reality that, while not necessarily objective, is created symbolically. People often initiate, embellish, and evolve an explanation of events that can catch fire and chain-out through a collectivity of people. (pp. 102-103)

Through the lens of SCT, fantasy is not simply make-believe. Fantasy involves the subjective meanings people assign to real life, meanings that are “not necessarily objective.” Another key point from the above passage is fantasies start as “explanations” which people “embellish” and “evolve” through communication. This implies communicators actively shape their understanding of reality, elaborating and developing their views of a real life happening or thing. People do not simply operate on basic facts; they assign their own meanings to real life phenomena. Bales (1970) asserted that people “color” communication with their emotions or feelings: “We all tend to perceive selectively and to color emotionally most of the things we talk

about” (p. 105). These messages that are imbued with subjective notions relate to the group’s real world situation symbolically.

Cragan and Shields (1995) stated people construct “symbolic reality” through communication (p. 32). Cragan and Shields framed symbolic reality as a subjective view differentiated from objective facts, or “material reality” (p. 32). To illustrate the difference between symbolic reality and material reality, Cragan and Shields gave the example of different aspects of the Desert Storm conflict. Some statements were objective facts that addressed the present situation, such as the deployment of troops. Other statements involved subjective opinions or views of reality expressed through associations to things outside of the immediate situation, like then-President Bush’s comparison of Saddam Hussein to Hitler (p. 32). That troops were deployed is an objective, material fact. However, the president’s characterization of Saddam Hussein as comparable to Hitler is the president’s subjective, symbolic interpretation of reality. The president’s interpretation of Saddam Hussein as a leader was that he was a violent and despotic ruler. Hitler was a symbol, removed from the immediate context, that illustrated Bush’s view of Hussein. This understanding of fantasy as subjective interpretations of reality expressed through symbols is fundamental to SCT. Not only does familiarity with this assumption tell researchers what to look for in communication, this assumption also implies the power of fantasy. Despite a title that may conjure images of day dreams and fictions, SCT deals with fantasy as something that feels very real for the people who subscribe to them. Fantasies are important artifacts for the researcher that present meanings, emotions, and motives associated with a group consciousness (Shields & Preston, 1986).

The second assumption of SCT is that meanings, emotions, and motives for groups can be found in the messages of a group, not the participants themselves. According to Bormann

(1972) meanings are contained within messages. When people fantasize in groups, they create new meanings. The idea that groups can arrive at a collective consciousness after sharing fantasies implies group members come to new meaning through the sharing of the dramatizing messages. Bormann (1972) argued emotions were partially contained within messages as well. While emotions can be measured in terms of their physiological effects, the interpretation of physiological effects such as increased heart rate or sweating as indicators of sadness, joy, or anger depends on the messages that accompany the bodily factors (Bormann, 1972). In addition to meanings and motives, SCT posits a link between the dramatic content of rhetorical visions and the behaviors of those who subscribe to the rhetorical visions (Shields & Preston, 1986). Bormann (1972) argued motives were embedded in communication not simply expressed in communication. He contended that those who adopt rhetorical visions and the associated fantasies adopt certain rules as well, which are embedded in the vision and fantasies: “When a person appropriates a rhetorical vision he gains with the supporting dramas constraining forces which impel him to adopt a life style and to take certain action” (Bormann, 1972, p. 406). Bormann disagreed with the notion that motives are within people. He argued such a view does not necessarily predict behavior and only provides insight after behaviors occur. Bormann (1972) added that placing motives within the individual makes motive inaccessible, defeating critical inquiry. If one operates on the assumption motives can be found within messages, however, it is possible to go “directly to the rhetoric” in order to determine motive (Bormann, 1972, p. 407). This assumption is important because it accounts for the explanatory power of fantasies and rhetorical visions. These explanatory fantasies and rhetorical visions spread through different types of communication.

Another important assumption of SCT is that fantasy occurs in different levels of discourse (Cragan & Shields, 1995). Fantasy themes are spread through interpersonal group communication regardless of the size of the group and through mass media (Bormann, 1972). Bormann (1972) presented a scenario in which a fantasy theme chains out within a small group that becomes very invested in the vision and then decides to make the fantasy public. Some group members prepare mass media communication that reflects the fantasy themes or rhetorical vision of the group. As individuals consume these messages, the fantasies or vision may again chain out among small groups of people who were exposed to the vision through mass media. In this way the rhetorical vision spreads beyond the small group where it began.

As groups propagate rhetorical visions different groups' visions may come into conflict over interpretations of the same issue. Different rhetorical visions that deal with the same issue "compete as alternative explanations of symbolic reality" (Cragan & Shields, 1995, p. 34). Competition between rhetorical visions results from "master analogues" that orient rhetorical visions toward an issue in a particular way. A master analogue can be described as righteous, social, or pragmatic (Cragan & Shields, 1995, p. 34). Rhetorical visions that fall under the righteous analogue focus on morality and rightness (Bormann et al., 2001). For example, Bormann, Cragan, and Shields (1996) uncovered a righteous vision that interpreted the cold war as a confrontation between good and evil, in which the noble American stood his ground in the face of the communist enemy. Social rhetorical visions emphasize harmony, the value of human life, and a willingness among people to work together (Bormann et al., 2001). Bormann et al. (1996) described a social rhetorical vision that emerged in the wake of the Second World War that stressed the importance of peaceful cooperation among the victorious allied forces. This vision was social because it stressed the importance of people working in harmony in order to

avoid nuclear war that would surely destroy the human race (Bormann et al., 1996). Pragmatic rhetorical visions focus on “the bottom line” or “what is expedient” (Bormann et al., 2001, p. 288). Bormann et al. (1996) identified a pragmatic rhetorical vision from the cold war era that emphasized the need for savvy, powerful leaders who made smart decisions and acted in the nation’s self interest. The visions described above interpreted the same issue and competed for public support. The assumption of competition between rhetorical visions suggests groups can interpret events in different ways.

With these core assumptions in mind, the critic can conduct research with SCT knowing how to conceive of fantasy within the theory’s framework. SCT’s assumptions also explain the importance of studying symbolic communication, a communication phenomenon that holds great meaning for people and is capable of spreading through all forms of communication. These assumptions explain how the researcher knows what she or he knows when analyzing fantasy themes and rhetorical visions. The assumptions also justify the research itself.

Terminology

Though the basic assumptions of SCT explain how this framework conceives of communication, the basic terms of SCT used in this project demonstrate how *Bronson* sends its message. In this section I explain the two terms of SCT, fantasy theme and rhetorical vision, that are used for this project. My analysis of *Bronson* involves fantasy themes and rhetorical vision. Fantasy themes describe the characters, actions, and settings that make up the dramatic vision of the text. The rhetorical vision is the overall message or dramatic statement of the film, assembled from the various fantasy themes.

The fantasy theme is perhaps the most basic concept of SCT. Bormann et al. (2001) described the fantasy theme as “a dramatizing message that depicts characters engaged in action

in a setting that accounts for and explains human experience” (p. 282). Fantasy themes are symbolic messages that creatively interpret real life events or phenomena (Bormann et al., 2001). While fantasy themes are most often understood as consisting of written or spoken language, Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, and Airne (2001) argued visual elements are important components of some texts and are worthy of analysis. Fantasy themes are the basic units of analysis one looks for when using fantasy theme analysis (Shields & Preston, 1986). Fantasy themes also contain structural components of rhetorical visions: characters, actions, and scenes (Shields & Preston, 1986). Themes demonstrate how a text conceives of the characters involved in the drama, their actions, and the places where the drama unfolds. These components come together to make up the rhetorical vision.

Bormann (1985) defined a rhetorical vision as “a unified putting-together of the various scripts that gives the participants a broader view of things” (p. 133). Rhetorical visions are sometimes described as “composite dramas” because they are the result of fantasies communicated by multiple people within a group (Shields & Preston, 1986, p. 106). Rhetorical visions gain their form from the integration of fantasy themes that usually describe *dramatis personae*, or actors in fantasies, settings, and actions (Shields & Preston, 1986). Involvement in a rhetorical vision leads to a group consciousness and can drive group members to action (Bormann et al., 2001). Groups of people who subscribe to a rhetorical vision constitute a rhetorical community (Bormann, 1985). In order for rhetorical visions to catch on and form rhetorical communities, the vision must have links to real life issues or phenomena (Shields & Preston, 1986). Rhetorical visions based in reality are more credible and more acceptable to the public.

The fantasy themes and rhetorical vision of *Bronson* illustrate the message the film sends regarding masculinity. The ways the film portrays characters, what actions they take, and where the drama takes place demonstrate how the film appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse and how it promotes violent masculinity. A fantasy theme analysis of the film demonstrates which characters are portrayed as sympathetic, which characters are antagonists, and what actions the good and bad characters take. This way the themes of the film reveal how *Bronson* appeals to the crisis discourse by revealing who the good guys and the bad guys are, in addition to what they are like. For example, if the film casts traditionally masculine characters as good, while effeminate men are bad, this would indicate an appeal to crisis sentiments. Also, if the sympathetic characters act violently, this would indicate the promotion of violent masculinity.

Criticism of SCT

While descriptions of SCT's explanatory power may make the theory sound compelling, SCT has faced criticism. Critics have questioned the usefulness of accounting for group fantasies and fantasy's link to reality. However, much of the criticism stems from SCT's origins in the work of Bales (1970) and the lack of total adherence to his work.

