

The Post Oedipal subject in *Damage* and *American Beauty*

Ingrid Hofmann-Howley

Freud and later Lacan theorised the emergence of post Oedipal subjectivity where desire is no longer contained within the Oedipal Complex via the threat of castration. Post Oedipal subjectivity is not concerned with the more socially acceptable convention of deferred gratification of desire as demanded within the Oedipal model, but rather is concerned with its own pleasure irrespective of the consequences. It is more firmly allied to drive and *jouissance* implicated in a drive to transgress Oedipal desire. Post Oedipal subjectivity is not simply a subject that has progressed through the Oedipal complex, but rather a subject that refuses the limits of Oedipality. Examples of such post Oedipal subjectivity are present in some contemporary films and this paper will introduce the ideas of post Oedipal subjectivities and apply this through the analysis of two films *Damage* (Louis Malle, 1992) and *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999). The paper explores the ways in which the male protagonists are largely concerned with their own pleasure, and unconcerned with social approval in relation to their desire. The paper demonstrates the ways in which the films are organised around the drive of the male protagonist to transgress Oedipal desires and the eventual downfall to which this leads. This paper seeks to show that using post Oedipal subjectivity as a filter for interpretation allows for more nuanced readings of certain forms of masculinity than Oedipal subjectivity alone.

Some neo Lacanian theorists, such as Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek, Elizabeth Cowie and Juliet Flower MacCannell, have theorised that since Freudian theory has become historical within Western metaphysical thought, this is now a period of post Oedipal relations where narcissistic *jouissance* replaces Oedipal desire based on lack. As one reads Lacan, one becomes aware of the shifts in his theoretical positions as his theory develops. Lacan's later theory is marked by a number of transitions of which the aforementioned neo Lacanian theorists make full use. Desire is replaced by drive. Desire is controlled by the Oedipal relations, thereby limiting rather than releasing pleasure through its alliance to *Eros* and the pleasure principle. Drive, on the other hand, is more allied to the expression of *jouissance*. According to theorists such as Žižek, Mellard and Leader, *jouissance* refers to the enjoyment of pleasure to the degree that it becomes pain or unbearable suffering. *Jouissance* is implicated in a drive to transgress Oedipal law with little real regard for consequences, thus representing *thanatos* or the death drive. According to Mellard, this means that while 'desire is lawful and seems allied with consciousness, enjoyment or *jouissance* is unlawful and is allied with the unconscious' [Mellard, 1998:406]. This paper utilizes this transformed Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory to focus on the disruptive and radical power of film as a signifying practice.

Damage, as a critique of masculinity, explores the dangers of obsessive desire for the masculine psyche through the downfall of a successful and wealthy married man resulting

from a transgressive relationship with his son's fiancée. Read psychoanalytically, masculinity is represented as in crisis within this film through two specific narrative devices. Firstly, Stephen's (Jeremy Irons) refusal to accept castration and therefore resume appropriate Oedipal relations; and secondly, the disintegration of the male subject resulting ultimately in exile. *Damage* also provides, within the character of Stephen, a representation of both the phallic and Oedipal fathers and the internal tension this produces between the phallic primal father representing drive, being and *jouissance* and the symbolic Oedipal father representing the more familiar desire, sense and pleasure.

American Beauty tells the story of a man's mid-life crisis set in contemporary American suburbia. The character of Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey), is already dead and tells the story as a flashback. Lester works in a hated dead end job, is in a loveless marriage, and has a tense relationship with his daughter. During the course of the film he quits the job he hates and gets a new one, his marriage falls apart and his relationship with his daughter further deteriorates as his obvious desire for her best friend, Angela (Mena Suvari) grows. Lester is a subject caught between castration and death, who moves from a castrated Oedipal subject to a post Oedipal subject actively pursuing the satisfaction of his narcissistic drives for *jouissance* outside the limits of Oedipal control.

