

**Anima Animus: Jennifer Jason Leigh's Bisexual Method in *Last Exit to Brooklyn***

Ian Murphy, University College Cork

**Abstract:** *This essay explores Jennifer Jason Leigh's portrayal of the young prostitute Tralala in Last Exit to Brooklyn (Uli Edel, 1989) as a case study in performance style that can be usefully understood as bisexual. Drawing firstly upon Joan Riviere's concept of womanliness as a masquerade, it examines how Tralala's feminine performativity masks a confused, neurotic and androgynous gender identity and a raging bid for phallic power. As played by Leigh, Tralala's snarling speech and undulating swagger evokes the wounded rage, rebellion and alienation of 1950s Method "bad boy" stars such as Marlon Brando, James Dean and Montgomery Clift, and the result is a performance style that oscillates freely between male and female subjectivities. Reading the male Method stars in terms of alternative masculinities that transgress the social order, the article argues that Tralala's essential masochism is fuelled by a similar disavowal of her biological gender. In this regard, she demonstrates a desire to annihilate the self that has less to do with standard screen representations of female masochism than with the explosive psychic processes of classic Method masculinity.*

In its critical engagement with queer theory, masculinity studies and phenomenology, film theory has gradually shifted from psychoanalytic feminism's early concerns with sexual difference towards a broader understanding of identity as fractured, fluid and mutable. While scholars such as Chris Straayer, Judith Halberstam and Chris Holmlund have theorised the processes through which identification and desire are written on the body in genre cinema, we must also interrogate the means in which gender fluidity is inscribed at the level of performance.<sup>1</sup> How might we approach a performance style that seeks to close the gap between male and female subjectivities? How does traditional narrative cinema facilitate or foreclose such a style, and what are its implications for screen performers of both genders? This essay considers Jennifer Jason Leigh's portrayal of the prostitute Tralala in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (Uli Edel, 1989) as a case study in performance style that can be usefully understood as bisexual. Drawing upon Joan Riviere's concept of the masquerade and Steven Cohan's view that the rebellious brand of masculinity promoted by such icons of 1950s Method acting as Marlon Brando, James Dean and Montgomery Clift posed an explicit new threat to the screen's gender binary, I argue that Leigh self-consciously subverts a range of masculine texts and traditions in order to express her character's confused and neurotic gender identity. In the process, her fundamental bisexuality constitutes an unnerving gaze into the abyss at the heart of subjectivity. Leigh's screen persona has long been defined by a sense of masochistic alienation from the social order, and I will consider the full import of this persona—her looks and mannerisms, her collaborative engagement with writers and directors, but also her idiosyncratic role choices and the modes of viewer response that they privilege. As a preliminary step, I will thereby situate *Last Exit to Brooklyn* within the broader context of her career by establishing the discourse of suffering that has conditioned her persona from the outset.<sup>2</sup>

## Victim or Aggressor: Rise of a Masochistic Star

Leigh's first major role was in the violence-against-women slasher film, *Eyes of a Stranger* (Ken Wiederhorn, 1981), in which she played a particularly fragile variant on Carol Clover's "final girl" type—a teenager left blind, deaf, and mute from the trauma of a childhood rape, and now preyed upon by a serial sex killer (35). Fighting for her life in the film's climax, her senses are dubiously restored (a scene that Robin Wood defended as "very moving"), with subjective shots of her blurred vision resolving into clarity as she struggles to defend herself first with a knife and then with a gun (84). She was similarly brutalised in such films as *The Hitcher* (Robert Harmon, 1986), where she was tied to a semi-truck and ripped in half, and *Heart of Midnight* (Matthew Chapman, 1988), in which her crippled heroine was costumed in leather, chained to a wooden beam, and videotaped as foreplay to a snuff production. Leigh's suffering extended beyond the horror genre: in the teen comedy *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling, 1982), she played a fifteen-year-old girl whose sexual curiosity leads to a deflowering scene of awkward verisimilitude (again rendered through shaky first-person camerawork), followed by an unplanned pregnancy and abortion. Roger Ebert's review of that film began by asking "How could they do this to Jennifer Jason Leigh?", going on to lament the manner in which we have "to see her humiliated, disappointed, and embarrassed by her sexual awakening" and noting the fact that "she looks so young, fresh, cheerful and innocent that we don't laugh when she gets into unhappy scenes with men—we wince" ("Review"). The narrative structure and *mise-en-scène* of these early films, combined with the affective identificatory responses of male critics like Wood and Ebert, ensured that Leigh's was an unusually vulnerable star image, constructed wholly around tropes of abuse, exploitation and a determination to make us feel her pain. Yet in contrast to her traditional reception, Leigh harboured the perverse conviction that her characters resisted stereotypical victim status: "Though they are vulnerable", she once conceded, "none of the women I've played are absolute victims. They have their own power" (Collins). To this end, we may recall the scene in *Flesh + Blood* (Paul Verhoeven, 1985) where Leigh's princess, kidnapped and raped before a cheering crowd of bandits, attempts to seize control by wrapping her legs around her rapist and expressing pleasure, much to his emasculated humiliation and the amusement of the spectators ("*She's fucking you!*", one of them perceptively jeers).