Mohrmann (1982a) felt SCT was too far removed from the work of Bales (1970), arguing it did not follow logically from the notions of fantasy and group fantasizing discussed in the original research. He disagreed with the idea that group fantasizing can extend outside of the interpersonal context and into the mass media. Mohrmann (1982a) contended group fantasizing, as described by Bales, required face-to-face interaction between the group members, that the chaining out was achieved by people, not media. This is because Bales identified participating group members' "unconscious meanings" as the driving force behind group fantasizing:

There is nothing “outside the persons,” however, that compels the chain of fantasy. The chaining or joining by free association from one person to another is caused by the associations that people already have in their minds, aroused by some features of the present situation. The feeling of some kind of mysterious drag is due to the fact that the fantasies aroused are partly unconscious, because they are repressed. (p. 138)

For Mohrmann (1982a) mass media presented little, if any, chance for interaction because mass media did not make for an environment in which people could enact and chain out fantasies, propelled by unconscious meanings. He dismissed the idea of group fantasies chaining out through mass media, suggesting any similarities between fantasies found in interpersonal group settings and those found in media artifacts were coincidental. Mohrmann (1982a) felt a small group fantasy may at most find a “counterpart” in the mass media but not an extension of itself (p. 115). In sum, he did not feel SCT had a strong theoretical base. In addition to fundamental concerns over the theory’s foundation, Mohrmann (1982a) questioned the application of fantasy theme analysis.

Mohrmann (1982a) was very critical of the application of fantasy theme analysis. He felt fantasy theme analysis was a needless accounting of dramas that did not represent social reality, “Despite the promises of understanding and appreciation that will be ours through the medium of fantasy theme analysis, a simplistic drama and a litany of terms tell us precious little about life as drama or drama as life” (Mohrmann, 1982a, p. 125). Mohrmann (1982a) felt fantasy themes represented a “make-believe reality” and were not useful for learning about human communication (p. 122). He indicated fantasy theme analysis was constructing dramas for the sake of drama, that fantasy themes were their own reason for being. Bormann (1982b) responded

to these claims, explaining the major criticism relating to SCT's connection to Bales (1970) and the usefulness of fantasy theme analysis.

Bormann (1982b) first responded to the criticism regarding the relation of his work to that of Bales (1970), or the lack thereof, stating that, in developing SCT, he had used Bales's findings as a "springboard for a very different research perspective" (p. 293). He did not see a problem with developing a theoretical framework without strong ties to a previously-established theoretical base (Bormann, 1982b). Bormann (1982b) distanced SCT from the research Mohrmann (1982a) used to ground his criticism of SCT. While Bales's work served as a starting point for the research program that led to the development of SCT, Bormann (1982b) indicated it was only an inspiration: "What Bales provided was at best assumptions and conjectures that pointed in the direction of an explanation" (p. 290). Bormann (1982b) contended he was interested in the rhetorical elements of group fantasizing, such as the skillful or effective presentation of dramas, not psychiatric concerns dealing with the unconscious motives of group members. Next Bormann addressed Mohrmann's (1982a) criticism regarding the accuracy and usefulness of fantasy theme analysis.

Bormann (1982b) responded to Mohrmann's (1982a) criticism that fantasy themes did not represent social reality by arguing they were never intended to. For Bormann (1982) fantasy themes contributed to the development of a group's view of reality. Fantasy themes were not considered constitutive of social reality for the group:

My position is that during the process of sharing a fantasy theme drama the participants come to share the interpretation of the drama, the emotions, meanings, and attitudes of the drama towards the personae and the action. They come to share a common view of an aspect of their common experience. (Bormann, 1982b, p. 304)

For Bormann (1982b) fantasy themes are a vehicle for communicating values or beliefs and establishing them within a group culture. Bormann (1982b) felt Mohrmann's (1982a) critique demonstrated a misunderstanding of SCT, even suggesting Mohrmann (1982a) misrepresented SCT. Overall, the disagreement seems difficult to resolve.

Bormann (1982b) seemed to have mixed success defending SCT from Mohrmann's (1982a) criticism. Bormann (1982b) gave a strong answer to the claim that fantasy themes did not constitute reality. He demonstrated that SCT does not claim life is a drama; rather, groups can come to an understanding of real life through the communication of dramas. Bormann (1982b) was not able to make a strong rebuttal of Mohrmann's (1982a) other claim: that group fantasizing is rooted in psychiatric research dealing with people's unconscious motives and feelings and thus fantasizing cannot be said to extend outside the small, interpersonal group. Mohrmann (1982a) indicated that simply saying researchers using SCT were not concerned with the unconscious was insufficient, yet Bormann (1982b) did just that. On this point, the two talk past each other. Mohrmann (1982b) maintained that SCT scholars could not ignore Bales's (1970) concerns with the subconscious elements of intergroup interaction, suggesting doing so left SCT without any theoretical grounding. Bormann (1982b) did not feel he needed to use a "borrowed theoretical whole-cloth" (p. 293). He seemed to dismiss Mohrmann's (1982a) criticism, suggesting they differed on how to build theory. Questions surrounding SCT's selective borrowing from Bales's work were not completely answered by Bormann (1982b) and were brought up again by Gunn (2003). Gunn reprised earlier criticism and added that SCT's lack of concern with the subconscious created an "uneasy theoretical oscillation" between humans, who on the one hand seemed completely autonomous, not affected by the subconscious, yet were able to be caught up in group fantasies (p. 52). Bormann, Cragan, and Shields (2003)

responded to this charge by stating SCT was concerned with the establishment of group consciousness as a conscious process not driven by subconscious motives.

Debate over SCT seemed to culminate in a difference of opinion. Critics of SCT are not likely to be swayed by the defense from the theory's advocates. It seems the central issue that prevents critics from accepting SCT is the nature of its connection to the work of Bales (1970). If critics cannot accept communication itself as evidence of group consciousness, they will never consider SCT a satisfying research perspective. Even though Bormann may not have silenced his critics concerning the roots of SCT, he did a good job explaining the theory's focus on overt communication over unconscious aspects. SCT positions communication as illustrative of a group's perspective on an issue. SCT allows the researcher to parse out recurring elements in communication in order to determine how people make sense of an event or issue. Bormann (1972) argued communication was valuable as an indicator of motive or feelings. To deny communication's value in this way does harm to the notion that communication is a worthwhile area of study. Despite critics' questions regarding the usefulness of SCT, studies have revealed compelling explanations of group consciousness achieved through fantasy.

Past Research Using SCT

SCT is a useful theory for studying communication as it relates to group perspectives. The theory is applicable to a variety of media or communication contexts. Through various applications, SCT provides consistent insights into the potential influence fantasy can have on group consciousness. In addition, scholars have used SCT to research issues of gender and gain insight into the ways communication practices can contribute to problematic notions of gender. Past work with the theory shows SCT is a useful theory for research on group perspectives.

Past studies conducted with SCT demonstrate the theory's applicability to a variety of situations. The theory has been used to examine political communication. For example, Page and Duffy (2009) examined recurring themes and rhetorical visions of competing political ad campaigns during a Missouri gubernatorial race. Zagacki and Grano (2005) applied the theory to sports communication by examining discourse from radio sports talk shows. Duffy (2003) used SCT to identify recurring themes present across web sites for different racial hate groups. Hill, Cable, and Scott (2010) applied SCT to print journalists' framing of bird watchers as a source of valuable ecotourism revenue for a community. These SCT studies provide insight into the influence fantasy can have over group consciousness.

SCT research identifies recurring fantasy themes in communication and demonstrates the potential influence fantasy may have over group consciousness, or the participating group's view of reality. Work examining the content of fantasies can explain why participants in the group fantasy think the way they do. For example, Zagacki and Grano (2005) analyzed the communication between sports talk show hosts and fans of a college football team. The fans exhibited an exaggerated sense of their favorite team's importance to the host university and to the host state. Zagacki and Grano revealed fantasy themes that formed a rhetorical vision framing the activities of the football team as battles on hallowed ground in which heroes and villains squared off, with great implications for the community and the university. The fantasies and rhetorical vision shaped fans' view of reality by allowing them to assign notions of great importance to the football team, which the authors argued created misconceptions about the players' roles as student athletes and the university's role as an academic institution (Zagacki & Grano, 2005).

Duffy (2003) used rhetorical vision and fantasy to account for group consciousness as well. Duffy analyzed the content of racist organizations' web sites and noted recurring themes of racial restoration and racist actions sanctioned by god. These fantasies explained the persistence of irrational, baseless racism by presenting compelling dramas that elevate participants' sense of duty and importance:

How can people hold such hateful and illogical viewpoints? . . . the discursive materials found in these Web sites are historically inaccurate and morally bankrupt. But for those participating in the drama of these rhetorical visions, they constitute a shining vision of hope and renewal. Individuals who feel marginalized by society, victimized by an unfair economic system, and beset by forces beyond their control can participate in a stirring drama of Biblical proportions. They can be one of the chosen people. (Duffy, 2003, p. 307)

Here fantasy shapes reality for participants in racist visions, rendering baseless attitudes more acceptable or justified. Fantasy can also account for attitudes relating to gender, as past studies have shown.

Symbolic Convergence Theory has been used to analyze communication relating to gender issues. Studies have given insight into the influence dramatizing communication can have on notions of gender and gendered behavior. Bormann, Pratt, and Putnam (1978) analyzed communication in mixed-gender interpersonal groups. The groups experienced tension resulting from male subjects' response to female leadership. In one group, male participants started a fantasy chain about female black widow spiders killing their male mates; this fantasy coincided with one female group member's emergence as an assertive leader. Male participants also fantasized about strong male leaders, such as figures in movies or from times of greater gender

inequality. These fantasies hinted at male group members' negative reactions to female leadership. The men seemed to overcome these feelings, however, upon the sharing of fantasies relating to the difficulties one man's homosexual friend faced. The group agreed that people should not be judged based on gender and sexuality, which coincided with acceptance of female power in the group (Bormann, Pratt, et al., 1978). The initial fantasies framed female leadership negatively and demonstrated longing for clear male dominance. However, the later fantasy focused on gender and sexuality as an unfair dimension to judge people by, suggesting acceptance of female leadership. The theory has been applied to situations involving another practice that contradicts traditional notions of gender: homosexuality.