Lacan argued that the shift from desire to drive is a process we are still witnessing, describing it as a general historical change [Lacan, 1990; 1999]. Building on this, Copjec argues that while desire is marked through Oedipal resolution, by a choice between Sense over Being; drive offers a choice of Being over Sense¹. Thus, as Copjec points out, the dangers of the post-Oedipal universe are located in the ways in which the new order replaces the old. A world where desire, controlled through the Oedipal father and the Law, is being replaced with the new order of the drive, where the protections against *jouissance* offered by the Oedipal father are no longer present [Copjec, 1994:182]. Both *Damage* and *American Beauty* are filmic manifestations of this transition.

MacCannell, in her work *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy*, contends that it is the figure of the brother that has taken up the place of the Oedipal father [MacCannell, 1991]. MacCannell maintains that the brother's law adopts not the Oedipal relations that both permit and control our desire, but the narcissistic drive to *jouissance* of the phallic or primordial father who draws all desire to himself that Freud theorised in *Totem and Taboo* [1919].

In *American Beauty* the relationship between Lester and his neighbour, Ricky (Wes Bentley), could be understood within MacCannell's framework of the regime of the brother. Certainly, Ricky instructs Lester by example on how to exploit situations through masquerade, which in this film becomes an effective strategy to avoid the limits of Oedipality. Ricky's demonstration of the use of self-conscious masquerade allows Lester to apply the same strategy in a

¹ Copjec uses these terms to refer to a dense set of dualisms. While sense is understood as reason and rationality, being refers to physicality, sensuality and emotionality.

meeting with his boss. In the first meeting between Lester and his boss, the framing and *mise en scène*, specifically through Lester's placement in a small chair, at some distance from his boss's larger desk, his slumped posture, and his being caught in a high camera angle combine to reinforce Lester's relative lack of power. By contrast, the second meeting, which takes place after Ricky's demonstration of self-conscious masquerade, Lester's open and sprawling posture, his more dynamic speech and his being framed by a lower camera angle combine to show a change in their relative power bases. The *mise en scène* and framing now combine to produce a text where the younger boss is uncomfortable especially as Lester is quite prepared to masquerade as having been sexually harassed by this boss, and to spread rumours about the philandering and inappropriate use of resources by the senior partners. This scene's power and comedic elements turn on Lester's refusal to continue to play within the Oedipal drama while his boss remains firmly located within it. Lester, however, no longer accepts the threat of castration as a means to control his desire, and his satisfaction is granted when he walks away with a sizeable separation package. This is a defining moment for the character of Lester. Previously the film consistently represents him as the castrated male subject, in relation to his wife, his daughter and his boss. Within the Oedipal model, he is easily contained. Once he moves from the position of Oedipal subject, where he operates within an ethics of desire constrained by the threat of castration with its required deferral of gratification, to Post Oedipal subject, where he operates within an ethics of *jouissance* and the drive to transgress Oedipal desire becomes paramount, he becomes a dangerous subject. He is dangerous because he is operating outside the constraints of the pleasure principle, that is to say he wants satisfaction now, regardless of the consequences. Lester and Ricky's connection along the lines of brotherhood, as MacCannel theorizes it, evidenced in the film through such scenes as where Lester buys drugs from Ricky while pretending to Ricky's father that he is borrowing the video *Re-animator*, assists the film's plotting of Lester's movement toward a post Oedipal subjectivity based in the narcissistic drives to *jouissance*. Lester wants his own pleasures satisfied and Ricky helps him satisfy them. Their cooperation to transgress the Law of the Father locates them within MacCannell's regime of the brother.

However, Žižek sees no reason to theorise a regime of the brother. He claims instead that, 'the allegedly archaic figure of the "primordial father" is actually a thoroughly *modern* entity, a result of the *decline* of the paternal metaphor [Žižek, 2001:159]. The opening sequence of *American Beauty*, with its video sequence of Jane complaining about her father saying

I need a father who's a role model, not some horny geek boy who's gonna spray
in his shorts whenever I bring a girlfriend home from school. What a lammo!
Someone should really just put him out of his misery...

establishes the film as one critiquing the decline of the paternal metaphor along the lines Žižek proposes. Lester's move to the position of primordial father is within a very modern context for the masculine social subject of corporate downsizing and loss of authority for men as they grow older.

