From Alien to Alpha Male.
Cillian Murphy, *Peaky Blinders* and the Role of Fashion in Hegemonic Masculine Performance

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Published: July 11, 2●24

Abstract

Cillian Murphy's career offers ideal ground to study the role played by fashion in the construction of male stardom. In terms of gender performance his career appears to be split in two, with the role of gangster Thomas Shelby in *Peaky Blinders* acting as a watershed. Prior to this role, Murphy's star image is characterized by a tendency to break traditional male canons by portraying androgynous, liminal characters. By contrast, *Peaky Blinders* makes him an icon of conservative masculinity, with dominant and stoic traits close to the hegemonic model. This transformation is closely tied to the sartorial aspect of the series, which sees Shelby and his gang display a classic elegance associated with aggressive, dominant, and success-driven masculinity. This dimension is also central to the mechanisms of appropriation enacted by the audience, inspiring fashion trends that denote the ability to influence an aspect of consumption crucial to male gender expression. Simultaneously, Murphy's "tailored" image in *Peaky Blinders* populates conservative and misogynistic online spaces such as the Sigma Male Grindset, testifying to the radical change underwent by the actor's image with regards to gender performance.

Keywords: Cillian Murphy; Peaky Blinders; Masculinity; Power Dressing; Sigma Male Grindset.

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On a gathering storm
Comes a tall, handsome man
In a dusty black coat,
With a red right hand..

Introduction

"This may be hard to believe for many, but Cillian Murphy, the same actor behind the testosterone-boosting World War I veteran Thomas Shelby in *Peaky Blinders*, once portrayed the opposite gender in *Breakfast on Pluto*."[1] These words from an article in *The Things* perfectly condense the evolution of Cillian Murphy's career from a gender performance perspective. At forty-eight the Irish actor is now for all intents and purposes a Hollywood star, endowed with enough prestige and recognition to earn him the lead role in a megaproduction like Christopher Nolan's Oscar-winning *Oppenheimer*. But the path to the top has been gradual: an up-and-coming actor in the '00s, Murphy has long been known mostly for roles in independent productions or as a prominent character actor in Hollywood films. It's with the role of Thomas Shelby in *Peaky Blinders* (2013–2022) that the definitive leap in popularity took place, inextricably linking the actor's face to the exploits of the gangsters featured in the popular BBC show.[2] But *Peaky Blinders* also had another effect on Murphy's career: that of recasting his star image in a distinctly masculine sense, transforming him into a contemporary icon of unyielding and assertive masculinity.

This is all the more remarkable when one considers that the actor's earlier career found a clear point of consistency in his propensity to explore unconventional masculinities, playing androgynous or at times even expressly feminine and queer characters.[3] In this article I want to account for such discontinuity, exploring the different ways in which Murphy performed gender identity before and after the character of Thomas Shelby. Within this journey, considerable importance must be given to fashion as an integral part of the process of masculinization undertaken by the actor in the eyes of the audience. In this respect it plays a twofold role: on the one hand, it contributes to the iconographic construction of the series as a male-dominated universe; on the other hand, it acts as an important signifier within the dynamics of appropriation enacted by the viewers, which in the case of *Peaky Blinders* range as we shall see from the simple revival of vintage male fashion trends to reactionary and misogynistic identity claims.

The first chapter will focus on Murphy's early career, with the aim of highlighting the presence of a thematic line consisting of figures who eschew the stereotypes of traditional masculinity; in this phase the actor seems to cultivate an image definable as androgynous, sexually ambiguous or fluid, which fits well with his peculiar screen presence and his general attraction to "outsider" characters. The second chapter examines the radical change brought to this image by the decade-long experience of *Peaky Blinders*, where Murphy ditches the skin of the feminine performer to don the stoic, hypermasculine attire of gangster Thomas Shelby. I will argue that the series champions a traditionalist and conservative masculine ideal, in many ways comparable to the so-called hegemonic masculinity first described by Connell (1995).[4] Particular attention is due in this regard to the sartorial dimension, marked by the recovery of a classicism that is itself affected by enduring cultural associations with a dominant idea of masculinity, based on economic-sexual success and a rigid demarcation of gender roles. The third chapter focuses on the reception of this image within a particularly radicalized segment of male audience, that of the

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1.   "How These Actors Portrayed the Opposite Gender," The Things, accessed December 12, 2023, https://www.thethings.com/how-these-actors-portrayed-the-opposite-gender-cillian-murphy/.