The set of contradictions and ambiguities that coalesced around Leigh's star image proved intriguing to Uli Edel when he was casting the role of Tralala in his screen adaptation of Hubert Selby Jr.'s controversial 1964 novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Tralala is a nineteen-year-old prostitute who makes a living by luring sailors and soldiers to an empty waterfront lot, distracting them with the promise of oral sex, and offering them as bait to a local street gang who knock them unconscious and rob their money. As conceived by Selby, the character is not only amoral but physically violent; in one of the book's more chilling passages, she joins the gang in assaulting a crippled soldier by stomping on the man's face, breaking his nose, and repeatedly kicking him in the groin (72). In Desmond Nakano's screenplay, Tralala becomes merely complicit to acts of male violence, and through Edel's expressionistic framing and composer Mark Knopfler's lyrical leitmotifs she is accorded a degree of pathos missing from Selby's brutal prose. The resulting emphasis on psychological interiority—of which Selby himself was highly supportive (Edel; Cameron-Wilson 103)—produces a Tralala who oscillates between conventional sexual binaries of hard/soft, masculine/feminine and aggressor/victim. It also enables Leigh to offer a bisexual interpretation of the character, one that self-reflexively references her own prolific screen history as a victim of male sexual violence while simultaneously playing upon audience awareness of classical Hollywood performance styles of both genders.

## The Politics of Masquerade

As with the novel, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is set in 1952 during a six-month factory strike that has left the neighbourhood of Red Hook on the breadline. It unfolds in a dark and claustrophobic night-world where only the most heteronormative masculinities attain social power. When Harry Black, a closeted union official desperate for the approval of his male peers, is outed as homosexual, he is beaten, kicked in the groin, and left hanging on a wooden beam in a crucifixion pose; similarly, an effeminate local transvestite named Georgette is half-jokingly offered a sex-change operation via switchblade. The film's castration motif is felt from its opening scene, in which we encounter Tralala quarrelling with her pimp Vinnie on a street corner over the possession of a "half-buck" he owes her: "I'll break your goddamn balls", she threatens as she knees him in the groin. When their quarrel attracts the drunken provocation of some passing soldiers, Tralala retorts by shrieking, "Go fuck your mother, I hear she's a good hump". Following a bloody street fight and the arrival of police officers on the scene, Vinnie is quick to exonerate himself through Tralala's femininity: he claims that she is his wife, and that he was compelled to defend her honour against "obscene remarks" the soldiers had made. A shadow of doubt darkens Tralala's face, as though she were unsure of her ability to pull off a credible account of female respectability, but she feigns offence and agrees that the men insulted her. As the scene dies down, she leans against a car bonnet, lasciviously smirks and licks her lips, and proudly thrusts out her cleavage at the bystanders; a moment later she playfully kicks Vinnie's leg in a gesture of macho camaraderie, forgetting their earlier quarrel. The clashing signifiers at play in this opening scene quickly establish Tralala's marginal status in the film. She is an alien figure of no fixed gender, a grotesque tomboy who flaunts her difference in order to survive in a Darwinian world where her biological sex is merely an alibi for male violence.

In her seminal study of femininity as a masquerade, Joan Riviere discusses certain "intermediate types" of women whose masculine psyches are at odds with their female biology. While not necessarily lesbian, their basic androgyny destabilises the socially prescribed boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality (303). Fearful of her potential to disrupt the patriarchal order, the woman who identifies with masculinity may indulge in a masquerade of particular exaggeration and excess, adopting a mask of overt womanliness that serves "to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (306). As a model of intermediate femininity, Tralala is engaged in a highly self-conscious gender masquerade, a performance that she must constantly regulate and maintain through a relay of acts, poses and gestures designed to draw attention to the cultural signifiers of woman. She emphasises her specularly by wearing low-cut tops that exhibit her cleavage, sheath-like skirts that drape around her curves and stiletto heels that roll her hips into an undulating swagger. While no Hollywood stars are mentioned in the diegesis, Tralala's body language, clothing, platinum hairdo and beauty spot are semiotic codes, the erotic success of which relies on her culture's ability to decipher certain traditions of female glamour, in particular a lineage of blonde bombshell stars ranging from 1930s prototypes such as Jean Harlow to post-war descendants such as Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield and Mamie Van Doren. In every respect, her femininity is mediated, contingent, and artificial.



**Gender trouble: Tralala's neurosis is conveyed through Uli Edel's expressionistic framing and Jennifer Jason Leigh's aggressive physicality (*Last Exit to Brooklyn*, 1989).**