Chesebro (1980) analyzed social scientific literature focusing on homosexuality. Chesebro looked for each occurrence of the word "homosexuality" and any recurring fantasy themes accompanying the word. The author concluded that homosexuals, when described by that term, were represented paradoxically in the literature. Social scientists at times treated homosexuals as "degenerates," describing them solely in terms of sexual behavior, doing so only by describing sexual acts (Chesebro, 1980, p. 129). Such descriptions came in objective language, free of wording that hinted at emotion. Chesebro argued such language framed homosexuals as degenerates by focusing solely on sexual acts to the exclusion of emotions that might hint at healthy, positive relationships. The other recurring theme framed homosexuals as not different from heterosexuals aside from sexual preference. Chesebro called this a "mainstreaming" fantasy that undermined the formation of homosexual identity, even though the theme may represent good intentions (p. 133). Chesebro argued these fantasies associated with the term homosexual or homosexuality contributed to feelings of discomfort and confusion scientists may have felt when confronted with homosexuality. The degenerate fantasy coincides

with feelings of discomfort toward sexual acts between same-sex partners, while the mainstreaming fantasy coincides with the desire to sweep homosexuality under the rug.

Symbolic Convergence Theory has also been used to explain gender inequality. Two studies using SCT, Koester (1982) and Garner, Sterk, and Adams (1998), uncovered fantasies that supported gender inequality. Koester analyzed career advice books for women. The themes in the books constructed a rhetorical vision that framed the business world as the domain of men. In addition, the vision posited women were in control of their own success and must manage their gender in order to be successful. Koester argued this vision worked to undermine women's skill by promoting gender as the primary dimension of success for women. In addition, Koester contended that by claiming women were totally in control of their own career success, these books precluded criticism of institutions or unfair practices. Participants in this vision might dismiss women's career success as somehow resulting from their gender. In addition, adherents may be hesitant to recognize the possibility of gender inequality in the workplace. The theory has also been applied to issues of unequal gender roles in relationships. Garner et al. (1998) analyzed advice columns in teen magazines and found recurring fantasies reflected sexual inequality between men and women. The rhetorical vision of the magazine columns framed women as sex objects who needed to be attractive and available to men. In addition, recurring themes suggested women needed to alter their behavior to accommodate men, particularly when trying to resolve problems in relationships.

Past work demonstrates SCT is a useful communication theory for examining group perspectives. SCT can be applied to different communication contexts or media, provides consistent insight into the effects fantasy can have on group consciousness, and has proved

useful when applied to issues of gender. Previous research reveals people can communicate dramatic interpretations of reality, or fantasies, in ways that reinforce certain values.

My Use of SCT

Past studies indicate SCT gives insight into fantasy's potential effects on group consciousness. In this section I explain how I used SCT to explain how *Bronson* appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse and promotes violent masculinity. First I describe my application of SCT. Then I explain how the artifact I analyzed is relevant to SCT study. Finally, because *Bronson* is a highly visual artifact, I justify using SCT for the analysis because the theory is usually applied to spoken and written language instead of visual media.

I used SCT to analyze the feature film *Bronson* and the way it fits into the masculinity crisis discourse described in the literature review. The film contains recurring themes that suggest a longing for traditional masculine norms in the face of men who are not traditionally masculine. It is necessary to explain that SCT is an appropriate framework for analyzing a single film. Though the theory is usually used to analyze a body of artifacts, SCT has been successfully applied to single texts. Ford (1989) studied "The Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous and its adherence to the "fetching good out of evil" fantasy type (p. 4). Ford was able to apply SCT to the lone artifact because the text served as a guide book for an entire group, which meant the single artifact had the potential to affect group consciousness. McCormick and Weiss (2009) also applied SCT to a single artifact, in this case a single work of graffiti art. They were able to use SCT because the artifact they analyzed contained themes that reflected views expressed by many, which suggested symbolic convergence. McCormick and Weiss focused on the single text because they wanted to demonstrate that a medium normally considered subversive could advance socially acceptable values. SCT, then, is an appropriate theory for analyzing *Bronson*

because the film reflects a larger discourse on masculinity. The issues I focused on are part of a group discourse, not restricted to this single text. In addition, I am interested in the film as it represents masculinity crisis discourse values seeping into a historical account, influencing the way characters are presented in the film.

Another aspect of the film that may appear outside the scope of SCT is its highly visual nature. SCT is most often used to analyze written or spoken language; however, visual elements of texts are open to analysis as well. Bormann, Koester, and Bennett (1978) and Benoit et al. (2001) analyzed political cartoons, finding recurring political fantasies. Benoit and associates (2001) argued for the importance of analyzing visual elements, stating images could “transmit meaning more directly than verbal symbols” (p. 378). Bormann (1982a) noted the importance of camera shots during news coverage of political events. Page and Duffy (2009) analyzed recurring themes in political television ads, noting visual elements such as color and background images in their analysis. Images in the movie form an important part of the film’s message regarding masculinity. SCT is a useful framework for analyze images, despite the theory’s more frequent application to the written or spoken word.

SCT can provide useful insights into the messages *Bronson* presents relating to masculinity and how it relates to the crisis discourse. Studies using SCT consistently concentrate on character, setting, and action themes (e.g., Garner et al., 1998; Zagacki & Grano, 2005). Analyzing the films representation of different characters, their actions, and the settings where the drama unfolds allows me to reveal how the film appeals to the crisis discourse and promotes violent masculinity. Using SCT I can account for the different visual and verbal markers through which the film portrays a traditionally masculine protagonist as under attack from effeminate men and promotes violent behavior in defense of traditional masculinity. SCT accounts for the

establishment of group perspectives through the sharing of creative interpretations of reality, or fantasies. This framework conceives of communication as a process through which groups construct meaning and come to share perspectives on certain phenomena. Despite criticism directed at the roots of SCT and the theory's disconnect from the psychological perspective of the researchers who inspired the theory, SCT remains a valuable perspective because it treats overt communication as evidence of meaning and motive. The theory's value lies in its ability to provide the communication researcher with a method for assessing shared interpretations of reality and the components they are made of.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

In this chapter I apply SCT to *Bronson*, using fantasy theme analysis to find recurring themes and construct the film's rhetorical vision. The fantasy themes describe the characters, settings, and actions central to the drama that plays out in the film. The analysis uncovers how the film presents the characters, the actions they take, and the spaces they occupy in a way that allows me to answer my research questions: 1) how does *Bronson* appeal to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse, and 2) how does the film promote violent masculinity over effeminacy. I begin with a review of the events of the film. Second, I start discussion of themes with the character themes that establish Bronson's masculinity through descriptions of his body, temperament, and differentiation from other male characters. Third, I discuss the setting themes that depict a world that does not accommodate Bronson's masculinity, leading him to prison, the place where he can enact his violent masculinity. Finally, I describe the action themes that center on Bronson's violent acts and domination over other men, framing such behavior as essential to Bronson's identity. I conclude with the rhetorical vision that presents Bronson as a model of traditional masculinity not welcomed by society and having to fight off repression from physically weaker or effeminate men. This vision reflects the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse, or the notion that traditional masculinity is in peril due to changing gender norms and encroaching femininity.

Film Narrative

Here I review the events of the film to provide background on the scenes I discuss during the analysis. Bronson drives the film, relating the events as narrator. The film is relatively fast-paced, speeding through some parts of Bronson's story using montages, still shots, and theater

scenes in which Bronson stands on stage and speaks to an audience. For the most part, the movie progresses through his life in a chronological fashion. *Bronson* begins with the protagonist introducing himself. The way Bronson introduces himself gives the impression he is looking back on his life and the events that brought him notoriety: “My name’s Charles Bronson and all my life I wanted to be famous.” Then the scene changes to show him inside a wire cage. He paces inside the cage, seemingly warming up for a fight. A group of prison guards enters the room and the film’s first fight ensues. After the fight ends, the scene fades and transitions into scenes from Bronson’s youth.

Bronson describes his early years beginning with his childhood. He explains his upbringing was normal and his parents “decent.” The film moves quickly through Bronson’s youth. The viewer sees him getting in fights at school as an adolescent, working at a grocery store as a young adult, and then fighting with police who come to arrest him at his family’s home. This segment draws to a close as Bronson, now married and a father, saws the barrel off of a shotgun in preparation of the robbery that would begin his life in prison.

A quick sequence of events shows Bronson going through his trial, seeing his wife for the final time, and being locked in a cell. At this moment he turns into the infamous prisoner. The viewer sees him lashing out at prison guards. His recognition behind prison walls is represented in one scene by the applause he receives from fellow inmates while being escorted down a long corridor. His fame is also illustrated by newspaper headlines that flash across the screen. Despite the enjoyment of acting out in prison Bronson conveys as narrator, all does not go his way: he is transferred to an insane asylum.

Bronson makes it clear things had not gone the way he wanted. After the first time he attacks prison guards, he is isolated in a cell and forcibly injected with a powerful sedative after

refusing to take pills. Bronson spends much of his time in the asylum ambling around the facility, weakened by drugs. He is miserable, once crying out in agony. He eventually comes up with a plan he hopes will get him sent back to prison. Bronson meets convicted child molester and murderer John White (Bronson, 2008). Bronson strangles White. To his dismay White survives and Bronson is sent to another asylum instead of a prison. Bronson lashes out in frustration, scaling the asylum's roof and causing great damage to the building. He is then certified sane and released because he had become too expensive to keep locked up due to the damage he caused to facilities.