According to Žižek, the Oedipal Father operates as a repressive agency of prohibition provoking the development of the subject's desire for subversion. In *American Beauty*, the character of Colonel Fitts (Chris Cooper) represents this Oedipal father in an extreme way. The excessive oppression of this character has provoked his son, Ricky, to develop a unique strategy to cope with his father's constant surveillance and control. Ricky masquerades as the good and nerdy teenage son, complete with immaculate bedroom, conservative clothes and hair, and a casual job in catering. This job provides a cover for his subversive life style of successful drug dealer with a bank balance of around \$40,000. No one suspects him, least of all his father. The oppressive nature of this Oedipal father does not curtail his son's desires or drives, thereby failing to operate as an effective paternal figure - representing Žižek's assertion that there is a contemporaneous decline of the paternal metaphor. The representation of such relationships in important signifying practices such as film operates as transitional moments between the Oedipal and post Oedipal orders.

In contrast to the Oedipal father who controls the son's desire through the threat of castration, there is the Primordial father who 'drains the subject, hinders his desire' [Žižek, 2001:189]. This leads to the son not being able to live fully through the undermining of the paternal authority because the father is too fully present and too knowing, a factor in the relationship between Stephen and his son Martyn in the film *Damage*. Lacan's phrase *le père ou pire* (the father or worse) describes the dilemma faced in the post-Oedipal universe. Near the end of *Damage* the scene in which Stephen is shown naked, post-coital and holding his dead son, is a terrifying image of its potential. Lacan's *le père ou pire*, refers to the choice between the Law of the Father and something worse (the primordial father), resulting from the transition within social life from an Oedipal subject (oriented toward an ethics of desire constrained by the threat of castration and Freud's pleasure principle) to a post-oedipal subject (oriented toward an ethics of *jouissance*, operating outside the pleasure principle and resisting the controls of castration).

Žižek rejects the usual analysis of homosexuality linked to the primordial dimensions of the relationship between father and son. In relation to film, he argues instead that *la femme fatale*, and I contend any female character who operates to entice the hero to transgress the Law of the Father, is a fetish object masking the true traumatic axis of the *film noir* universe², the relationship to the primordial father. He claims that *la femme fatale* is not fatal as long as the primordial father is present. Instead she operates as an '*object of exchange* between father and son – father *qua* "Master of Enjoyment" disposes of the woman' [Žižek, 2001:160]. In *Damage*, Anna certainly functions as an object of exchange between father and son; even though Martyn is at this stage not aware of this possibility. Martyn and Stephen discuss Anna

² *Damage* belongs to a new cycle of films based on classic *film noir* called *neo noir*, which have appropriated various visual and narrative elements of classic *film noir*, particularly the inclusion of the *femme fatale*. While *American Beauty* is not aesthetically aligned with *film noir* conventions it transfers some of the same tensions to middle American quotidian and very importantly has a female character that is able to be read as operating in the function of a *femme fatale*.

in a scene just after their engagement has been announced. Martyn points out to Stephen that there is a whole other side to Anna that he has not experienced. Since the film barely reveals the sexual side of Martyn and Anna's relationship, it is not possible to decide what Martyn knows. Nevertheless, the spectator knows that Stephen has experienced more of Anna than he is entitled to within appropriate Oedipal relations. However, when analysed within post Oedipal relations, Stephen can be seen to be functioning as the primordial or phallic father who operates from a position of narcissistic *jouissance* drawing all desire to himself.

The relation of the male subject to *la femme fatale* of *film noir* demonstrates such a shift because *la femme fatale* turns the male protagonist's desire toward *jouissance*. She encourages him to make the choice of Being over Sense, so he increasingly moves outside the Law and back into a pre-oedipal realm of Being, that is sensuality and pleasure, unmediated by the Law of the Father as dictated within the Castration Complex. Copjec points out that the male hero may also use *la femme fatale* as a strategy of defence. Once he chooses *jouissance*, the hero risks his subjectivity. In order to protect himself from this, he attempts to split himself between knowledge and *jouissance*, projecting onto *la femme fatale* the *jouissance* he is unable to sustain himself. This results in a conscious or unconscious contract between the hero and *la femme fatale*, where she can command *jouissance* from him [1994:199]. Since film, like any other signifying practice is open to multiple readings, it is also possible to read Anna from an Oedipal point of view, in her position as *la femme fatale*, as affirming Stephen's fall from grace through his inability to resist her and maintain his appropriate Oedipal position. However, within the post Oedipal universe *la femme fatale* operates as a projective screen, much in the form of a defence mechanism. By projecting his drive for *jouissance* onto her, he can protect himself from understanding that the drive is his own. She can be blamed for his fall from Oedipal grace.