In theorising the whole spectrum of gender identities as performative utterances of social norms, Judith Butler likens the masquerading woman's "wish for masculinity" to the case of a homosexual man who overcompensates with self-conscious acts of virility (69). Just as Harry Black indulges in histrionic displays of bravado for fear of a violent patriarchal reprisal, Tralala sublimates her castration fantasies beneath public impersonations of femininity. However, as Butler reminds us, the masquerade is assumed "knowingly in order to conceal [her] masculinity from the male audience she wants to castrate", and where Harry is consumed with shame, Tralala takes perverse pleasure in her performance (70). In one early scene, she walks into a crowded bar, lights a cigarette and sits alone at the far end of the counter, deeply isolated in the filmic space. Patrons cheer on a television boxing match, counting to ten with the referee as a fallen boxer struggles to rise from the floor. "Hey Willy", she grins at the bartender, "Count to ten—like in a fight". Mimicking the strategies of the pugilist, she affects a demure pose and makes eye contact with a soldier across the bar. A few seconds later, her chosen victim has offered to buy her a drink. The next scene galvanises the link between Tralala's predatory female sexuality and the world of male violence: crouching in a vacant lot, Vinnie's gang rations out the money over the soldier's body (like the boxer, he is out for the count), while Tralala extends a hand for her take and glances over her shoulder to ensure that there are no witnesses. She has effectively donned the mask of womanliness to attain symbolic power as an honorary tough-guy, privy to the clandestine operations of outlaw masculinity, and again disclosed her status as a willing beneficiary of the privilege that patriarchal culture reserves for the phallus.<sup>3</sup>

The basic discord between Leigh's delicate frame and the male psychology driving Tralala's masquerade encourages us to read overtones of bisexuality into her acting style. While Lizzie Francke notes that she "brings to the role some of Marilyn Monroe's or Eva Marie Saint's tender fragility—but with any anger that was sewn up into the wounded female roles of the 1950s here allowed to seep through at the seams", others refer directly to Tralala's masculinity (8). Kevin Maher, for instance, feels that rather than evoking any female icons, her snarling, tomboyish swagger—"leading from the hips" while "trading insults with the Brooklyn boys"—recalls "more than anything a *Streetcar*-era Brando" ("Jennifer Jason Leigh"). Laura Miller also detects a "certain machismo" to Leigh's acting style, suggesting her debt of influence to "those young male actors of the 1950s—Brando, Dean and Clift—who sought to prove themselves with a flamboyant intensity that defied traditional cinematic masculinity" ("Sluts and Addicts"). Here we should note a telling early shot that entraps Tralala at the far right of the screen, half-dissolved into the frame. She affects the same mannered "loitering" stance as every other would-be rebel in the room: leaning against a wall, a cigarette dangling from her lips, hips thrust forward in the loose, slouching posture with which the new male stars of the 1950s attempted to prove their mettle as hardened products of the streets. The resonance of her posing is twofold. Firstly it suggests that Tralala's alienation runs so deep that her masculinity is as much a process of mimicry as her more obviously constructed femininity. Secondly it reminds us how, as theorists of 1950s male performance such as Steven Cohan, James Naremore and Virginia Wright Wexman have argued, the male stars of that decade responded to the post-war crisis of American masculinity by cultivating a new set of alternative star images with an unusual degree of performativity. In his book *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*, Cohan attributes those characteristics readily associated with Method acting progenitors like Brando, Clift and Dean—"their self-conscious posing, grungy clothing, lack of formal education, working-class identity, urban background, emotional immaturity, alienation from corporate America"—to a greater gender anxiety, sexual ambiguity and revolt against the dominant fiction of phallic masculinity (202). In this respect, they ranked among Hollywood's first stars to address the taboo possibility that manliness was also something of a masquerade, so it is worth revisiting their star images to assess the legacy of sexual difference that Leigh invokes in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.<sup>4</sup>

### **Bisexual Methods: The Rebel Heroes of 1950s Hollywood**

In his discussion of Marlon Brando, Cohan argues that, despite the cultural perception of ruggedness, virility and "transcendent authenticity" (244) that congealed around his embodiment of masculinity—for instance, Norman Mailer's personification of the early Brando as "a walking phallus" (Naremore 196)—roles such as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951) attest to the self-consciously exhibitionistic performativity of his star image. For Cohan, Stanley's violent temper tantrums, theatrical investment in the details of costume and "mood lighting" during sexual intercourse and flaunting of his muscular physique in wet, torn T-shirts (or less) to solicit the female gaze of Kim Hunter and Vivien Leigh—and, by implication, a non-diegetic homoerotic gaze—all signify a flamboyant sexual narcissism that troubles the gendered binary of subject/object difference. The bisexual significance of his Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954) lies in his tortured negotiation between masculine and feminine modes of identification as he struggles to live honourably in a corrupt patriarchal order. In her essay on that film, Wexman reads Terry's spiritual closeness with his beloved hermaphrodite pigeon, his repeated withdrawal from physical conflict and obvious discomfort holding a gun, and the naturalistic ease with which he famously slips on Eva Marie Saint's glove during their walk through the park, as connoting a

fluid movement between male and female subjectivities, as well as his need to affirm an individualistic new mode of masculinity capable of reconciling those qualities that are traditionally opposed along gender lines—a masculinity that Wexman describes as “strong vulnerability” (137).