2.   "Cillian Murphy Says 'Peaky Blinders' Fame Can 'Ruin Experiences':'It Kind of Destroys Human Behavior'," Variety, accessed December 20, 2023, http://variety.com/2023/tv/news/cillian-murphy-peaky-blinders-fame-ruins-experiences-1235609685/.

3.   "I'd never really played that physically imposing sort of hyper-masculine-type character ... in fact, I'd probably played the opposite up to that point," Entertainment Weekly, accessed January 01, 2024, https://ew.com/tv/peaky-blinders-season-6-cillian-murphy-interview/.

4.   R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

Sigma Male Grindset on the social platform Tik Tok. In these spaces — part of the broader complex of masculinist online communities known as the manosphere — the icon of Thomas Shelby recurs in association with content that hymns a conservative, misogynistic masculinity, again largely mediated by clothing. Finally, I turn briefly to the change elicited by Murphy's new image in his prolific collaboration with director Christopher Nolan, in whose authorial universe we trace a constant "postmodern" preoccupation with the refounding of a masculine ideal perceived to be in crisis.

Besides making up for the lack of studies on one of the most relevant actors in the contemporary audiovisual landscape, the analysis of Murphy's career offers a privileged ground to show how fashion participates in the definition and redefinition of forms of male stardom, as well as its role in mediating reception among audiences through consumption, fandom dynamics and online practices. With regard to gender expression, in particular, it retains a fundamental importance in the construction of that "structured polysemy" (according to Dyer's definition) which is the complex of cultural and ideological meanings constituting the image of a star through time, where the new does not replace the old but stands alongside it in dialectical and contradictory coexistence.[5]

Misfit, Crossdresser, Villain. Subverting Gender Stereotypes

Rather than a sudden rise to fame, the early years of Cillian Murphy's career look like a slow and uneven path, which, beginning in the independent cinema of his native Ireland, soon led him to the gates of mainstream Hollywood. Here however the Cork actor entered fairly quietly, alternating minor roles with low-budget or European-produced films. Because of this low profile — more like a character actor than a star — his early filmography is remarkably varied in terms of genres, tone and types of parts tackled, making it difficult to draw a unified picture or isolate recurring themes.

One exception to this is the recurrence of roles marked by unconventional gender performances, willing to play with stereotypes by projecting an aura of ambiguity and sexual fluidity. His screen presence may have contributed to this, possibly leading to some typecasting and facilitating the assignment of liminal parts. In physical terms alone, in fact, Murphy already exhibits an unusual mixture of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits: on the one hand his prominent jaw and deep baritone voice; on the other his small stature, slender build, and a face with soft, delicate features, framed by hair often worn long. A cocktail with which all subsequent gender reformulations of his icon will have to deal, sometimes emphasizing it, sometimes trying as much as possible to curb its troubling force. In the early years the play with identity performance takes the form of three recurring figures, which in the alien presence of the young actor find answers to different cultural and industrial needs.

The Misfit

In one of the few analyses devoted to Murphy's career (2017), Cristina Diamant focuses on this early period isolating three roles that share a portrait of marginal characters, embodying an irreducible diversity from societal norms. Together, *Disco Pigs* (2001), *Intermission* (2003) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005) form an ideal trilogy of the Misfit, whose protagonists mirror the anxieties of contemporary Irish youth. In these alienated youth we recognize the new generations of a country still in search of identity after the achievement of independence, where traditional values based on religion and family unity have lost much of their meaning.[6] Their clash with authority and institutions, embodying a different "ontological order", includes a challenge to the conventions of traditional masculinity: "gender roles are subverted, not only in the obvious sense in Breakfast on Pluto, but also in the conflicting sensibilities of Pig and John."[7]

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5.   Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998).