In *American Beauty*, *la femme fatale*, if understood as a female who seduces the hero outside his proper relations with others, is located in the character of Angela who, like Anna, represents the transgressive choice. Angela is Lester's daughter's best friend and Anna is Stephen's son's fiancée. While neither woman is actually the daughter of these men they function as displacements of these men's incestuous desires thereby increasing the tension around them as object choices for these fathers. Both women provide an obstacle and a hindrance to these father's relations with their children, between Stephen and his son Martyn, and between Lester and his daughter Jane. Nevertheless, these women also represent the point in the film at which the symbolically dead father becomes enlivened. In both films, prior to the entrance of Anna or Angela, there are establishing scenes demonstrating the deadness of these men's lives. Stephen's life is luxurious and successful but deadening and via voice over, we discover that Lester's life is a failure and deadening. The characters of Anna and Angela represent both the erotic principle of Oedipal desire, representing a limited release of pleasure, and also the principle of *thanatos* in its association with *jouissance* and transgressive desire of post Oedipal subjectivity. Both these men respond to these women as erotic objects in spite of the transgressive nature of such relationships and with no or little

regard for the consequences; representing the transition from the Oedipal to the post Oedipal father where the father's desire is paramount and limitless.

In both cases, while the characters of Anna and Angela initiate or encourage the sexualised nature of their interactions, they also operate as perfect screens upon which Stephen and Lester can respectively project their desires. It is the men's projections onto the women that seduces them as much or perhaps more so than the actions of the characters themselves. This is particularly obvious in *American Beauty*, Lester's projection fails when Angela reveals she is a virgin. Lester's desire disappears – she is not what he has thought she was all through the film. The unconscious contract between Lester and Angela is broken once this projection fails and Lester does not continue to pursue his transgressive desire for this young woman. Earlier in the film, he had moved beyond Oedipal subjectivity where his drive for satisfaction became paramount, but at this point, when the projection fails, he seems to move back to Oedipal subjectivity. His subjectivity is not capable of admitting to the drive to transgress the Law of the father in such an open way. When it operated as a form of projection, his ego was safely defended from realising its own drives and transgressive desires. In both *Damage* and *American Beauty* the characters of Anna and Angela, via this projective affect, demand or provoke the satisfaction of perverse *jouissance*.

For Lacan, desire and drive are always present in any notion of the father. Therefore, it is not surprising that Stephen, as father, demonstrates this duality of desire and drive as he occupies the position of both the Oedipal and the phallic/primordial father representing desire and drive, pleasure and *jouissance*, sense and being. In *Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek paints the picture of the Oedipal father as 'symbolic-dead father, Name-of-the-Father, the father of Law who does not enjoy, who ignores the dimension of enjoyment' [Žižek, 1994:206]. The establishing scenes of *Damage* construct Stephen as such an Oedipal father. He is seen in parliament, indicating that he is a man who makes the Law. He is coded as successful, indicating that he has been able to discipline his enjoyment sufficiently to advance in his chosen career. His clothing, speech and manner of moving indicate a certain repression of his emotional life. Martyn, his son, later says that he remembered Stephen as a cool and distant father. In cinematic terms, these elements of the narrative and spectacle combine together to produce a character who is symbolically dead to his feelings and his pleasure before he meets Anna. From the moment he meets Anna, he begins to choose enjoyment over sense/reason. However, the character of Stephen then fluctuates between these two poles. Socially, he continues to perform the role of the Oedipal father within his role as lawmaker, and within his role in the family, operating within an ethic of desire constrained by the threat of castration and the pleasure principle. Privately or rather secretly with Anna, he increasingly moves into the psychic space of post Oedipal subjectivity oriented toward an ethics of *jouissance*, resisting the controls of castration and operating outside the pleasure principle. His subjectivity in private is increasingly marked by the desire to transgress the Father's Law most obviously in his choice of lover, with no thought of the consequences.