In contrast, Montgomery Clift’s persona has been read in terms of neurotic intensity, a brooding psychic interiority that invests his screen image with a fundamental bisexuality. Mapping the construction of his image within 1950s fan discourse, Cohan perceives a meaningful tension between Clift’s real-life insecurity as a closeted bisexual anxious to play roles that emphasised his virility and those “feminine, neurotic, bisexual qualities” that facilitate queer readings of his films (220). He points to the emergence of a sexually indeterminate acting style in *Red River* (Howard Hawks and Arthur Rossen, 1948), in which Clift’s passive, introspective boyishness provides a seductive—and threatening—alternative to the conservative he-man values embodied by John Wayne; in the process, that boyishness solicits a conflicted erotic gaze from Wayne and John Ireland as well as “official” love interest Joanne Dru. Cohan observes a similar dynamic structuring Clift’s obsessive love for Elizabeth Taylor in *A Place in the Sun* (George Stevens, 1951), whereby desire is enacted as a state that dissolves the ego boundaries traditionally demarcating male from female: despite its heterosexual object choice, his romantic longing is conditioned by a narcissistic, reflexive identification with Taylor’s own longing towards him, and as such, “like an infant’s for its mother, his desire exceeds a stable subject/object relation, casting it in the performative mode of bisexuality” (231). An equally fraught mediation between masculine and feminine subject positions marked the short filmography of James Dean, in whose adolescent antiheroes Laura Miller intuits at once “a ‘feminine’ abandon to emotional display” and an underlying “potential for violence” (“Sluts and Addicts”). Wexman considers Dean’s petulant outbursts at his quarrelling parents in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955)—most notably his melodramatic exclamation, early in the film, that “You’re tearing me apart!”—a key instance of this hormonal excess (132); while Naremore points out that, by the end of *East of Eden* (Kazan, 1955), Dean has shed so many tears that Julie Harris must challenge the issue by asking “Are you going to cry all your life?” (203). Indeed, that film turns in explicitly Freudian terms upon Dean’s desire for the withheld love of his stern father and his self-loathing identification with his “bad” mother, a brothel madam: “I’m more like you,” he tells the estranged mother when she asks about his relationship with the father, shortly before a two-shot frames son and mother reflected in the mirror of her office headquarters.

To return to *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, we can see how Leigh cannibalises various elements of 1950s male performance style—Brando’s swaggering narcissism, Clift’s dark interiority, Dean’s associations with abandon and excess—to convey the sense that, depending on her social situation at any given moment, Tralala must effect a series of uneasy mediations between masculine and feminine modes of identification with the world.<sup>5</sup> While her heavy drinking, chain-smoking, and use of foul language exemplify her successful accommodation to environmental spaces that are explicitly coded as masculine, these attributes also make her female identity the ongoing butt of a joke amongst the gang members. As the lone girl hanging out after-hours in the exclusively male-identified space of the local strike office, she angrily reminds Vinnie that he never repaid the “half-buck” they argued over; when he wisecracks “Go fuck yourself, I defended your honour didn’t I?”, the men erupt in choric laughter. Tralala’s exposure to the language of machismo causes her to absorb and reappropriate masculine modes of expression as her own, whether snapping her fingers and making a stifled whistling sound when hailing a taxi, extending her middle finger through the cab window at Vinnie’s gang after another quarrel, or simply addressing men within the culturally understood idiomatics of

masculinity. When two drunken bar patrons harass her to join them for a drink, she informs the bartender with a conspiratorial lean forward that “Those two-bit punks couldn’t kiss my ass”, as though she herself were a hoodlum challenging a rival gang member to a street brawl; and when Steve, a love-struck sailor who begs her to stay with him during his three-day shore leave, incongruously asks her if she has ever visited his home state of Idaho, she casually responds, “I’m from Brooklyn, man”—as though she herself were a man. Any delusions Tralala harbours about being one of the boys are shattered when, instead of mugging her latest client, the gang watches from behind a barrel as she is forced to administer oral sex to an impatient sailor. “You thought that was funny, you bastards?” she yells as she staggers out of the waterfront like Brando in stilettos, wiping her mouth, enraged by their prank, exiled from the phallocracy.



**Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and Jennifer Jason Leigh in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1989): narcissistic swagger, brooding interiority, and a masochism that threatens the gender binary.**

It is interesting to consider the dialogue between Tralala’s mind and body in light of Richard Dyer’s view that the Method acting system Brando, Clift and Dean were largely credited with bringing to 1950s Hollywood operated within broadly psychoanalytic economies of meaning, privileging a character’s internal psychic life as the locus behind their physical expressions in the narrative (141). As with the rebel stars, Leigh’s mumbling, slouching, body-scratching and interaction with props foregrounds the performative aspects of Tralala’s gender

neurosis: for instance, when she circles aggressively around the gang to gloat that her officer “takes me out places, he buys me things, and when he ships out he’s gonna drop a bundle on me”, she takes care to slap her shiny new red purse back and forth between her hands, a gesture that suggests the importance of status symbols in her mind’s materialist fantasy narrative. More significantly, it is her vividly impassive facial expressions and body language that express the pathology of her masquerade. In an interview at the time of the film’s release, Edel observed the manner in which Leigh’s “whole language changed completely. Her movement was all of a sudden completely different and she took on this real vulgar expression. She got rid of Jennifer and literally became the character” (Weinstein). He attributes Leigh’s metamorphosis partly to the long conversations she had with Selby, who made a cameo appearance in the film and remained on set throughout the fourteen-week shoot (Edel). In another interview, Leigh herself admitted that she “was having trouble with Tralala’s walk. I had a hard time figuring it out”, and that it was a discussion with Selby that provided her with “the key. He said the walk stemmed from deep rage, a walk that said: ‘I’m going to walk this way, and you’re going to want me, and then you’re going to get bashed over the head and have your money stolen because it’s owed to me. I deserve it!’ That’s her secret, that enables her to dominate these men” (Collins). The closet castration fantasy behind her walk is anatomised in the scene where she swaggers down the street before a cavalry of policemen, relishing the lustful gazes, wolf-whistles and offers of spanking from a sweaty picket line of strikers preparing for a riot. When Kevin Maher later told Leigh how much she reminded him of Brando in the film, she was quick to make the connection: “It’s the walk. I worked on the walk for weeks” (“Jennifer Jason Leigh”). The phallic violence of her physicality thus warps the gender-regulated emotive economy of a Method acting culture that, at least in its 1950s Hollywood synthesis, conformed to a conservative psychoanalytic model “whereby disturbance and anguish were reserved for men and repression for women—men as the Id, women as its repression” (Dyer 142).<sup>6</sup>

