

# Performing Self-Reliance: Repetition, Masculinity, and Historical Change in American Cinema

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## Abstract

This essay examines how masculinity is represented and redefined across different historical moments in American cinema. Focusing on the recurring pattern of male self-reliance, it asks how films construct masculine identity through narrative structure, character behavior, and repeated acts of endurance, control, and independent action. Using qualitative textual analysis, the essay compares four films—*The Searchers* (1956), *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Fight Club* (1999)—to trace changes from the relatively stable masculine authority of early cinema, to the feminist crisis-driven masculinity of the 1970s, and to the more self-conscious and diversification forms of contemporary film. The essay argues that masculinity in cinema is not a fixed identity, but a changing cultural idea shaped by different historical conditions, social concerns, and film traditions. Rather than treating film as the direct cause of social change, the essay shows that cinema functions as a cultural space in which masculinity is repeatedly presented, questioned, and reshaped. In this way, repeated patterns of male self-reliance show how outdated masculine ideals continue to exist even as their meanings change over time.

## Key words

Masculinity, self-reliance, repetition, gender performativity, American cinema, historical change, male protagonists

## Introduction

Cinema is often seen as entertainment, but it is also a major cultural space where gender is presented, discussed, and made to seem “normal.” Because films

reach large audiences and combine story, image, and performance, they do more than depict gender identities; they shape ideas about what seems believable, admirable, or shameful. Masculinity is a clear example. From the confident heroes of classical Hollywood to the un-

easy, self-divided men of later decades, “being a man” on screen has never been a fixed concept. However, these changes should not be seen as a simple reflection of social change. Film participates in the process as well: it draws on existing ideals of manhood, then reshapes them through familiar narrative conventions and character types.

This essay asks a focused version of that larger question: across historical periods, what dominant features define male protagonists on screen, and how do films register—or even reshape—changing gender ideology? I do not treat masculinity as a natural essence. As Connell and Messerschmidt argue, masculinity is “not a fixed entity” but is shaped through social practice. This is why I understand masculinity as something made visible through representation, especially through behavior and plot structure. Butler offers a useful way to explain this process. She writes that gender is “always a doing” (32), and later describes it as “a stylized repetition of acts”. In film, these repeated acts can be seen in the way characters speak, the choices they make in difficult moments, how they control their emotions, and what they do in everyday life. More simply, films matter because they repeatedly show these acts and help audiences understand them.

A historical approach makes those repetitions easier to see. Classical Hollywood often presented male protagonists who showed authority, independence, and clear moral confidence, which supported stable ideas of leadership and control. In contrast, many American films of the 1970s began to focus on men who seemed isolated from society, emotionally unstable, or unsure of their situation. This trend developed alongside wider cultural conflict—especially the challenges raised by second-wave feminism to patriarchal authority and traditional gender expectations. As a result, masculinity on screen increasingly looked less stable and more questioned. These changes suggest that cinematic masculinity is not fixed; it shifts as cultural debates shift, while also responding to industrial and aesthetic developments in filmmaking.

To trace these shifts, I compare films from three broad moments in American cinema: classical films of the 1950s–60s, socially critical films of the 1970s, and late twentieth-century contemporary cinema. Through close textual analysis of *The Searchers* (1956), *Mean*

*Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Fight Club* (1999), I examine how male protagonists embody different models of masculinity. Rather than making broad claims about “male psychology,” I focus on repeatable, observable patterns of male self-reliance: (1) refusal of help, (2) problems framed as solitary tests, and (3) narrative outcomes that reward, question, or punish independent action. By using these concrete patterns across different periods, the essay shows how masculinity is built through repetition, but also how its meanings shift when cultural pressures and film conventions change. The essay first sets out the framework and method, then offers the historical comparison, and finally discusses what these patterns suggest about the two-way relationship between cinema, masculinity, and social change.

## Theoretical Framework

For this essay, the most useful theoretical idea is gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not simply something people are, but something they repeatedly do (Butler). In other words, gender becomes convincing through repeated acts, gestures, and habits. This idea is especially helpful for film analysis because cinema constantly repeats recognizable behaviors and narrative patterns. Across different periods, male characters are often shown refusing help, controlling emotion, and facing problems alone. These actions are not just personal traits. Through repetition, they become signs of masculinity that audiences recognize in daily life. This essay therefore uses repetition as its main theoretical subject: by tracing repeated patterns of male self-reliance, it examines how films construct masculinity and how the meaning of that masculinity changes across historical backgrounds.

## Methodology

This essay uses qualitative textual analysis to examine how masculinity is constructed in American cinema across different historical periods. Rather than measuring audience response or trying to prove what viewers think, the essay focuses on how films create meaning through their own stories and characters. More specifically, it pays attention to narrative structure, character behavior, and moments when masculinity be-

comes especially clear through action, conflict, and the way problems are resolved. This method fits the essay because the focus is not only on feeling private, but on how films make certain masculine ideals visible through repeated patterns.