The level of psychic tension between the Oedipal and phallic father unconsciously erupts on occasion. In some of the scenes with Anna, he tries to reassert himself as an Oedipal subject cognisant of responsibilities and consequences, particularly in the scene where he tries to persuade Anna that he must leave Ingrid and marry Anna. The use of words like 'must' and 'should' indicates Oedipal subjectivity because it arises out of the pleasure principle controlled through the castration complex. That is to say an understanding of appropriate Oedipal relations and the requirement to live up to them and the ability to defer gratification. However, he is vulnerable to his desire to transgress the Father's Law in his choice of her as lover and she easily dissuades him of this plan, offering instead the post Oedipal solution of satisfaction outside the pleasure principle. That is having all of it now, with no consequences. Freud contends that for most people love and desire remain divided so that 'where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love' [1977:251]. Anna's response to Stephen's proposal of marriage seems to demonstrate an awareness of this relational problematic. She solves this dilemma for herself by loving the son and desiring the father and offers a similar solution to Stephen. For the most part in social situations, such as family meals that include Anna, Stephen as Oedipal father is able to control the phallic father, behaving in a socially appropriate manner. However, the control is not always absolute, for example when Martyn announces his engagement to Anna, Stephen knocks over a glass of red wine onto a white tablecloth and the camera closes in on the spill. The spill of red wine serves as a metonym of the phallic father's aggression erupting in his desire to kill the son and take his place. The phallic father is only just controlled by the Oedipal father resulting in a displacement of that desire to spill his son's blood onto the spilling of the red wine.

The character of Lester, in *American Beauty*, is less ambivalently constructed. There is not so much of the internal tension within the character that is present in Stephen but rather Lester moves from Oedipal subjectivity, to post Oedipal subjectivity and back again or perhaps beyond. The vacillation is not as frequent as occurs with Stephen. In some ways, one can see the move into post Oedipal subjectivity as necessary for Lester to effectively abolish the Oedipal complex, a feat that, according to Freud, few people achieve [Freud, 1900-1]. The same cannot be said of Stephen. Stephen ends a tragic and exiled figure much like Oedipus. Lester seems in the last moments of the film, prior to being killed, to achieve a state of being beyond desire. Where Stephen's state of being beyond desire is seen as negative and the reason for his vulnerability to Anna's seductive influence; Lester, at the end of the film, is in a different state of being beyond desire. That is to say, he finally realises that he already has everything he needs now that he has become more of a man within himself. Instead of seeking or rebelling against an external paternal metaphor in the form of authority figures, in these final moments of the film, he locates within himself an internal locus of paternal strength. It is ironic that it is at this point of transcendence that Lester is killed by the over determined masculine figure of Colonel Fitts representing the repressive Oedipal father. While it seems that Lester moves from castrated Oedipal subject to post Oedipal subject and back to successfully resolved Oedipal subject, in another way it could be argued that he has moved beyond both positions - to a position which is more self contained, where masculine authority

and power is no longer projected outwards but found within. In this way at this point of the film, he has moved beyond desire, where desire is seen as lack, here he is sated and complete.

In *Damage*, Stephen is not the only parent to want to maintain a relationship to the phallic nature of his parental role. After the death of Martyn, Stephen's evident attachment to his phallic role allows Ingrid to admit to her own desire to maintain her phallic maternal role in relation to her son. She says to Stephen,

Martyn was the one for me. There is always just one person really. Anna I suppose for you?

Ingrid's desire to remain the phallic mother in relation to her son is a direct challenge to the Law of the Father that requires the castration of the phallic mother signifying her movement to the position of Oedipal mother. Ingrid's desire to remain the phallic mother to her son Martyn explains some of her hostility toward Anna, and probably any woman connected to her son. Martyn's comment to his father that he expected his mother would not accept any woman about whom he was serious, indicates Martyn's awareness of his mother's proprietorial feelings toward him; nevertheless, he is sufficiently distanced from those feelings to find another woman. For Ingrid to move to the position of Oedipal mother means she must make space for the future woman in her son's erotic life, but this is not her desire. Ingrid's desire to remain Martyn's primary love object and to replace Stephen with Martyn as her own primary love object is another form of transgressive and incestuous desire residing in this film.