It is this sense of slippage between gender identities—the constant threat of her masculine Id to explode the contours of her feminine mask—that invests Leigh’s performance with what Cohan terms the “transvestite effect” (259) of actors like Brando, Clift and Dean. Drawing upon Marjorie Garber’s concept of the transvestite as “the third ... that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis”, Cohan argues that the 1950s male stars create a sense of “category crisis”, a symbolic space arising from the displacement of any explicit doubts about their sexual orientation onto a more general anxiety about their gender identity (11). Tralala’s gender neurosis inhabits this transvestic space when, alone at a bar and seething from the gang’s sexual humiliation, her efforts to seduce a soldier are compromised by two rival prostitutes who refuse to give him up. Her mercurial vacillations between the flirtatious, “feminine” mode of address (“Hey soldier, you should be able to do better than that”) and bursts of hostile, “phallic” aggression (“Shove it up your ass, you!”, she snaps at one of the prostitutes who interrupt her) indicate the special venom she reserves for women whose sexual rivalry threatens her “wish for masculinity”; later she will denigrate them as “scabby whores” and “douchebags”, and, attempting to seduce another potential client away from them, threatens one by pushing her in the chest and swearing, “I hope you burn like hell when he leaves here with me”. Coupled with the manner in which she struggles to authenticate her femininity by impersonating icons of feminine excess, these moments of transvestic slippage highlight Tralala’s alienated self-loathing and internalised misogyny, her psychic disavowal of the gender identity she shares with other women. They also highlight the intimations of drag and pastiche in Leigh’s performance, as when she asks Steve if her breasts are too small for him and he responds that “they’re the best in the Western world”, but that he likes her for *herself*. Fetishistically overinvesting in her breasts as a kind of phallic substitute, she chooses to misread him, struts over to the mirror and, turning the imaginary vantage point of

conventional male subjectivity upon her reflection, holds them as if to weigh them—"I like that: the best tits in the Western world". At such moments the dissociative split between psyche and flesh throws Leigh's performance into a heightened state of category crisis. And yet, like Brando, Clift and Dean, what her ensuing transvestite effect masks is not necessarily an erotic desire for *anyone*. As Butler reminds us, the masquerading woman's desire to castrate her male audience thoroughly "exhausts itself in the act of displacement", and "what is hidden is not sexuality, but rage" (73, 71).

### **Shattering the Self**

For most of the film, Tralala's rage against a world that has subordinated her to the phallographic order is expressed at the level of the psyche, but its gathering force means that it must finally be discharged through the body. The sense of splintered identity implicit in Vinnie's rhetorical question after she sashays away from the gang ("Who the fuck do you think you are?") is legitimated in the following scene when, absorbed in the glamour of a fashion window display as Steve stands by admiringly, she is accosted by an angry soldier she robbed. Instantly adopting the persona of "Dolores" as an alibi, she receives a sheepish apology from the soldier ("I thought you were someone else") before facing the camera with a feral scowl—clearly she, too, thought she was someone else. When Steve leaves her with a heartfelt love letter instead of the extravagant lump sum that she had expected to confer her with phallic social mobility, the burden of castration is too much to bear. As Leigh explains, "Her initial reaction when she sees the sailor's letter is rage and humiliation. She gave this guy three days and he gave her a piece of paper! Yet somewhere in her psyche, she knows that she's touched someone and it terrifies her, so she goes on a binge—saying to herself, 'If everyone in this bar fucks me, I know I will feel great again'" (Fuller 197). The hellish gang rape that closes *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is a masochistic project of epic proportions. And just as Leigh's performance has functioned as a feminised twist on male Method acting styles, so Tralala's self-destruction plays out as a female usurpation of the recognised mechanisms of classic male masochism.

In her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Kaja Silverman draws upon the studies of Freud, Krafft-Ebing and Deleuze to outline some basic characteristics of male masochism. While those theorists differ in their interpretations of that perversion, they agree that the libidinal economy of the male masochist is structured around transgressive fantasies of feminisation. Silverman explains that the masochistic male's wish to shatter the social order is manifested as a fundamental desire to unburden himself of the phallus, to kill off the paternal imago within and, along with it, the whole legacy of patriarchal succession (207). In place of a masculine subject position, he avows his identification with the negativity and lack his culture assigns to women. According to Silverman, the masochist "acts out in an insistent and exaggerated way the basic conditions of cultural subjectivity, conditions that are normally disavowed; he loudly proclaims that his meaning comes to him from the Other, prostrates himself before the gaze even as he solicits it, exhibits his castration for all to see, and revels in the sacrificial basis of the social contract" (206). In this light, it is not difficult to reconcile the fetishistic performativity of the classic male masochist with the bisexual transgressions of the 1950s rebel stars. Consider Brando howling semi-nude on the street late at night for his beloved Stella, too livid with remorse to care if he wakes the neighbours; Dean's frequent crying fits and noisy protests of psychic mutilation; Clift's raw need to abolish his identity and close the gap between Self and Other. Consider also how the sheer emotional abandon of these performances forcibly narrows the gap between masculine and feminine subjectivities.