When Bronson is released, he reunites with his parents but quickly leaves the family home to find his uncle, who would be able to find job opportunities for Bronson. His uncle directs Bronson to a former prison inmate who would promote Bronson as an illicit boxer. It is at this time he changes his name from Michael Peterson to Charles Bronson, a "fighting name." Bronson fights in out of the way locations like basements and what appear to be warehouses or industrial settings. He wins his bouts but receives little reward for doing so. Bronson eventually lands back in prison after robbing a jewelry store, attempting to win his girlfriend's affection with an expensive ring.

Back in prison, Bronson is introduced to the warden, who clearly looks down on him. Once he was sent to his cell, Bronson took a prison librarian hostage. Guards forcefully extract Bronson from the cell. He is next shown bloodied in a straight jacket. The warden warns him he will die in prison if he does not change his behavior. Bronson sits silently, apparently taking the warden's warning very seriously. He is next shown focusing on his art work, having taken an interest in art during a class. This newfound passion has seemingly distracted Bronson from his usual violent pursuits. He presents a sample of his work to the warden, who praises Bronson for

his good behavior. Bronson seems bothered by the warden's praise, standing silently. In the next scene he is sitting in the art classroom alone with the art instructor. Bronson has a brooding expression, seemingly contemplating the latest turn of events. He then springs into action, taking the art instructor hostage. Bronson ties his captive to a pole and paints his face, adding a violent twist to his art work. Guards then enter the room and beat him into submission. The film ends with Bronson stuffed into a cage barely big enough to hold him.

Character Themes

Here I describe the character themes that describe Bronson and the other players in the film. Character themes describe the characters and establish their place within the rhetorical vision (Shields & Preston, 1985). Character themes ascribe certain qualities to the characters and establish them as good or bad (Shields & Preston, 1985). My central focus is on themes describing Bronson directly. First I discuss themes describing Bronson's body as a symbol of his masculinity. Next I review themes that frame Bronson's personality, presenting him as an entertainer and a ticking time bomb. I end by describing the character themes of other male characters in the film, who serve to accentuate Bronson's masculinity through their appearance and behaviors, which communicate comparatively lower levels of masculinity.

Bronson's Body

Here I describe the visual and verbal character themes that describe his body. Bronson's body is different from those of most other male characters in the film. These themes work to set him apart from the other men, presenting him as an ideal example of masculinity, a model whose manliness exceeds that of other men. First I discuss the recurring visual themes that depict Bronson's body as extraordinarily muscular and powerful. Next I describe the verbal themes that add to the image of Bronson's masculine body with descriptions of his physique. Themes

regarding Bronson's body are fundamental to establishing him as the ideally masculine protagonist.

Recurring visual themes display Bronson's muscular body. The viewer is introduced to the protagonist's hard body early in the film. Bronson paces inside a holding cell, mostly dark, lit only by a dim red glow. His figure takes center stage as the only thing the viewer can see other than the wire of the cage he is locked inside. The prisoner shows his body at work, throwing punches in the air, punching the sides of the holding cell, and doing pushups rapidly in anticipation of the movie's first fight with prison guards.

Bronson is often naked or seminaked during his encounters with guards, who, in contrast, are always clothed, usually wearing armor and helmets. This sharp contrast in appearances between the guards and Bronson accentuates his muscular appearance and sets him apart from the other men on the screen.¹ Any potential masculine body characteristics the guards may possess are hidden under clothing and armor. Bronson's manly build, however, is on full display. Another way these scenes are suggestive of the prisoner's masculinity is that other men are shown as needing protection from him. When they confront the muscular prisoner, they need to augment their bodies in order to handle Bronson, who, on the other hand, needs little. In preparation for an impending fight with guards, Bronson deliberately undresses, applying what appears to be butter to his body: "What am I going to do? I'm going to put my fucking body paint on is what I'm going to do . . . my body armor." The visual themes describing the bodies of the guards and Bronson, armor and clothing for the guards and a naked body for Bronson, are striking in this scene. His opponents must be dressed for the occasion, either wearing clothes or

¹ It is ironic that Bronson's nudity communicates power. Being nude, in the presence of clothed people, can be considered a subordinate position. That said, men's bodies are often displayed in media as strong and powerful when uncovered, in contrast to women's uncovered bodies, which are more often depicted as vulnerable or weak (Earp & Jhally, 2010).

adding body armor. Bronson, on the other hand, undresses, exposing himself completely to the guards. The only sort of armor he allows himself to have is a thin covering of butter, which makes it more difficult for guards to grasp and restrain him (Armstrong, 2010). This strategy also demonstrates Bronson's masculinity because it shows he wants to prolong the fights with guards.

For the film's final confrontation between Bronson and prison staff, he once again undresses and applies a presumably slick substance to his skin. However, for this fight Bronson uses a dark substance, possibly paint, as he is in an art classroom. This substance turns Bronson a very dark brown, almost black. Bronson stands high on the stairs leading out of the classroom, appearing to strike a pose. This instance of the visual theme depicting Bronson's masculine physique seemingly offers him to the viewer as a work of art, maybe a tribute to traditional masculinity. The color of his skin, combined with the pose he holds and the stairs as a makeshift pedestal, makes him look like a metal statue or sculpture. This is the final and most dramatic occurrence of the visual character theme that communicates Bronson's manliness through his imposing physique.

Bronson's masculine body is also depicted through verbal themes that describe his body as powerful. The verbal themes appear in dialog in which characters comment on Bronson's body. When Bronson first meets the man who would end up as his illicit boxing manager, he compliments Bronson's body as clearly masculine and powerful: "That's an impressive set of guns there. You must be handy in a brawl." In another scene, their first meeting as business partners, the manager again comments on Bronson's body, "You're looking good Mickey. Fit, strong, powerful." These bodily observations establish Bronson as a masculine figure by emphasizing his physical power, which can be used for fighting. Bronson's fighting manager then suggests his client's powerful body merits a suitable fighting name, which he would assume

over his legal name Michael Peterson. He scoffs at Bronson's initial suggestion of Charlton Heston as a fighting name, "Look love, nobody gives a toss about Charlton Heston. The man's a cunt. You're more the Charles Bronson type." The manager indicates only a celebrity who stars in violent films has a name worthy of his client and his powerful body. A woman Bronson meets at his Uncle Jack's apartment also comments on surface inscriptions of masculinity on his body, observing marks on his head:

Woman: "What's that from?"

Bronson: "Fight."

Woman: "And that one?"

Bronson: "Fight."

Woman: "Here . . ."

Bronson: (interrupts) "Fight."

His marked body exudes masculinity. These battle scars signify Bronson's willingness to fight other men, a traditionally masculine trait. The woman continues to examine Bronson, she remarked "you're very muscley [*sic*] aren't you? Mind if I hold your arm?" Bronson extends his arm and she wraps her hands around it, stroking his bicep as she says, in a quivering voice, "Oh my God. It's huge." These comments highlight the size and implicit power of his body. In addition, after remarking at the size of his arm muscles, the woman begins kissing Bronson. His body exudes masculinity not only by showing toughness but also by enabling his heterosexuality. Bodily markers of masculinity identify Bronson as a tough guy who is desirable to women.

In summary, character themes describing Bronson's body establish his masculinity. Recurring visual themes display his muscular build and make other male characters look weaker in comparison. Not only do most other men in the film remain clothed, concealing their own

muscles. They frequently don armor for their confrontations with Bronson, suggesting relative weakness. Verbal themes also emphasize his masculinity, describing his powerful build and battle scars. These themes set Bronson apart from other male characters as a peerless model of masculinity. Other men need to dress appropriately for their confrontations with Bronson, whose powerful body enables him to fight wearing little more than the skin on his back. His “impressive set of guns” allows him to fight; He has the scars to prove it. Bronson’s body establishes him as a traditionally masculine male worthy of the admirable gaze of men who buy into the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. The Charles Bronson depicted in the film is a sight to see. Onlookers, however, should keep their distance.

Bronson as a Sight to Behold: Admire from a Distance

In addition to depicting his powerful body, character themes depict Bronson as a sight to behold, a one-man show.² In addition, themes that suggest a potentially lighter side of Bronson are counteracted by those depicting his dangerous temperament. This is accomplished through themes depicting Bronson as a stage entertainer and themes that demonstrate his violent tendencies.

Bronson, as narrator of the film, is frequently shown standing on a stage in a theater, speaking to an audience. The film introduces this version of Bronson to the viewer for the first time when Bronson begins his first prison sentence. After he is locked in his cell, Bronson appears to begin sobbing, the camera behind his back. After several seconds Bronson stops sobbing, takes a deep breath, and the scene transitions to a stage setting in which Bronson is wearing a suit, with heavy, white makeup on his face. “I got you. Go on, I had you going. I’ve always fancied myself as being a comedian,” said Bronson, seemingly mocking the thought of

² It is useful to consider the carnival-grotesque here, which acts as a challenge to normal, everyday notions of being (Halnon, 2004). Bronson as an entertainer can be considered an escape from the rules or norms of everyday life that prohibit violent or powerful performances of masculinity.

showing emotion. This stage version of Bronson makes frequent appearances throughout the film, eliciting laughter and applause from the audience as he weaves his story like a skillful showman. Although the audience could be read as Bronson imagining how the public might receive him, I argue the audience is a device used to frame Bronson as a charismatic entertainer. Director Nicolas Winding Refn stated he concentrated on the “myth” of Charles Bronson when making the film, conceiving him as a “showman” (*Bronson*: Interview). This version of Bronson shows charisma. Perhaps he is even a likable person.

