

# Exegesis of *FARCE*

CIM211 - Project 3 - Exegesis

**Group members:** Joel Rowan, Patrick Reeve, [REDACTED] and Tyreese Pele

## Introduction:

Hegemonic masculinity is defined by Raewyn Connell (2005) as “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (p. 76). In other words, the “set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organise society in gender unequal ways” (Jewkes et al., 2015, p. 113) is what we regard as hegemonic masculinity. We see examples of hegemonic masculinity all over the world through media representations, sports, vehicles and beauty standards. Within the realm of our chosen craft there are many characters in films and television series that represent the trope of what ‘being a man’ truly means. As a group of four young men, we decided to explore critical masculinity theory through our short film. *Farce* centres around a construction worker (Joel) literally and figuratively being weighed down by the work responsibilities that he has placed upon himself. The scene is accompanied with dialogue alongside a one-shot dolly. The verbal components reflect the pressures that weigh someone down in this life whether it be from friends and family or those one may put on oneself. According to Connell (2005), “definitions of masculinity are deeply enmeshed in the history of institutions and of economic structures... Masculinity... is extended into the world, merged in organised social relations” (p. 29). *Farce* hints at this interplay between capitalism and masculinity, as Joel’s gender performance is linked to his role in the economy, as a blue collar worker shouldering the load of society’s labour. As young men confronting the realities of mounting responsibilities and the fear of societal alienation, we sought to critically engage with

our positions within the structures of hegemonic masculinity. Through this work, we aim to initiate a conversation on the complexities of male identity in the modern world, inviting reflection and critique of the roles that patriarchy imposes on men. The narrative shifts auditory focus between Joel, his coworkers and his wife, to demonstrate the multi-layered effects of patriarchy and its power over everyone, including men like Joel.

## Methods & Techniques:

*Farce* depicts a worker under a spotlight. We utilised a space light and opted for harsh lighting. The lighting direction and use of hard lighting create heavy shadows on the subject, which has a thematic reasoning; These shadows over the face and body help keep the identity of the character obscured. Because our film tackles themes of masculinity and gender ubiquitous to men, the obfuscation of identity promotes the audience's connection to the character, especially if they have experienced similar issues. The shadows of the film also relate to the suppressive feeling that many men experience, the feeling of needing to hide one's true feelings so the world can only see and judge one's performance, not one's soul. The film uses a dolly-in to create movement in a scene while the subject is stationary. "The continuous camera move tends to infuse the moment with extra dramatic weight... and the audience is cued to imagine what the character is thinking or feeling" (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier, 2020, p. 195). We also had a tilt down in the final shot of the film to reveal that the audience we heard throughout were never there. In terms of sound design, we meticulously crafted a mix that subtly divides characters through spatial audio. The illusory presence of an audience was created through a deliberate soundscape of murmurs and applause that deeply impacts the protagonist's psyche. Additionally, the use of infrasound, frequencies below the threshold of human hearing, is intended to instil an unsettling feeling in the viewer, which mirrors the unspoken anxieties of men. Due to project requirements and time constraints, we operated as a

small crew of five creatives; Patrick Reeve as writer/director; [REDACTED] as producer/director of photography; Hyeongjun Park as camera assistant, Tyreese Pele as sound recordist/editor, and Joel Rowan as actor/gaffer.