By contrast, cinematic representations of female masochism have rarely challenged the woman's baseline identification with a female subject position. In playing women whose sexual experimentation liberates their bourgeois shackles behind closed doors, actresses such as Catherine Deneuve in *Belle de Jour* (Luis Buñuel, 1967), Maria Schneider in *Last Tango in Paris* (*Ultimo tango a Parigi*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972) and Kim Basinger in *9½ Weeks* (Adrian Lyne, 1986) have retained a traditionally feminine performance style that foregrounds the passive, vulnerable or sexually alluring aspects of their characters' perversions.<sup>7</sup> The cultural acceptance of masochism as a "natural" element of female sexual awakening is mirrored in the psychoanalytic work of Theodor Reik, whose *Masochism in Sex and Society* contains a passage Silverman finds exemplary in its take on the supposed differences between male and female perversion. It is worth citing this passage in full to establish how thoroughly Leigh's Tralala subverts the social order of masochism, and how she consequently troubles the notion of a binary, gendered subjectivity:

Compared with the masculine masochism that of women shows a somewhat attenuated, one could almost say anemic character. It is more of a trespassing of the bourgeois border, of which one nevertheless remains aware, than an invasion into enemy terrain. The woman's masochistic phantasy very seldom reaches the pitch of savage lust, of ecstasy, as does that of the man. Even the orgy in the phantasy does not ascend in so steep a curve. There is nothing in it of the wildness of the chained Prometheus, rather something of Ganymede's submission. One does not feel anything of the cyclone-like character that is so often associated with masculine masochism, that blind unrestricted lust of self-destruction. The masochistic phantasy of woman has the character of yielding and surrender rather than that of the rush ahead, of the orgiastic cumulation, of the self-abandonment of man. (Reik 216)

Reik's male masochist is a gender renegade who rushes headlong into "enemy terrain" in search of shattering, an affective moment of psychic rupture that violently explodes the boundaries between self and world (Silverman 208). As such he is a heterocosmic figure, willing his divestiture of the phallus to "remake the world in another image altogether, to forge a different cultural order" (198). What is most salient about Tralala's instigation of the gang rape is the heterocosmic manner in which she too seeks the obliteration both of her own identity and the underlying cultural laws that inscribe her as gendered subject. Painfully aware that Steve's love letter carries the threat of feminisation, a drunken Tralala staggers around at the bar, gives a terrified scan across the room and makes a childlike grunt before tearing open her blouse to announce "the best tits in the Western world". As the male crowd goes wild, groping her breasts and pouring beer over her, all pretences toward womanly masquerade evaporate in her bid for phallic power. One man's taunting provocation, "What is this—all tits and no cunt?", marks the moment at which her breasts can no longer compensate as substitute phallus and she is forced to exhibit the scar of her castration, but her furious response—"Come on, I'll show you... all of you!"—affirms her intent to wage war on the male world with an apocalyptic performance of sexual difference. As the crowd carries her out to a car in a vacant lot and begins to violate her, she indeed exhibits all "the wildness of the chained Prometheus", but where the male masochists of 1950s Hollywood feminised themselves with tears, Tralala laughs stoically, contorting her face into a death mask and simulating orgasm (Reik 216). "Come on you bastards, I'll fuck you blind" she screams at the baying crowd of would-be rapists, her linguistic role reversal betraying her need to neutralise her femininity and obtain the phallus at all costs. She has become a darkly inverted mirror image of Brando, Clift and Dean, an even more deviant animus to their anima.

In his discussion of masochism in *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre agrees with Reik that it is a highly performative pathology, but he maintains that the bid for negation—for a remade world in which the masochist’s identity will be heterocosmically erased—is a doomed enterprise. “Masochism is and must be itself a failure”, because while the masochist craves being nothing more than an object, he can never truly escape his subjectivity: “I am far from being able to be fascinated by this alienated Me, which remains on principle inapprehensible. It is useless for the masochist to get down on his knees, to show himself in ridiculous positions, to cause himself to be used as a simple lifeless instrument” (400). Whether she or he wants to or not, the masochist still feels. The film mirrors this journey into subjecthood at the level of its enunciation: from her decentred blocking as gender-bending alien in the early scenes, there has been a gradual increase in the camera’s compassionate construction of Tralala as active subject. In the bar, there were vertiginous subjective close-ups of men’s faces laughing riotously as she was bounced from one to another, crashing into tables and sending drinks flying; now the rape is shot from her low-angle diagonal viewpoint, the emphasis placed on claustrophobic spatial oppositions as the crowd lurches over her, first in the car and then on a rotting mattress. Despite these visual set-ups, Edel grants the men only fleeting presence in his *mise-en-scène*, while Tralala’s face, no longer confined to the margins of the frame, commands centre stage and close-up with black eye and bloodied lip. The film forces identification with her annihilated subjectivity as we hear her reliving the tender words of Steve’s letter; under his voiceover narration, the sound of waves lapping against the docks evokes the oceanic distance of the first person to see beyond her masquerade.<sup>8</sup> In place of the sought-after erasure, she realises the impossibility of her own object-ness: “The more the masochist tries to taste his objectivity”, Sartre warns us, “the more he will be submerged by the consciousness of his subjectivity—to the point of anguish” (400).