The main analytical focus is male self-reliance. In this essay, self-reliance is not treated as a hidden psychological state, but as something that can be observed on screen through repeated choices and story structures. Three recurring patterns are especially important: the refusal of help, the framing of problems as solitary tests, and the narrative response to independent action. More specifically, I pay attention to moments when male protagonists reject help from friends, family members, institutions, or intimate partners. I also examine how films present certain problems as challenges that seem to require individual action rather than collective support. Finally, I consider how the narrative judges that independence. In some films, acting alone is rewarded and presented as admirable; in others, it is questioned, shown as unstable, or linked to failure and violence. By tracing these patterns, the essay can compare different films without reducing masculinity to a fixed personality type.

The films selected for analysis come from three broad stages in American cinema: the classical period of the 1950s and 1960s, the socially critical films shaped by feminist debates in the 1970s, and later films from the end of the twentieth century. The main case studies are *The Searchers* (1956), *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Fight Club* (1999). These films were chosen because they present different forms of masculinity and show different meanings of male self-reliance. The aim of this comparison is not to write a full history of masculinity in film, but to use representative examples to show how the same repeated behavior can take on different meanings in different historical backgrounds. In this way, the method keeps the analysis grounded in close reading while also linking it to wider questions of gender and social change.

## Historical Analysis

### Pre-feminist Masculinity

Before feminism became an important force in cul-

tural debate, masculinity in American cinema was more often shown as stable, powerful, and widely accepted. This does not mean that every male character was simple or that all films expressed exactly the same values. However, many mainstream films from the 1950s and early 1960s still followed a pattern that connected masculinity with independence, control, and responsibility. Male authority was often presented as normal, rather than as something that needed to be questioned or defended. In this setting, self-reliance was usually seen as a strength rather than a problem. A man who could act alone, endure difficulty, and make decisions under pressure was often seen as dependable, competent, and deserving of respect.

This model of masculinity was shaped by the values of that time. In postwar America, people still paid a lot of attention to social order, a stable family, and clear differences in status. Men were usually expected to protect others, make important decisions, and take the leading role in public life. At the same time, controlling emotion was often seen as a sign of maturity and strength. Films did not create these ideas by themselves. Instead, they took beliefs that existed in society and turned them into stories and characters on screen. Because these images of male authority appeared everywhere repeatedly, they gradually came to seem normal, attractive, and even necessary.

“The Searchers” is a useful example because it presents a male protagonist whose authority comes from endurance, action, and determination. Ethan Edwards is not introduced as an ordinary man. From the beginning, he is shown as experienced, tough, and strongly driven by his goal. The story repeatedly places him in situations where persistence and personal judgment seem more important than cooperation or emotional openness. After Debbie is taken, Ethan commits himself to a search that lasts for years and continues through harsh conditions and ongoing uncertainty. Although Martin travels with him, Ethan is still presented as the person who leads the search, makes the major decisions, and refuses to give up. His masculinity is therefore shaped not only by what he says, but also by what his behaviors are: he rides, tracks, survives, and keeps moving forward even when the search seems impossible.

This is where self-reliance becomes especially important. Ethan’s independence is not shown as sim-

ple isolation, but as part of his masculine strength. He is able to keep going when others lose patience or become uncertain, and the film repeatedly suggests that his strength lies in endurance rather than emotional openness. He rarely explains his feelings directly, and he does not seek comfort from others. Instead, the film gives him authority through action: he continues the search over a long period of uncertainty, relies on his own decisions, and keeps going even when others are ready to stop. Even when his choices create tension with other characters, the film still places him at the center of action and judgment. In this sense, self-reliance is not just one of many qualities. It becomes one of the main ways the film defines masculine authority.

At the same time, the film also shows the limits of this model. Ethan's authority depends on emotional control, but this control can also make him seem rigid and distant. His strength is closely tied to hardness. This matters because it shows that even in earlier cinema, dominant masculinity was not completely free from conflict. Even so, these influences do not overturn the larger pattern. The film continues to treat endurance, independence, and control as important forms of masculine power. That is why this period matters for the essay as a whole. It shows a historical moment in which male self-reliance is still strongly connected to authority, stability, and social approval.

From this perspective, early cinematic masculinity reflects more than the personality of individual heroes. It points to a broader social belief in which male control is treated as both necessary and legitimate. The self-reliant man is not only a character type. He also represents a wider belief that social order depends on male strength, decisiveness, and the ability to act without hesitation. In this period, cinema helps make that belief seem natural by placing it within familiar stories and character types. Masculinity is not yet mainly presented as a crisis. Instead, it is still imagined as a stable source of action, responsibility, and authority.