However, the entertainer persona is contrasted by images of a dangerous, volatile man. As stage Bronson approaches the part of his story when he is released from prison on parole for the first time, he frames the occasion as a disappointment, coming at a time when he was “about to make a name to be reckoned with.” The audience groaned, seemingly sharing Bronson’s disappointment. This suggests sympathy or familiarity with Bronson from the audience. An unseen spectator gets too familiar with the host, questioning the notoriety Bronson claimed he was working toward, “Oh yeah? As what?” The glowing stage personality fades as Bronson answers angrily, “As what? You don’t want to be trapped inside with me, sunshine. Inside I’m someone nobody wants to fuck with. Do you understand?” Following this scene is a series of still images of Bronson fighting prison staff and fellow inmates, accompanied by sounds of animals growling. Bronson describes himself as “Britain’s most violent prisoner,” a title indicative of a dangerous temperament because it suggests he is the most extreme member of a population considered dangerous in general. Recurring imagery also indicates Bronson’s volatility. In multiple scenes he is shown sitting at a table, fists clenched, with a strained look on his face. The viewer gets the impression Bronson could explode in violent behavior at any second. This alternate side of Bronson’s personality is also indicated during narration, when he smiles briefly,

only to revert to a strained, threatening expression. These character themes depict Bronson as a very dangerous man, suggesting the viewer should not be fooled by his charismatic stage personality.

Themes depicting Bronson as an entertainer and a dangerous man work to establish Bronson as a one-man show to be enjoyed from a distance. While Bronson's stage personality frames Bronson as an engaging storyteller whose tale is to be enjoyed, the violent themes counteract the stage persona, establishing Bronson's threatening masculinity. These constructions make Bronson a compelling narrator while maintaining the sense that he is imposing and threatening. These themes encourage viewers to like or even sympathize with Bronson without taking the violent edge off of his character. Thus he appeals to the crisis discourse as a man who the viewer admires while still respecting his powerful, violent masculinity.

Not Quite There, Loony, or Just Plain Girly: The Other Guys

Bronson also establishes its protagonist's masculinity in relation to other men depicted in the film. These alternate models of masculinity range from men who exhibit the general markers of manhood, such as prison staff, yet are not as strong as Bronson, to effeminate men, who represent the antithesis of Bronson's masculinity. Recurring visual themes depict these characters as different, often less masculine subjects through images of their bodies and behavior. Verbal character themes also serve to differentiate Bronson from the men who surround him. The supporting cast of male characters consists of prison guards, feeble-minded mental patients, and the frail-looking, effeminate men who are antithetical to the powerful, violent masculinity embodied by Bronson.

Perhaps the most frequently portrayed man in the film is the prison guard. Recurring visual themes depict these men as masculine in appearance and manner. No arguably feminine traits are evident when these men are present. Despite their clear masculinity, they rarely measure up to the standard set by Bronson. As mentioned before, prison staff members do engage Bronson physically, but they must do so in groups, often with the added protection of body armor. They appear less masculine than Bronson because their bodies are always covered, in contrast to Bronson's often bare muscles. Some guards are larger than others. These men often fight Bronson without body armor and land powerful blows with their fists. Even though these guards appear stronger than the others, they still come across as less powerful than Bronson. Not only are they always clothed, muscles concealed, they also have fellow guards restraining Bronson when they hit him. Bronson also appears to be laughing or mocking them as they hit him. Even the toughest men the prison system can throw at Bronson still need help subduing the prisoner, who condescends to them while they fight.

Similar to the guards from the prisons, Bronson also faced strong nurses in the asylum. The asylum nurses are similarly masculine to the prison guards. They too must handle Bronson in groups, eventually resorting to sedatives in order to handle him. Bronson does get to fight other men on more equal terms during his brief stint as an illicit boxer. His opponents, not wearing body armor, appear muscular and powerful. The bouts were one-sided affairs. Bronson fights two men at the same time, both are shirtless and appear similarly built to the protagonist. However they are unable to handle Bronson during the fight. They appear less than extraordinary in the face of the mighty Bronson.

Unlike the nurses, the asylum inmates were feeble, presenting a great differentiation from Bronson's masculinity. When Bronson was moved to the mental institution, he shared space with

inmates who exhibited none of the physical or behavioral cues of masculinity. The mental patients were depicted as weak and frail. They stumbled through the facility at odd postures that failed to demonstrate any kind of strength or power. The inmates cowered in fear during Bronson's violent outbursts. These men were not just lacking in masculinity, they seemed less than human, communicating very little and taking no action. The inmates seemed like props on the set, blending into the background. While Bronson was reduced to a similar state by crippling drugs forced on him by nurses, Mr. White's assessment of Bronson reminds the viewer he is not really like them: "Thing is, they don't understand. They'll never understand, and that scares them. So they keep you drugged up. What's that going to change? It's not going to change the you inside." Despite his physical state becoming more like that of the feeble mental patients, the tough, powerful Bronson still lurked underneath. This Bronson is perhaps the most at odds with the effeminate men in the film.

Bronson's masculinity is arguably most accentuated by the presence of effeminate men in the film. The prominent visual themes establish these men as effeminate through their physiques and behaviors. The first such man to appear in the film is the prison inmate who goes on to manage Bronson's underground fighting career. He saunters across the screen, once singing a song as he entered the room to a puzzled Bronson. This character communicates effeminacy and physical weakness through his posture and comportment. He often exhibits homoerotic desire for Bronson, through his words, touches, and looks directed at Bronson's body. This is most evident when he initiates the meeting to set up Bronson's fighting career. He looks up and down the protagonist's body and says, "Let's fuck." While there is no indication the two engaged in sexual intercourse, the line demonstrates desire for Bronson. The desire for Bronson stems from his body, which is indicated by the manager's admiration for Bronson's body expressed through

looks and verbal praise. This homoerotic desire makes for even greater differentiation between the masculinity of the two characters. Bronson is more traditionally masculine because of his muscular body and heterosexuality. The manager is less masculine not only because he appears homosexual but also because his frail body does not inspire admiration from another man the way Bronson's does. Despite being very different from Bronson, the two have an amicable relationship because the manager sanctions Bronson's violent behavior and admires his masculinity. The other effeminate male characters are not easy friends with Bronson.

One inmate Bronson encounters in the mental asylum presents a differentiation between effeminate masculinity and Bronson's powerful masculinity, in addition to providing moral separation between the protagonist and the most despicable criminals. This man, Mr. White, is a convicted child molester, presumably placed in the institution for his own safety. The sex offender communicates effeminacy through his gentle gait and expressions like wagging a finger in Bronson's face. This character contrasts Bronson not only with his effeminacy but also through his status as a less moral figure. The juxtaposition of Bronson with a child molester suggests the protagonist is no "monster." Bronson is a less immoral figure than Mr. White due to the latter's status as a sex offender. This relationship between Bronson and the child molester mirrors a tactic used in other films, which is the use of morally despicable characters to distance morally questionable male protagonists from perceived extremes of immorality. Arthur (2004) argued neo-Nazi characters in the films *Falling Down* and *American Beauty* served to make the morally questionable protagonists more palatable by contrasting them with unacceptable figures. *Bronson* points out that despite the great amount of time Bronson has spent behind bars he has

never killed. Also, viewers can expect he would kill a child molester if he had the chance.³

However, one need not victimize children to get on Bronson's bad side.

Perhaps the most striking example of effeminacy is Bronson's art teacher, Mr. Danielson. Danielson appears in the film as Bronson begins to take an interest in art, acting as the prisoner's mentor. Danielson also communicates effeminacy or weakness through his appearance and outward behavior. The viewer first sees Danielson rehearsing dance steps in the middle of an art session. Prisoners and guards sit rigidly in the room as he prances down the stairs, an awkward positioning of a lithe male body alongside comparatively rigid-appearing bodies. His movements here make him stand out from the other, more traditionally masculine men. Danielson does not exude physical strength or power as he bounces among other men who comport themselves purposefully, focusing on their work. In addition, he at times makes limp-wristed gestures while speaking. These gestures are often seen as symbolizing weakness, even homosexuality. During their interactions, Bronson appears either amused or irritated with Danielson.

In addition to the visual differences between teacher and pupil, verbal themes describe the art instructor as out of touch with the masculine Bronson. Things turn sour between Danielson and Bronson as the teacher appears to assume too much familiarity with his pupil. Danielson tells Bronson he thinks he will be released, saying he is an "excellent judge of character." He goes on to tell Bronson, "We can do this." Bronson answers, "What do you mean 'we'?" Seemingly distancing himself, displeased with the instructor's presumed familiarity indicated by the word "we."⁴ Danielson later assures Bronson things will work out well for him: "You are finally going to get what you've always wanted." Bronson again distances himself:

³ Bronson's attack on a child predator also speaks to the notion of men as patriarchs, since dispatching of a sexual predator can be read as a protective act (Trujillo, 1991).

⁴ Traditional conceptions of masculinity often emphasize separation or independence from others (Buerkle, 2009).

“What do you know about what I fucking want?” Danielson is striking in his difference from Bronson. He accentuates Bronson’s masculinity through his difference from the protagonist.