The development of Lester's body as a signifier of his increasing masculinity becomes very important toward the end of the film where not only is his body displayed as an masculine ideal, but his movements become more active, secure and almost predatory in the scene between Angela and him in the lounge. These elements combine to prefigure the new masculine subject with access to internal mechanisms of power and authority of his final scene and his growing independence from the limits of Oedipality. The use and display of Lester's body contrasts to the display of Stephen's body, which while still being framed as an object of masculine ideal, that is well muscled, lean and powerful, produces a different meaning. Stephen's nakedness becomes a sign of his complete depravity in the eyes of his son as he watches his naked father having sex with his naked fiancée.

The narcissism of both men is evident in the care of their bodies. For Lester, this narcissism is rendered more evident when he states that his desire to work out and develop his body is so that he can look good naked, and the motivation for this is his desire for the desire of the Other, represented in the figure of Angela. Lester's body is displayed naked at the beginning of the film when he is out of shape, but even though his newly developed body is never fully displayed, there is enough display of his body to understand that he has achieved what he set out to do. When his narcissistic drive to develop a body that is a worthy of his object of desire has been achieved, he then moves more fully into being the subject of his desire/drive and pursues Angela actively. His switch to active and confident pursuit of her provokes a distinct

change in her behaviour from masquerading as a confident sexually experienced woman to a less confident teenage girl.

Returning to the figure of *la femme fatale*, Žižek rejects the notion that *la femme fatale* issues the seal of doom for the hero. He argues, on the contrary, that the lowest point of a *film noir* is the point at which the hero must face his lack of being. From this point of view *la femme fatale* can be read not so much as an agent of evil tempting the male protagonist to his doom, but rather a point of relief. Her function is analogous to the function of the Name of the Father in that she 'renders it possible for the subject to locate himself again within the texture of symbolic fate' [Žižek, 2001:169]. There are two points in *Damage* where Stephen is facing his lack of being: at the beginning of the film before meeting Anna, and then after their relationship has terminated. In both cases, the filmic techniques combine to display his melancholy within a life of success and riches. In both cases, it is contact with Anna that enlivens him through no longer having to face his lack of being. However, this choice ultimately leads to the destruction of his life and his seeming inability to recover from the damage of this transgressive desire. The final scenes of *Damage* show Stephen living an almost monk like existence worshipping at the shrine of his lost love, a massive image of Anna is the last image on the screen.

In *American Beauty*, there are also two key points where Lester recognises his own lack of being. The initial establishing scenes construct Lester as the castrated male subject where he is dead to his life and who, like Stephen, becomes enlivened by his meeting his object of desire. Before we even see his wife, via voice over and the image immediately preceding our first sight of her the film establish her as the agent of castration in Lester's life. Just before we see Carolyn, there is a close up of pair of secateurs cutting a rose stem. Metonymically, the cut rose stem stands in for Carolyn and all through the house, which is her domain, there are numerous vases of bunches of red roses. These scenes of metaphorical castration provide the rationale for his vulnerability to the enlivening presence of Angela. It is not Angela herself so much as his fantasies about her and projections onto her that enliven him. Lester's desire for Angela is metonymically represented by rose petals, multiple, red and soft as they accompany all his phantasies of her. He says

It's the weirdest thing. I feel like I've been in a coma for about 20 years and I'm just now waking up.

As the film progresses he moves steadily outside Oedipal relations to the point where he operates as a post Oedipal subject who is able to liberate himself from much of the confinement that had so deadened his life. His post Oedipal status allows him to resist the castrating influences of both his boss and his wife. He becomes free to pursue his narcissistic drive for his own satisfaction regardless of the consequences for himself or others. He unshackles himself from an ethic of care to an ethic of narcissistic pleasure.