## **Feminist Disruption**

If early American cinema often presented masculinity as stable and authoritative, films of the 1970s increasingly show that this stability was beginning to weaken. This shift should not be explained by only one cause. However, the rise of second-wave feminism,

together with political disappointment, urban violence, and broader social instability, created a cultural climate in which traditional male authority was more openly questioned. Older ideals of masculinity—control, certainty, leadership, and emotional restraint—did not disappear, but they no longer seemed fully secure. As a result, many films from this period present male protagonists who still want authority and a clear sense of identity, but can no longer achieve them in a stable way.

This is why masculinity in the 1970s often appears conflicted rather than heroic. Self-reliance still matters, but its meaning changes. It no longer clearly suggests ability or authority. Instead, it becomes more closely linked to isolation, frustration, and instability. Male protagonists are still expected to act, endure, and take responsibility, but the world around them no longer supports their authority in the same way. In this sense, the crisis of masculinity is not that masculine ideals disappear, but that the world which once supported them is beginning to change.

“Mean Streets” illustrates this shift clearly. Charlie wants to be responsible, respected, and morally serious, but the world around him is unstable and hard to control. He is pulled between friendship, loyalty, and the need to act like a man who can deal with problem. Because of this, he repeatedly places himself in the position of managing the problems created by Johnny Boy. However, these efforts do not give him real authority. Instead, they show how limited his control really is. His self-reliance therefore feels less like power and more like pressure. In this way, the film presents masculinity as a form of responsibility that the protagonist is expected to carry, even when he does not have enough power to resolve the situation.

“Taxi Driver” pushes this pattern further. Travis Bickle is deeply isolated, but the film shows that his isolation is not just personal loneliness. It becomes a twisted way of defining who he is. He drives alone at night, watches the city from a distance, fails to build real connections with other people, and gradually turns to violence as a way of proving himself. Here, self-reliance no longer looks like simple independence. Instead, it becomes tied to control, anger, and the need to prove masculinity through force. In this way, the film shows a man who still feels he must act, control, and define himself as a man, even though the world around him no longer

gives that role a stable place.

Taken together, “Mean Streets” and “Taxi Driver” show that masculinity in the 1970s had become deeply unstable. Traditional ideals such as strength, decisiveness, and emotional restraint still remained important, but they no longer gave men the same powerful authority as before. This change needs to be understood in relation to the wider cultural debates of the period, especially the rise of second-wave feminism, which challenged patriarchal power and traditional expectations of male authority. In this situation, masculinity could no longer appear as natural or secure in the same way. Instead, it had to be defended, performed, and repeatedly proved. For this reason, these films do not simply present men in crisis. They show a culture in which older forms of male power were being questioned. At the same time, society still expected men to be powerful and in control, even as feminist movements were challenging traditional male authority. Therefore, Cinema becomes a space where this contradiction can be obviously seen.

## **Contemporary Masculinity**

By the late twentieth century, masculinity in American cinema was no longer shown as a stable and unquestioned role. Instead, it often appeared as something uncertain and constantly changing. Older ideals such as strength, control, independence, and self-reliance still remained important, but they now existed in a social world shaped by consumer culture, changing work life, and growing uncertainty about identity. As a result, contemporary films often present masculinity not as something fixed, but as something men must keep expressing, testing, and rebuilding. This is what makes the period different from earlier cinema. Masculinity is no longer shown simply as a secure role, but as a more unstable and divided identity shaped by both older values and newer ways of understanding male identity.

At the same time, masculinity in contemporary film is not shown only through older masculine ideals in a new form. As social roles have changed, more films have begun to present male characters in more varied ways. For example, some male characters are no longer defined only by toughness, control, and emotional restraint. Instead, contemporary films may show men as fathers, partners, or uncertain individuals who are trying to understand themselves through relationships with

others. In these cases, masculinity is shaped not only by strength and authority, but also by care, vulnerability, and self-questioning. As a result, contemporary masculinity is not always limited to a dominant model. Traditional forms of strong masculinity still remain important, but at the same time, other ways of being male have also become more visible. Therefore, contemporary masculinity is shaped not only by the return of older ideals, but also by the presence of different masculine models within the same cultural space.

“Fight Club” is a useful example of one important direction within this broader society. The film presents a male protagonist who feels trapped by repetitive work, daily life, and emotional emptiness. His dissatisfaction is not only personal. It points to a wider problem in which older ideas about masculine purpose no longer feel easy to reach. In this film, self-reliance takes on a different role. Unlike earlier films, self-reliance here is no longer mainly about authority. Instead, it becomes a way for the protagonist to prove himself. The desire to be a “real man” is expressed through physical pain, aggression, and the rejection of comfort. Masculinity, in this case, appears to depend on struggle and action.