The warden is the final effeminate male character in the film. Unlike the others, he is a formidable foe for Bronson. When Bronson is jailed again after a brief period of freedom, he meets the warden, who is effeminate in appearance, posture, and behavior. He carries himself in a comparatively delicate manner. The warden is always calm and soft spoken. He does not communicate power with the intensity that Bronson does. In addition, his slender build does not suggest power or strength. Despite his appearance of physical weakness, the warden presents a threat to Bronson as the figurehead of the feminine authority working to suppress Bronson’s violent masculinity. The warden is a powerful character who exercises power differently from Bronson. The warden conveys power through verbal commands. The way this character wields power can be read as symbolic of a shift in men’s behavior. Instead of exercising power through physical strength and intimidation, the warden’s power resides in his position at the top of an organization’s hierarchy. The warden represents a conception of masculinity much different from Bronson’s, highlighting the protagonist’s physically powerful and violent masculinity.

The supporting characters in *Bronson* differ greatly from the protagonist and are generally less masculine than Bronson. Recurring themes depict these men as less masculine through their appearance and behaviors. Bronson truly sticks out among the men in the film as an ideal example of the powerful male.

Character Themes: Final Thoughts

Recurring themes establish Bronson’s masculinity and its relation to other men. Themes describing Bronson’s body communicate his masculinity through depictions and descriptions of his muscular body. The film frames Bronson as a showman by depicting him as an entertainer

yet maintains his masculinity through depictions of his threatening, explosive temperament. Finally, Bronson's characterization is dependent on other male characters. They accentuate his heightened masculinity and strength through their comparative lack of physical power and strength, in addition to the arguably effeminate behavior of some characters, like the art instructor or the boxing manager. Character themes establish Bronson as more traditionally masculine than the men around him. Themes depicting Bronson's superior physical strength encourage the viewer to see him as a man among boys. The character themes appeal to the crisis discourse by depicting a traditionally masculine man as out of place or surrounded by weaker men. Next I describe the settings in which the film takes place and their significance.

Setting Themes

The events of *Bronson* play out in domestic and prison settings, the two settings contrasting in a way that appeals to the masculinity crisis discourse. In this section I describe the setting themes that frame these locations as suitable and unsuitable environments for Bronson and his brand of masculinity. Setting themes describe the places where the drama takes place. These themes can impact the characters and the rhetorical vision (Shields & Preston, 1985, p. 107). Fantasy themes describing settings in *Bronson* play a part in the formation of the rhetorical vision and its connection to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. I first discuss the depiction of the world outside of prison, focusing on themes of desperation and unsuitability for Bronson. I then describe the film's contradictory treatment of prison as a place conducive to Bronson's violent tendencies, yet still a miserable space in which to live.

A World Not for Bronson

The "outside" world in *Bronson* is described as a less than ideal place for the protagonist. Setting themes frame the world outside of prison as a place where Bronson is underappreciated.

He first describes his hometown, pointing out the limited opportunities the location offered him: “It was a tough time to be young in England. Not a lot of opportunity around.” Bronson is only able to find work at a grocery store. When he turns to crime, he points out the small sum of money he netted from the robbery that earned him a 7-year prison sentence, the viewer sees only a few bills and some coins representing Bronson’s take. Suggesting there was so little on offer for him that even crime didn’t pay. Things were not much better for Bronson when he was released from prison and took up underground fighting. Visual themes depict the venues for Bronson’s fights as dark and dilapidated. One of his fights occurs in a basement. Other fights take place in what appear to be deserted industrial buildings. One scene shows Bronson looking on at a row of neglected factory buildings, evoking earlier sentiments Bronson expressed about the lack of economic opportunity for him. The abandoned buildings symbolize failures in industry and economic woes keeping men like Bronson from providing for themselves. These themes of neglected industrial settings are reminiscent of the connection some scholars make between failures in the manufacturing sector and the masculinity crisis (Farrell, 2003). Verbal themes also depict the setting for Bronson’s exploits as underwhelming. When Bronson protests what he considers low pay from his manager after a fight, the manager defends his payment, stating Bronson is doing his work “in the middle of fucking nowhere.” He added, “It was hardly the hottest ticket in town.” These themes depict a setting in which there is little appreciation for Bronson’s violent masculinity. There are neither packed arenas nor big paydays. Bronson exists on the margin, fighting with little to show for it and few people to show it to. The outside world apparently undervalued him so much, Bronson felt more at home behind bars.

Home at Last?

The film gives a somewhat contradictory treatment of the prisons its protagonist inhabits. On one hand Bronson describes prison as a place where he can finally practice his violent masculinity and receive proper credit for doing so. On the other hand, Bronson does not find the mental asylum to his liking, as he is largely prevented from acting violently there. Finally, despite verbal themes that describe prison as a positive place for Bronson, visual themes depict prison as dark and constricting place despite the fun Bronson claims he had.

In contrast to the outside world in which he saw little place for himself and his violent masculinity, Bronson describes prison as a good fit for his lifestyle. He does not claim prison is a good place in general—"I won't say prison is not bad"—rather he suggests prison suited him well: "for most people, prison is hard. For me, prison was finally a place where I could sharpen my tools. Hone my skills. It's like a battleground, isn't it?" Bronson saw prison as conducive to his violent tendencies and, thus, a good venue to practice his brand of masculinity. Bronson claimed he did not consider his prison cell as such, rather he saw it as a "hotel room." He also found recognition for his acts: "It was an opportunity, a place where soon every native was going to know my name." This is reflected in a scene in which Bronson is led to a holding cell, in chains, receiving cheers from inmates who crowded around doorways and openings in order to see him.

Despite the good reviews from Bronson, the film visually depicts prison in a less than positive manner. Recurring visual themes emphasize the tight and confining nature of the setting, which is accentuated by Bronson's size. He is led through narrow corridors and locked in small holding cells behind multiple doors. At times he is locked in smaller enclosures inside prison cells, a vivid illustration of his imprisonment. At the film's end, after his final hostage standoff,

Bronson is shown locked inside a very small cage, just big enough for him to fit inside. Barely able to move, his labored breathing suggests suffocation. Regardless of what Bronson says about his enjoyment of prison, the visuals remind the viewer that it is still prison, a bad place to be.

While Bronson claims to enjoy prison, he does not feel the same way about the asylum. He is sent to a mental asylum after repeated incidents in prison. While narrating he clearly indicates it was a bad place. Bronson says he “got it wrong” when he was transferred to the asylum. Nurses informed him he was in a different place, stating their intent to keep him from fighting: “this isn’t prison. We’re lion tamers here.” The asylum was clearly not a place where Bronson could practice his violent masculinity and bask in the glow of adulation from his fellow inmates. Instead, the other patients cowered in fear when he attacked nurses, who forced crippling drugs on him. The drugs reduced the once-powerful fighter to a feeble, drooling mess. The forced medication of Bronson can be read as a feminizing experience. Nurses held Bronson down and injected the drugs into one of his buttocks. In an act that resembled anal rape, nurses sapped him of his strength. The drugs feminized Bronson. Bronson’s misery during his stay in the asylum is illustrated by his cries of anguish while surrounded by mental patients. This is the only time in the movie Bronson seems to express sincere emotion. Visual themes also depict the asylum as a joyless setting. The building is clearly in a state of decay, with pieces missing from the walls and warped boards protruding from the floor. Bronson’s attempted murder of Mr. White was planned with the hopes of being convicted and sent back to prison: “I had to get out of there and I knew just the way to do it.” Bronson is anguished to learn his victim survived. The plan failed, so he would be sent to another “loony bin,” not back to prison. Unlike prison, the asylum was not a cordoned-off area in which he could enact his violent masculinity and receive recognition for it. Instead of cheering, his fellow inmates in the asylum cowered in fear when

Bronson acted out. Not only was his audience unreceptive, asylum staff subdued Bronson with powerful sedatives, rendering him physically incapable of committing violence.

The setting themes in the film treat imprisonment as a mixed blessing for Bronson. On the one hand, he can indulge his violent masculinity and receive recognition for it in prison. On the other, Bronson is forced to exist in constricting, dark spaces hardly resembling the “hotel room” he describes. This suggests a larger message about masculinity, that the world can only offer a dark, cramped prison as a place where Bronson can indulge his masculinity.

Setting: A Mixed Blessing

The way the settings of the film are framed is heavily influenced by Bronson’s ability to express his masculinity. Outside of jail there are few opportunities for Bronson to live life the way he wants. There is little reward for his violent masculinity. Behind bars, however, is a setting in which Bronson can engage in violent behavior and win recognition for his efforts. That said, the film reminds the viewer of the horrors of prison through its visual depictions of tight cells and constricting cages. The film appeals to the masculinity crisis discourse through its settings by suggesting there is no place for a strong man like Bronson except behind bars. Setting themes suggest Bronson must choose a life of physical confinement if he is to perform his masculinity, which is achieved through violent action.

Action Themes

In the previous discussion of character themes I argued Bronson’s masculinity depended heavily on depictions of his powerful body, his violent temper, and his differences from other men in the film. In addition to these characterizations, his masculinity is also defined by his actions. Action themes depict the actions taken by the characters in the drama (Shields & Preston, 1985, p. 107). The actions the characters take are major characteristics of the drama.

The bulk of the action in this film involves Bronson physically dominating other men. In this section I discuss the recurring themes of violence against and domination over other men and the way such action is framed as an essential expression of Bronson's masculinity. First I describe the scenes of domination. Then I discuss themes characterizing these acts as essential to Bronson's identity. Finally, I argue the film promotes violence as a rejection of femininity.