## Critical Theory & Cultural Context:

*Farce* addresses critical feminist theory, more specifically the theory of masculinity developed by Raewyn Connell. Connell's masculinity theory focuses on some of the neglected aspects of the critical theories that came before, her discussion centred around the relationships between men instead of the 'othering' of women. The theory suggests that male domination is "a dynamic system constantly reproduced and re-constituted through [changing] gender relations" (Wedgwood, 2009, p.332). *Farce* is a depiction of this system. Joel is like a funambulist, seeking to find balance in the representation of his own masculinity suspended by social hierarchy, a tightrope held taut between two opposing forces; His superiors on one side, men pressuring him to fulfil his role of the provider given to him by the patriarchy; and his 'subordinates' on the other side, women watching helplessly as he suffers under the weight of his place in hegemonic masculinity.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity asserts that "the body is inescapable in the construction of masculinity... (both personal and collective) and a possible object of politics" (Connell, 2005, p. 56). In this sense, Joel is choosing to participate in the hegemony by placing the bag on his back. This is a representation of every individual man's decision to assume their position in the hierarchy. It is in Joel's and every man's power to ascend their gender role, literally and metaphorically, to remove the pressure that they've placed upon themselves. However, as Connell stated, the collective is equally as responsible. Assuming a role in a hierarchy is only possible if the hierarchy exists in the first place. This is Joel's position,

choosing to perform on the stage of masculinity but not actively participating in its construction or deconstruction. This is the complacency that sustains patriarchy.

The piece does not explicitly mention the gender or sex of Joel, but he is constructed to be a man because of the surrounding contexts. This is Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, that gender is not biologically determined but instead created through social interaction (Sallee & Harris, 2011, p. 413). Much like Connell, Butler questions to what extent we constitute ourselves, and if our actions are chosen for us (Felluga, 2015). This is ultimately the defining question of the short film. Who is responsible for Joel's suffering? Joel's gender is assumed because of his position within the structures of the film, fulfilling certain gender expectations. Joel's role for example is expected to be male, as well as the subordination towards strong male presence and domination of women. Joel's gendered performance is defined by his adherence to these gender expectations, or 'gender role' (Connell, 2005, p.48).

Joel's performance is so intrinsic to his gender his actions do not immediately invite criticism. Not only do his superiors fail to see the harm, they encourage him to intensify his performance, mounting pressure to keep going and push himself harder. A male audience may not even recognise the plight, viewing it as a necessity for the greater good of society. There is a reason why the feminine, female voice recognises this insanity. For if a woman, 'Julia', found herself in Joel's position society would immediately appreciate its horror.

The division of men and women in the theatre is an exercise of the concept of 'othering'. Women are literally and figuratively segregated, as the men define their domination through their aggressive language and mockery (Udasmoro, 2018, p. 6). The audience's heckling phrases such as "Only one bag?", "50 bucks says he drops it", "Look at him... He's whipped!" are palatable versions of the all-too-familiar verbal abuse inflicted on men by other men. The character of Joel is not defined by his strength, but his fear. Stepping outside of his role would risk him becoming 'othered' and could become excluded from heteromasculine circles. This fear of being homosexualised and its subsequent isolation is a hysteria that many men feel,

consciously or otherwise. This is because in the context of hegemonic masculinity homosexualisation moves a man down the social hierarchy. In this way homosexualisation can be equated with feminisation (O'Neill, 2014, p. 6). This feminisation terrifies men, Joel included, as they risk feeling the same domination that they place on women.

The consequences of this homophobia are laid bare in the film, concluding with Joel succumbing to the pressure and collapsing under the weight. This is the great farce of hegemonic masculinity that plagues many modern men; nonsensical actions addressing absurd fears, which lead to ridiculous consequences. This is the criticism that lays at the heart of the film, demonstrating this insanity in its purest form by removing abstractions. In this sense the film does not problematise hegemonic masculinity, but gives the audience an opportunity to problematise it themselves by providing an unfettered view into its psycho-sociological landscapes. The film is not meant to be a criticism, but instead an invitation to find criticism and understanding in the problem.