The film shows this pattern through repeated scenes of fighting, strict self-discipline, and direct confrontation. Through these actions, male identity seems to be rebuilt through pain, endurance, and the refusal to show weakness. However, the film also makes clear that this process is full of contradiction. What first looks like freedom soon becomes another kind of control. Likewise, what seems to reject consumer culture quickly turns into another fixed model of masculine behavior. In this sense, “Fight Club” does not simply bring back an older form of masculinity. Instead, it shows how masculinity can appear in the form of conflicts while still depending on familiar ideas such as hardness, dominance, and emotional restraint.

This is what makes contemporary masculinity different from the earlier periods discussed above. Unlike earlier cinema, it is no longer presented as a natural and stable form of authority. Instead, it appears more self-aware and less secure. However, this does not mean that older masculine ideals have disappeared. On the contrary, they continue to survive by taking new forms. Self-reliance still remains important, but it now looks more like something men must actively perform than

something they simply inherit. This matters because on the one hand, traditional masculinity no longer seems fully convincing. On the other hand, it is still difficult to imagine male identity without ideas such as strength, control, and individual struggle. As a result, old and new forms of masculinity are not able to replace one another. Therefore, they continue to coexist side by side within the same cultural society.

## Discussion

The comparison across these three periods suggests that masculinity in cinema is better understood as something that changes over time, rather than as a fixed identity. What is especially important is not only that masculinity changes, but that one pattern—male self-reliance—continues to appear in totally distinctive historical periods. In the earlier period, self-reliance is closely connected to authority and social approval. In the 1970s, it becomes more closely linked to instability, frustration, and masculine crisis. In contemporary film, it does not disappear; instead, it returns in a more uncertain and contradictory form. This continuity matters because it shows that masculinity is not simply replaced from one period to the next. Older values often remain, but their meaning changes under new cultural pressures.

This is where repetition becomes a useful way of understanding the argument. If masculinity gains power through repeated actions, then film matters because it organizes those actions into recognizable narrative and visual patterns. Across different periods, male characters are still shown enduring pain, restraining vulnerability, and trying to prove themselves through action. Yet repetition does not produce a single meaning. In early cinema, these patterns help secure masculine authority. In the 1970s, they expose masculine instability and crisis. In contemporary film, they often appear as both conscious performance and internal contradiction. For this reason, repetition matters not because it guarantees the same meaning in every context, but because it helps us see how the same masculine pattern changes across history.

These changes cannot be explained by film alone. Cinema is better understood as part of a wider cultural context, not as the direct cause of social change. In each period, film reflects broader social pressures while

also shaping how they are understood. Early masculine authority was closely tied to postwar beliefs in order and clear power structures. In the 1970s, masculinity became more unstable as feminist criticism and wider social uncertainty challenged traditional male authority. In contemporary film, masculinity is shaped by consumer culture and growing anxiety about identity. Film did not create these social conditions by itself. Instead, it responded to them and turned them into stories, characters, and conflicts that audiences could clearly see on screen.

For that reason, this comparison is useful because it shows how the recurring image of self-reliant man is redefined across different periods. In *The Searchers*, acting alone still supports male authority. In *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, the same pattern is linked more closely to pressure, division, and lost control. In *Fight Club*, this pattern returns in a more unstable and self-aware form. What links these films is not a single, fixed model of masculinity, but an ongoing effort to define manhood through action, endurance, and control. What changes across time is the meaning that masculinity carries.

## Conclusion

This essay has examined how masculinity is represented across different historical moments in American cinema, with particular attention to the recurring pattern of male self-reliance. By comparing early cinema, the period of feminist disruption in the 1970s, and contemporary film, the essay has shown that masculinity is not a fixed identity, but a changing cultural form. What remains important across these periods is not the stability of masculinity itself, but the continuity of certain repeated ideals, especially action, control, patience, and independence.

Even so, these ideals do not stay fixed. Their meaning changes across different historical moments. Self-reliance may support authority in one context, but in another it may signal pressure, isolation, or uncertainty. This suggests that masculinity in cinema is not simply replaced over time. Rather, older models continue to return, but their meaning is reshaped by changing social conditions and cultural expectations.

For this reason, cinema should not be understood

as either a passive mirror of society or the sole cause of social change. Rather, film functions as a cultural space in which different ideas of masculinity are represented, negotiated, and given visible form. By tracing repeated patterns of male self-reliance across time, this essay has argued that film helps make historical changes in masculinity easier to see. The value of studying cinema, then, lies not only in identifying how male characters are portrayed, but also in understanding why particular forms of masculinity become meaningful in specific historical contexts.

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