Bronson's ability to physically dominate other men is established early in the film. As an adolescent he gets an early start in school, beating a classmate. The young Bronson is even strong enough to punch an adult male teacher to the ground. This seemingly easy domination of other men appears throughout the film. Even the prison guards are dominated by Bronson individually, the first guards entering his cell always getting knocked to the ground. Even though Bronson is always beaten into submission by the group, his ability to resist individual guards is a more significant act of dominance. Bronson illustrates he is more powerful than the individual authority figures trying to control him. Outside of prison, during his brief career as an underground fighter, Bronson humiliates his opponents. He even urinates on one defeated foe. Another fight sees the protagonist easily defeat two men at the same time. His ability to control other men is also demonstrated through intimidation as he takes a prison librarian hostage and governs his every move by shouting. Bronson furthers his dominance of the librarian by stripping naked and forcing his captive to rub butter on his naked body. The scene is striking because of the way Bronson exercises his power. He barks instructions to his captive on where to apply the butter and how, questioning his sexuality in the process: "On my ass. Not in my ass, you fucking homo, on it!" Bronson's domination of his hostage is clear. Not only does he question his sexuality, and thus his masculinity, he is able to do so while forcing the man to touch his naked body. While the captive may have grounds to question Bronson's

heterosexuality in return, because the prisoner is commanding him to touch his bare buttocks, he knows it would be dangerous to question Bronson's masculinity. These acts of subordinating other men in this way are constructed as an essential part of his identity.

Throughout the film Bronson and others make references to his latent artistic talent. The film begins with Bronson stating his potential: "All my life I wanted to be famous. I knew I was made for better things. I had a calling. I just didn't know what I had. It wasn't singing. Can't fucking act. Kind of running out of choices really, aren't we?" Bronson saw himself as possessing a talent, yet it was not in the realm of traditional artistic expression. His uncle also refers to Bronson's artistic potential: "I always knew you had an artistic bent." As the film progresses, his medium of expression slowly becomes evident. Perhaps the first sign that violence is what he has to offer the world came when he first turned to crime shortly after getting married. Bronson stated married life was "not bad," but he pointed out "they don't give you a star on the walk of fame for 'not bad,' do they?" This is followed by a scene in which Bronson saws the barrel off of a shotgun while his wife tends to their child. This leads to the bank robbery that began Bronson's long tenure behind bars.

Bronson does discover traditional art forms in the prison art class yet he does not stray completely from his violent ways. Bronson focuses intently on painting after his art instructor tells him, "Find that piece of you that doesn't belong here." This call to action meant to inspire eventually takes a dark turn. Initially Bronson's behavior improved as he focused on his paintings. The warden praised him for his progress, stating he was pleased the prisoner showed signs of being able to coexist peacefully with others. It dawned on Bronson that traditional art had made him controllable. Visibly upset, he quickly turned on his art teacher, tying him to a post and painting on his face. Bronson had found his medium: doing violence to other men.

When his work was finished, he stood back to admire what he had done, saying, “oh yeah, that’s a fucking piece of me.” Bronson had found that piece of himself his teacher alluded to earlier. Violence and domination over other men was an essential component of his masculinity. This was his medium of expression. Painting on paper was a personal betrayal. His canvas was other men’s bodies. That Bronson embraced violence as an art form after he realized conventional art rendered him docile suggests the promotion of violent behavior. Bronson’s twisted art work was a violent resistance to effeminate authority. The svelte warden praised Bronson for his improved behavior and the prisoner responded with an act of violence against the effeminate art teacher.

Although this scene makes it most clear that Bronson’s violence is a resistance of feminine authority, this is not the only time he commits violence to combat repression. In the asylum Bronson strangled the sex offender in the hopes he would be convicted and returned to prison. The strangling was a violent act meant to release him from the feminizing force that was the staff of nurses with their crippling sedatives. The hands-on nature of this act highlights Bronson’s strength and masculinity. When he was moved to another asylum, Bronson responded by rioting, causing significant damage to asylum property. In sum, Bronson uses violence to resist the feminine authority’s efforts to control him.

Bronson frequently depicts its protagonist doing violence to other men or dominating them. Notions of artistic talent are gradually tied in with these themes of violence until it is made clear that Bronson’s true talent was violence, which he refined to an art form. Authority figures, in their attempts to control him, repressed something essential to Bronson’s masculine identity: violence. Violence was the necessary strategy for resisting the prison authorities’ repression. This way *Bronson* promotes violence as a way to reject the feminine.

Rhetorical Vision

In this section I review themes and discuss how they come together to form the rhetorical vision of *Bronson*. First I summarize the themes discussed previously and explain how they form the rhetorical vision. Then I discuss how the vision appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse and promotes violent masculinity as a rejection of femininity. I argue *Bronson* presents a rhetorical vision in which a traditionally masculine man for whom society has no place ends up in prison, where he must fight authorities' attempts to repress his masculinity.

I first discussed character themes that established Bronson as a highly masculine character worthy of admiration. Themes depicting his body establish Bronson's masculinity through his powerful physique. Themes describing Bronson's personality present him as a showman who is likable and exciting to watch yet dangerous and violent. Themes describing the other men in the film serve to differentiate Bronson and highlight his masculinity, which is heightened in comparison to other men like prison guards or the effeminate men in the film. The character themes in the film position Bronson as a model of traditional masculinity more powerful than the men around him. Themes also present Bronson as a charismatic, even likable character yet still maintain notions of his power by depicting him as volatile and dangerous. These character themes appeal to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse by establishing the main character who is more masculine than those around him and presenting him as a likable figure.

Setting themes also demonstrate the ways *Bronson* engages the masculinity crisis discourse. The world outside of prison is depicted as a place with few opportunities for the highly masculine protagonist. Prison is the one place that is conducive to Bronson's violent masculinity. Its suitability for Bronson is highlighted when contrasted with the asylum, where he

is sedated and grouped with feeble-minded inmates barely resembling humans. Thus Bronson must return to prison in order to indulge his masculinity. Despite Bronson's claims that he enjoys prison, visual themes clearly depict prison as a dark, cramped, unpleasant space, a sad place for traditionally masculine men to live.

The action themes reveal the ways the film appeals to the crisis sentiments and promotes violent masculinity as a rejection of the feminine. Action themes show Bronson physically dominating other men and establish his penchant for violence as an essential part of his identity. He commits violence against other men to resist effeminate authorities' attempts to repress his masculinity.

Taking the character themes, setting themes, and action themes together reveals a rhetorical vision reflective of the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. Bronson, with his powerful body and intimidating personality, represents a heightened masculinity that is not allowed a place in society. Prison is the only suitable venue for his masculinity, which is expressed through violence and domination over less traditionally-masculine men. Authority figures try to repress his masculinity, punishing him with beatings and isolation in cramped cells. In the end Bronson chooses his violent masculinity over accommodation to a society that has no place for him, which seals his fate within the confines of prison.

This film makes sense of events in a way that appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. The notion that traditional masculinity is no longer valued is reflected by Bronson's failure to fit in outside prison. Society offers him few opportunities to provide for himself or fulfill his potential. It is in prison where Bronson finds he can indulge his violent tendencies and receive recognition for doing so. The tough guy, unappreciated by society, must reside in the dark, cramped world of prison.

The contemporary masculinity crisis discourse is also characterized by the fear that traditional masculinity is in peril from encroaching femininity. Bronson faces encroaching femininity and resists it with violence. He refuses to bend to the will of the effeminate authority figures that imprison and try to control him. Violence is framed as an essential component of Bronson's identity. He acts out violently, damaging property, attempting murder, and assaulting his art teacher in order to resist attempts to repress his masculinity.

Bronson appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse by offering a rhetorical vision that depicts gender relations in a way that is consistent with crisis sentiments. The film reflects the crisis discourse when it portrays its traditionally masculine protagonist as undervalued by society and under attack from femininity. *Bronson* appeals to the crisis discourse further with its promotion of violent masculinity as a rejection of the feminine.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Bronson appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse by promoting violence as a rejection of the feminine. The film recasts Bronson's life as a fantasy that depicts a traditionally masculine male fighting oppression from effeminate authority figures. Here I summarize the previous chapters, reviewing the crisis discourse the film appeals to, the theoretical lens used for the analysis, and the results of the analysis. I argue *Bronson* presents the life of its protagonist as a fantasy that reflects the crisis discourse. I also argue the message the film sends about masculinity is troubling due to the restrictive, destructive model of masculinity it promotes.

Review

I began this project with a review of literature on the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse and representations of masculinity in media. The contemporary masculinity crisis discourse can be characterized as a backlash against changing gender norms and perceptions of encroaching femininity. Research showed this discourse is rooted in reactions to women's social progress and perceptions that men were taking on traditionally feminine roles and behaviors. Despite notions that traditional masculinity was endangered due to the prevalence of more feminine conceptions of masculinity, research on representations of masculinity demonstrates traditional constructions of masculinity are rearticulated in media in ways that privilege the traditional model over alternate constructions.

Next was the method section, a review of Symbolic Convergence Theory as the method of analysis for this project. The chapter began with a review of the theory's development, epistemological propositions, and key terms used in this project. The chapter also contained a

section devoted to debates over the theory's usefulness, which concluded with the argument that SCT provided useful insights into the communication of groups' interpretations of events and the cultivation of group perspectives. SCT was a useful method of analysis for this project because it provided insight into the ways *Bronson* makes sense of the events of its protagonist's life in a way that appeals to the masculinity crisis discourse, which is a group discourse on masculinity. In addition, this project answers critics' claims that fantasy does not spread outside of interpersonal contexts and that fantasies do not accurately describe social reality for groups. That *Bronson* appeals to a larger discourse on masculinity through the use of fantasy demonstrates a group perspective manifesting itself in mass media, outside of the interpersonal context. The vision of the film demonstrates the ability of fantasy to capture the essence of a group's social reality by depicting a repression of traditional masculinity, corresponding to crisis discourse notions of masculinity in peril.