## Audiences & Aesthetics:

The text is intentionally vague to evoke different interpretations based on the audience's position to the media. This is Stuart Hall's theory of media decoding (Sullivan, 2019, p.142). Hegemonic masculinity is multifaceted and complex, each individual having a unique interaction with it and in turn, interpreting this piece differently. Ultimately, the intention was to provoke the audience into interrogating their relationship with the patriarchy, whatever form that may take. The ambiguity of the film is accentuated by the aesthetic of most of the film's content being solely heard, not seen. This allows the audience to imagine the off screen characters according to their position. In the words of David Lynch, 'The eye sees, but the ears imagine' (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier, 2020, p.150)

The aesthetic of a man being literally and figuratively at the centre of the piece is a choice to reflect the nature of patriarchy (Gaut & Lopes, 2013, p.438). Hegemonic masculinity is held up by men like Joel even if it kills them. This evokes the aesthetic of the myth of Atlas, in which Joel is trapped under the sandbag, believing that his world depends on him. This is an absurdity that many men maintain, a dogmatic belief that Mickey A. Feher (2021) calls 'The Atlas Complex of Men' (para. 1).

The diverse elements in our film, such as the man ensconced in darkness, the performative construction site setting, and the valorisation of suffering, serve to evoke potent reactions within a modern audience by touching on themes of isolation, the relentless grind of labour, and the glamorization of masculine perseverance. These aesthetic choices mirror the pervasive, often unacknowledged, struggles inherent to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. The darkness enveloping the man symbolises his ostracization and loneliness of adhering to traditional masculine roles. The construction site embodies the perpetual toil and expectation to build and climb, whatever the cost. The glorification of suffering as a badge of honour emphasises the societal expectation for men to proudly endure in silence.

Audience interpretations of the film's motifs will vary based on their perspective towards the message, aligning with Stuart Hall's theory of media decoding. Those in the dominant-hegemonic position might see the film as a reinforcement of traditional masculine virtues, interpreting the struggle and isolation as necessary sacrifices for masculine success. Individuals with a negotiated position may recognise the critique of these norms, acknowledging the truth in the portrayal of masculinity's burdens while still seeing value in traditional roles. On the other hand, viewers in the oppositional position could interpret the film as a stark condemnation of these societal expectations, regarding the protagonist's conflict as a critique of the toxic aspects of masculinity and the destructive nature of patriarchal standards. By presenting these varied elements and potential viewpoints, our film engages audiences in a

deeper contemplation of their own relationships with the constructs of masculinity and patriarchy and hopefully encourages greater dialogue on these germane societal issues.

## **Message/Conclusion:**

### **An Artist's Statement by Patrick Reeve**

*"The title Farce has a dual meaning. Firstly in the literal sense; it's a performance of a man holding a sandbag, how ridiculous. Secondly in a figurative sense; Joel's performance of his gender, like many men, is wildly nonsensical. You can't help but ask 'why are you doing this?' A man works sixty hour weeks at a job that hates him, breaking his body and neglecting his family, why? A man treats women as his servants, disrespecting and mocking them at every opportunity, why? However, when you analyse masculinity critically these answers become obvious. They are absolutely terrified of being seen as lesser, othered, and feminised. There is no greater threat to the heterosexual man than being perceived as a homosexual."*

From our research of hegemonic masculinity, we found that "[the concept] combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy" (Jewkes et al., 2015, p.40). By combining this knowledge with the script written for our short film, *Farce*, we strengthened the direction of the piece from the writing, through to the filming and editing process.

Through research and collaboration, we refined our film into a more poignant narrative, adeptly portraying the intense burdens borne from striving to meet the expectation of others, irrespective of whether these forces are benevolent or malign. The deliberate use of a spotlight within a theatrical setting highlights the protagonist's plight as a metaphorical performance for an unseen audience, gradually succumbing to the weight on his shoulders. This creative

decision underscores our exploration of hegemonic masculinity, questioning societal norms and the conventional portrayal of manhood. We aspire to offer a glimpse into the complexities surrounding hegemonic masculinity, as well as a story that fosters understanding among viewers. To those who see reflections of their own struggles within our narrative, we hope to help them feel seen and understood. Moreover, by striving to present an ambivalent perspective on a topic often mired in controversy, we hope to encourage a balanced discourse and invite audiences to consider perspectives beyond their own.



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