**From whore to mother: the troubling resolution of Tralala’s bisexuality.**

Having closed the gap between Tralala and viewer in harrowing fashion, the film finally attempts to resolve the paradox of Leigh’s bisexuality. The trouble is that it does so by recuperating her within the mother/whore dichotomy that governs so many cinematic representations of femininity. Drawing upon Deleuze’s concept of pre-oedipal desire for symbiotic fusion with the oral mother, Gaylyn Studlar (1985) promotes a sexually undifferentiated “masochistic aesthetic” (605) in which both male and female characters take pleasure in submitting to the will of a powerful maternal imago.<sup>9</sup> Studlar informs us that “the female in the masochistic aesthetic is more than the passive object of the male’s desire for possession” (610), and Leigh’s mastery of 1950s “bad boy” attitudes ensures that Tralala is no passive object. There are two males who treat her with tenderness, and in both cases they do so

from a distinctly Deleuzian perspective that betrays their infantile need to be absolved of the phallus. We have already noted the scene in which Steve curls up against her bosom as though it were a pillow, his lack of libido suggesting that his true intention is to recreate the primal site of “object cathexis and identification” one experiences in being breastfed (Studlar 615). “I wish I didn’t have to leave”, he laments, resting his head against her back before being shipped out to Korea. “To close the gap”, Studlar reminds us, “to overcome separation from the mother, to fulfill desire, to achieve orgasm means death” (612). The second male who takes Tralala as a maternal love object is Spook, a local teenager to whom she had earlier shown an uncharacteristically protective streak when she defends him from bullies on the street. Spook’s primary narrative function is felt at the film’s climax. After Tralala has been raped by dozens of men, he stumbles upon the scene, scares away the remaining would-be rapists, covers her battered body with his sweater, and breaks down crying.

Deleuzian masochism unfolds within an economy of role reversals and identificatory shifts, “surprise gestures of either tenderness or cruelty” (Williams 212), and the temporary loss of ego boundaries separating Self from Other. It seeks to shatter the symbolic law in a double disavowal, whereby the female is invested with the phallus as the male is divested of it. Studlar reminds us that the oral mother of masochism is “a figure of identification, the mother of plenitude whose gaze meets the infant’s as it asserts her presence and her power” (610). Just as the mother’s gaze meets the infant’s, Tralala makes direct eye contact with Spook before she sits up and cradles him against her breast in a pose that invokes both the Pietà and its agonised recreations in films ranging from *Rome, Open City* (*Roma città aperta*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945) to *Cries and Whispers* (*Viskningar och rop*, Ingmar Bergman, 1972). Coolly issuing the command “Don’t cry”, she becomes the fleshly incarnation of the pre-oedipal “dream screen” (Studlar 612), a bruised and beaten vessel to accommodate the boy’s desire for fusion without limits.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

In his essay “A Child is Being Beaten”, Freud claims that the beating fantasy that sows the seeds of masochism inheres only in “unmanly boys and unwomanly girls” (179), and hence that it is those characteristics of “femininity in the boy and masculinity in the girl which must be made responsible” when either seeks pleasure in suffering (179). The climax of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* presents us with the horrific tableau of an unwomanly girl and an unmanly boy, fused together in a masochistic merger whose goal is the temporary eradication of sexual difference. In configuring Leigh as the Virgin Mary—the ultimate maternal imago for a bisexual, masochistic mode of desire—the film freezes her in a mythopoetic pose, crystallising her essential bisexuality while also illuminating the divergent channels through which male and female bisexual performance are circuited. Where 1950s Hollywood permitted its rebel stars to surrender the phallus as a means of negotiating iconic new relations to their masculinity, Leigh’s gender transgressions yield a Pyrrhic victory: she goes through hell for a taste of phallic power, and only attains it on terms that authorise the classic male fantasy of returning to the womb. Yet this does not mitigate the power of a performance style that narrows the gap between male and female subjectivities, allowing the viewer to forge deep and painful identifications beyond his/her gender identity.<sup>11</sup> Finally, it is worth noting the wry self-consciousness of Leigh’s facial expressions and line delivery in the closing scene. Her eyes remain dry, the comfort she offers is cold, and we are left with the distinct impression that, for all her psychic haemorrhaging, Tralala has somehow managed to retain the secrets of her subjectivity. Her desire lies elsewhere.

## Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Gwenda Young, Antonio Jocson and Tina Murphy for their insightful feedback during various stages of this essay.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Straayer's "Redressing the 'Natural': The Temporary Transvestite Film" (1996), Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) and Holmlund's *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies* (2002). For key star studies on gender complexity, see Dennis Bingham's *Acting Male: Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson and Clint Eastwood* (1994) and Martin Shingler's "Masquerade or Drag? Bette Davis and the Ambiguities of Gender" (1995). For in-depth studies of screen acting, see Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnickie's *Reframing Screen Performance* (2008) and the edited collections *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom* (2003) and *More Than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (2004).