Analysis revealed the ways the film appealed to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse and promoted violence as a rejection of femininity. The film established the protagonist's masculinity through character themes emphasizing his powerful body, his violent temperament, and his differences from other, less masculine men in the film. Setting themes depicted a world that did not appreciate Bronson and his violent masculinity. Themes also framed prison as the place where Bronson could indulge his violent masculinity. However, despite themes suggesting Bronson considered prison a positive environment, visual themes depicting the constricting spaces of prison maintained the setting as less than ideal. These themes say that in a world in which powerful men are not valued, they must turn to dark places like prisons in order to be themselves. Finally, action themes consistently depict Bronson physically dominating other men. He briefly abandons this behavior, only to resume attacks on others when

he realizes authority figures have managed to curb his violent masculinity. The film presents a rhetorical vision in which one traditionally masculine character is undervalued by society, finding a place for his violent masculinity only in the tight cages of prisons. Prison authorities try to control his masculinity, yet he pushes back, maintaining his violent tendencies at the price of his freedom.

Bronson appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse through its depiction of a traditionally masculine character struggling to exist with his masculinity intact. The protagonist pushes back against less traditionally masculine men, some of them effeminate, inflicting physical harm. The film promotes violence as a rejection of femininity by framing violence as an essential component of Bronson's masculinity and an action he must resort to in order to maintain his masculinity in the face of feminine repression.

Discussion

Bronson sends a troubling message regarding masculinity. The film recasts a violent criminal's life as a drama in which a traditionally masculine man struggles against feminine authorities' efforts to repress his masculinity. The notion that traditional masculinity must resist femininity promotes restrictive notions of gender. Here I discuss additional imagery that reinforces my reading of *Bronson* as a fantasy of traditional masculinity resisting feminine repression. I then discuss the restrictive and destructive nature of the masculinity this fantasy promotes.

Bronson appeals to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse by presenting the life of the real criminal as a fantasy in which traditional masculinity fights feminine repression using violence. Thus the film makes sense of the events in Bronson's life in a way that reflects crisis notions of masculinity-in-peril and overbearing femininity. While it is possible to read the film

as representing traditional masculinity as potentially harmful through the depiction of the suffering Bronson goes through as a result of his behavior, I argue the film frames Bronson's ordeal as the result of feminine repression. Themes depicting an effeminate authority figure in the warden and the domination of the effeminate art teacher as the reassertion of Bronson's masculinity indicate he is resisting the feminine. Other imagery in the film that falls outside the scope of fantasy theme analysis also indicates Bronson rebelled against the feminine in order to preserve his masculinity.

One scene contains clear imagery that indicates Bronson is fighting feminine authority figures. The scene of Bronson narrating on stage just after his attempted strangulation of Mr. White shows Bronson acting out his dealings with asylum authorities. Half of Bronson's face is painted white, with his bald scalp painted brown in a pattern resembling a woman's haircut. He also wears long painted fingernails on one hand. The other half of Bronson's face is left bare. He enacts a dialog between himself and an imagined nurse, turning each side toward the camera as he goes between roles. Here the film casts oppressive authority as feminine, despite the fact all nurses in the film were men. This could also be read as accusing the men working as nurses of being feminized or less manly for filling roles traditionally filled by women. This imagery reappears when stage Bronson shows footage of the roof top riot that got him released from the asylum for good. This time his entire face is painted white, scalp painted to resemble a woman's haircut. He also has two red stripes painted on his face, one across his eye, the other across his forehead. I read these red stripes as scars, symbolizing the damage Bronson inflicted to the system during his riot. With Bronson's stage makeup, he presented the face of the authorities as a feminine one.

Other imagery supports the notion Bronson fought to maintain his masculinity. Phallic imagery symbolizes power shifts in the film between Bronson and authority figures. Thompson (2004) described the phallus as “a mystified ideal of omnipotent power whose possession would confer a state of absolute and incontestable dominance in the patriarchal hierarchy” (p. 316). Bronson and the guards show indications of phallic power at different times during the film. The protagonist showed phallic power when he began his life of crime. He held a shotgun outward from his groin after sawing the barrel off in preparation for a robbery. Bronson most frequently displays phallic power through his body. His body is a phallic symbol when it is bare, conveying power and hardness through his muscular build. Prison guards also possess phallic symbols of power in the form of batons, which are held upright, near the guards’ mid sections. This possession of symbols of power by two opposing forces indicates a power struggle. Thompson stated possession of the phallus was a claim to patriarchal dominance. Bronson fought for dominance on behalf of traditional masculinity while the guards fought on behalf of feminine authority. Bronson seems to lose phallic power when he focuses on his artwork and becomes more docile in the process. He sits over his work fully clothed, concealing his powerful body. When he presents an example of his artwork to the warden, the rolled up piece of paper he holds in his hands can be read as a failed phallus. It stands tall and erect yet it is soft. The appearance of this failed phallus also coincides with Bronson’s realization he has been tamed by the effeminate warden, who takes the rolled up painting from him. When Bronson attacks the art instructor to reassert his violence and, thus, his masculinity, his powerful body is once again on display. Bronson possessed the phallus once more. The reemergence of Bronson’s phallic symbol of power coincided with the reassertion of his masculinity. Bronson was upset by the

realization he had temporarily relinquished his claim to masculine power. When he lashed out in defiance of the warden's control, his symbolic claim to male power was on full display.

Bronson advances a model of masculinity that is restrictive and, most importantly, destructive. *Bronson* promotes restrictive notions of masculinity through its protagonist and the treatment of other male characters in the film. Bronson himself is a narrow concept of manhood. He possesses a muscular physique that many would find difficult to achieve. In addition he expresses little emotion. Finally Bronson's resistance to effeminate men indicates a rejection of men who do not fit the ideal embodied by Bronson. The model of masculinity embodied by Bronson is very destructive as well. The extent to which this model is unhealthy was not fully covered due to facts left out of the film. The scene in which Bronson takes his art instructor hostage is a striking example. Director Nicolas Winding Refn wrote the scene with the aim of depicting Bronson as an artist searching for a canvas for his art (Anthony, 2009). The true event is more grim. The teacher, Phil Danielson, claimed he feared for his life during the incident, in which Bronson held him hostage with a knife, threatening to stab him ('I've suffered terribly since hostage ordeal,' 2007). Danielson, who now suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder, quit his job at the prison ('I've suffered terribly, 2007). *Bronson* depicts the actions of its violent protagonist without adequately representing the harm done to others.

The insufficient representation of the harm Bronson caused to those around him demonstrates the film's problematic connection to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse. Because *Bronson* appeals to the crisis discourse through depictions of its characters, settings, and actions, the protagonist is cast as an endangered relic of traditional masculinity fighting for his manhood. His status as a violent, destructive criminal who leaves a trail of misery behind him is secondary to the narrative of traditional masculinity fighting for survival. This film demonstrates

the potential for crisis sentiments to color perceptions of masculinity in a way that privileges unhealthy notions of masculinity without considering the negative consequences of such constructions. The model of masculinity advanced in the film is unhealthy because it is asserted through violence. If adopted, such masculinity could potentially lead to physical and psychological suffering for those in the vicinity of men who evince a Bronson-like masculinity.

Although I argue Bronson is cast as a sympathetic character and traditional masculinity as repressed, the film can be read in other ways. One possible interpretation of *Bronson* is that the film serves as a moral tale depicting the dangers of violent masculinity. The negative consequences Bronson faces lend credence to this reading. He leads a life of pain and isolation as a result of his violent conduct. Bronson is forced to live in a constricting environment, unable to stay connected to others such as the women in the film or his art instructor. Though viewing Bronson as a moral warning against violent masculinity is a valid reading, I maintain the film frames its protagonist not as a victim of his own mistakes but rather as a victim of circumstance (i.e. an unwelcoming culture, repressive authority figures). The film depicts a world that offers little opportunity for a tough guy like Bronson to be himself. Prison is his only alternative. In addition, Bronson's failure to connect with others in the film is not emphasized, as women are not important to Bronson, and he expressed a desire to be apart from his art teacher rather than maintaining a close working relationship with him. My reading of the film, as a tale of a powerful, masculine figure who is framed as a victim of a world that does not appreciate him, demonstrates the film's ties to the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse.

The rhetorical vision of *Bronson* is troubling. It appeals to crisis sentiments with a narrow ideal of masculinity that is difficult to achieve. *Bronson's* model of masculinity is also highly destructive with its focus on the physical domination of other men. The scenes of violence from

the film as well as reports of misery the real Bronson left in his wake indicate the potential negative consequences of such conceptions of masculinity. In addition, the movie reflects the whiteness of the crisis discourse as men of color had no role in the film. This indicates the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse does not include concerns over nonwhite men's issues. Finally, while the film is not cruel to women, they have very little voice. Bronson's mother's few lines cast her as an enabler of his antisocial behavior. Bronson's wife only has one line, asking, "Michael, what are you doing?" as he prepares for the robbery that would land him behind bars. The viewer sees her visit Bronson in prison once. She says nothing and is never seen again. Rounding out the women of the film, Bronson's nameless romantic interest, who he met after he was released from prison, was portrayed as shallow and materialistic, eventually choosing another man over Bronson because the other suitor had a motorcycle. Thus, *Bronson* demonstrates that harmful notions of gender can be promoted through what appears to be a simple retelling of true events. My research provides insight into ways notions of gender can be communicated even when these notions are not the overt focus of a text. Future studies could focus on other artifacts that engage the contemporary masculinity crisis discourse, perhaps using SCT to look for themes and visions similar to those found in *Bronson*.

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