It is intriguing that at the point where Angela, as *la femme fatale*, exposes her own lack of Being, that is not being the sexually experienced young woman he fantasised about, Lester reverts to a more successful Oedipal father who is able to defer his own satisfaction. Now when his projections onto Angela fail, through a mismatch between his fantasies and her actions he can finally see Angela as the young girl she is and whom he can then comfort and feed. Lester finally assumes the role of protective and nurturing father, a function he has not been able to achieve with his own daughter. Significantly when he assumes his role as Oedipal father he too becomes contained within the controlling impetus of the Oedipus complex. The Oedipal father not only controls the desire of his children but his own as well, within those relations appropriate to Oedipality. In this moment he understands what he does have. He sits in the kitchen looking at the photo of his wife and daughter smiling, he, in connection with this photo, forms the Oedipal triangle. Now at this point of sublime realisation he dies. He is shot by the repressive element of the Oedipal father, signified by Colonel Fitts. This sequence seems to concur with Žižek's earlier proposal that *la femme fatale* is only fatal when the primordial father is no longer present. Lester's transition away from primordial position, either to Oedipal father or a position beyond, allows the fatal effect of *la femme fatale* to become operational. In this case, it occurs through the agency of Colonel Fitts, who, in the course of the film has transitioned from oppressive Oedipal father to a character who unsuccessfully tries to lure Lester into transgressing the Law of the Father through homosexual relations.

Both *Damage* and *American Beauty* lend themselves to readings via the theoretical framework of post Oedipality to provide more nuanced readings of masculine subjects representing the tension between the impulses of Oedipal and post Oedipal subjectivity. This tension between the drive to transgress the law of the father and the inability to delimit his transgressive desire within appropriate Oedipal relations leads to their inevitable inability to resist the encouragement of *la femme fatale* to choose *jouissance* over pleasure, being over sense and drive over desire. For Stephen, this leads not only to the destruction of his own life but all those close to him. For Lester, there is a dismantling of his life as he progresses from the castrated Oedipal subject to the post Oedipal subject and finally at the point of death to subjectivity beyond desire. Films, such as these, represent transition points between Oedipal subjectivity and the post Oedipality theorised by both Freud and Lacan, and open audience desires to acknowledge the possibility of the operations of the post Oedipal universe while still drawing back from it in their final scenes.

Bibliography

- Copjec, J. (1994). *Read my desire: Lacan against the Historicists*. London, The MIT Press.
- Cowie, E. (1993). 'Film noir and women' *Shades of noir: a reader*. Ed. Joan Copjec. London, Verso, 121-65.
- Freud, S. (1900-1). *The interpretation of dreams*. London, The Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1919). *Totem and taboo: resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics*. London, The Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S (1977). *On Sexuality: Three essays on the theory of sexuality and other works*. London, Penguin Books.
- Lacan, J. (1981). *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis: the seminar of Jacques Lacan, book XI*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company.
- Lacan, J. (1985). *Feminine sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*. Ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jaqueline Rose. Trans. Jaqueline Rose. New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company.
- Lacan, J. (1990). *Television/ A challenge to the psychoanalytic establishment*. Ed. Joan Copjec. Trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson. New York, W. W. Norton & Company.
- Lacan, J. (1992). *The ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*. The seminar of Jacques Lacan book VII. Ed Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Dennis Potter. New York.
- Lacan, J. (1999). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan: On feminine sexuality- the limits of love and knowledge Book XX - Encore 1972-73*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Tans. Bruce Fink. New York and London, W W Norton & Company.
- MacCannell, J. F. (1991). *The regime of the brother: after the patriarchy*. New York, Routledge.
- Malle, Louis (1992). *Damage*.
- Mellard, J. M. (1997). "The other desire: good, beauty, death and the thing in Lacan's Antigone." *Clinical Studies: International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 3(1): 11-30.
- Mellard, J. M. (1998). "Lacan and the new Lacanians: Josephine Hart's Damage, Lacanian Tragedy and the Ethics of Jouissance." *PMLA* 113(3): 395-407.
- Mendez, Sam (1999) *American Beauty*.
- Zižek, S. (1994). *The Metastases of Enjoyment: six essays of Woman and causality*. London and New York, Verso.
- Zižek, S. (2001). *Enjoy your symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*. New York and London, Routledge.