<sup>2</sup> A cursory glance at the titles of some 1990s magazine articles is instructive on the media discourse surrounding Leigh's subversive star image: "Dark star" (*Paper*), "Sluts and addicts" (*Salon*), "Bad girl rising" (*Vogue*), "She's the Queen of the Ravaged, Boozed-Up, and Strung Out" (*Rolling Stone*), "Jennifer Jason Leigh feels your pain" (*Esquire*).

<sup>3</sup> For a genealogy of masculine female characters in classical and contemporary American cinema—generically subdivided into tomboys, transvestites, predatory lesbians and various permutations of "butch"—see the chapter "Looking Butch: A Rough Guide to Butches on Film" in Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*.

<sup>4</sup> Leigh's father was the actor Vic Morrow, a Method-trained contemporary of Brando, Clift and Dean best known for his role as a sneering inner-city gang leader in *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955). Chris Chang notes that *Blackboard Jungle* "reveals the actress' uncanny resemblance to Morrow—a mirror of attitude and body language" (62).

<sup>5</sup> I would not classify Leigh as a full-time Method actress given her emphasis on mimicry, impersonation and historical research in such films as *The Hudsucker Proxy* (Joel Coen, 1994) and *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (Alan Rudolph, 1994), which align her with the Diderot-Coquelin school of acting "from the outside in". Nor am I suggesting that she is the only modern actress whose androgyny derives from a subversion of Method-style masculinity: cases could be made for Linda Manz in *Out of the Blue* (Dennis Hopper, 1980), Juliette Lewis in *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991) and *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), or Angelina Jolie in *Girl, Interrupted* (James Mangold, 1999), while Lesley Stern detects some of James Dean's neurotic emotionalism in Sandra Bernhard's performance in *The King of Comedy* (Scorsese, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> There is, of course, a substantial body of work that explores the connections between performance, screen persona and authorship (see McGilligan, Studlar (1996), Pramaggiore, Miyao, Tait). While my primary focus is not on whether Leigh operates at the level of *auteur*, it is also clear that her reading of Tralala emerged at least partly through her own idiosyncratic research process, in which she interviewed prostitutes, kept diaries of fictional childhood

memories in Tralala's voice, covered her dressing room in George Grosz and Otto Dix paintings of mutilated prostitutes, and avoided looking in the mirror "so that I could keep her reality alive to me—the reality of someone flying into a wall of glass" (Leigh qtd. in Fuller 197).

<sup>7</sup> Portrayals of female masochism that foreground agency or perverse pleasure, e.g. Charlotte Rampling in *The Night Porter* (*Il portiere di notte*, Liliana Cavani, 1974), Isabella Rossellini in *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), Holly Hunter in *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) and Isabelle Huppert in *The Piano Teacher* (*La pianiste*, Michael Haneke, 2001), generally still retain the focus on female subject positions and private spaces rather than the explosively public performativity of Reik's male masochism. An interesting early exception is Marlene Dietrich, whose androgynous star image has been examined in terms of masochism, bisexuality and masquerade by Studlar (1988).

<sup>8</sup> On a related note, Paul McDonald's study of Ingrid Bergman's "poisoning" scene in *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946) convincingly argues for the expressive power of screen acting to foster intense viewer identifications with a character's subjectivity; for McDonald, the potency of this scene depends on our affective introjection of Alicia/Bergman's suffering as much as our intellection of Hitchcock's framing and editing rhythms.

<sup>9</sup> Studlar's reading of Deleuze is based on his 1967 essay "Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty".

<sup>10</sup> This scene does not occur in the novel, in which Tralala is unconscious and left for dead after the rape. Interestingly, Selby felt it remained true to his work and was moved to tears on the set: "What Jennifer gets you to experience is Tralala and her suffering. The fact that she brings such humanity to such a degrading situation is an indication of her magnificence as an actress" (qtd. in Cameron-Wilson 103).

<sup>11</sup> An analysis of Leigh's post-*Last Exit to Brooklyn* career is beyond the scope of this essay, but I see an ongoing bisexual resonance to her playing women who inhabit a porous interstice between Self and Other, e.g. the psychopath who vampirically steals her roommate's identity in *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992); the alcoholic, heroin-addicted singer trapped in dysfunctional symbiosis with her more successful sister in *Georgia* (Ulu Grosbard, 1995); or the lovesick kidnapper in *Kansas City* (Robert Altman, 1996), who at one point confesses that "Real love makes someone else a part of you, a part of your body... If it's real love, then you're both the same person".

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### **Suggested Citation**

Murphy, Ian. "Anima Animus: Jennifer Jason Leigh's Bisexual Method in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*". *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 4 (Winter 2012). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

**Ian Murphy** is a PhD in Film Studies candidate at University College Cork, where he teaches poetry, drama, fiction and film in the School of English. He is an editorial board member of *Alphaville*, and his writing has featured in *Jump Cut*, *Scope* and *Bright Lights Film Journal*. His research interests include aesthetics, spectatorship, performance and continental philosophy.