6.   Cristina Diamant, "Stranger(s') Voices at Home: The Many Faces of Cillian Murphy as the Misfit," *Caietele Echinox*, Vol. 32 (2017): 293.

7.   Diamant, 293.

Of course, it is the character of Patricia "Kitten" Braden, the protagonist of Neil Jordan's film, who has received the most attention in this regard (Fig. 1). A trans woman struggling to assert her identity in the turmoil-shaken Ireland of the 1970s, her figure is the subject of analyses that frame it in terms of an explicit challenge to the conventions of a repressive and violent male order. Tiina Mäntymäki speaks of it as "a narrative of resistance against the regulatory regime of heterosexuality", where the tenacity with which Kitten opposes her own queer experience to the conventions of society rises to critique and questioning of that normative order.[8]

In these films the subversion of gender stereotypes is therefore linked to a specific representational trend in Irish cinema of the period, reflective of a culture witnessing a change in its own models of masculinity. In the same vein, in their analysis of the new wave of Irish actors finding success in Hollywood in the 00s, Bracken and Radley place Murphy — alongside Colin Farrell and Jonathan Rhys-Meyers — in the context of changing American stereotypes of Irish masculinity: no longer the brute force of the proletariat who emigrated overseas in the early twentieth century, but "young, gorgeous boys" capable of tapping into metrosexual trends by conquering new niches of female and gay audiences.[9]

Figure 1: Screen shot taken from *Breakfast on Pluto* (Neil Jordan, 2005).

The Crossdresser

Breakfast on Pluto is central to another recurrence that frames Murphy's career around the subversion of gender stereotypes; that of roles where the actor appears in women's clothing. While performance in drag by cis-het actors is nothing new, Murphy's case is surprising in its relative frequency. There are in fact no less than three instances: in addition to *Pluto* we may recall *Peacock* (2010) a variation on the dual personality theme in *Psycho*, and *Sunburn* (1999) where Murphy appears in women's clothing in a party scene. It's in these films that the relationship between dress and identity performance, which will accompany the actor all the way to *Peaky Blinders*, first emerges forcefully. Culturally dress acts as a powerful signifier of sexual difference, helping to mark gender and its social attributes.[10] At the same time because of its recombinable nature, which denounces it as constructed and performative, it is an ideal terrain for subversion, allowing the performance of alternative or fluid identities.[11] Murphy's in

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8.   Tiina Mäntymäki, "Dismantling *Serious* in Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto*," *GEXcel Work in Progress Report*, Vol. 6, 2 (2009): 119.

9.   Claire Bracken and Emma Radley, "A Mirror up to Irishness: Hollywood Hard Men and Witty Women," in *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*, eds. Claire Bracken et al. (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2007), 157.

10.   Tim Edwards, *Fashion in Focus. Concepts, practices and politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011).

11.   Annette Kuhn, "Sexual disguise and cinema," in *The Power of the Image. Essays on Representation and Sexuality*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), 49–50.

drag roles can therefore be read as challenging heteronormative models, via performances that refuse to submit to the prescriptions regulating the relationship between fashion and identity expression: thus they offer "a glimpse of 'a world outside the order normally seen or thought about' — a utopian prospect of release from the ties of sexual difference that bind us into meaning, discourse, culture."[12]

Naturally by speaking of subversion I don't mean to underestimate the presence of stereotypes and cultural stigmas that may be present in these films. Think for example of the discriminating tradition that weighs on a film such as *Peacock* (Fig. 2), born of decades of cinematic representations that — through the aforementioned *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill* or *The Silence of the Lambs* — have equated trans identities and criminal tendencies; or of the problematic nature posed today by the assignment of a trans role like *Pluto* to a cis actor. At the same time, we shouldn't underestimate the disruptive value that these kinds of roles take on in the construction of Murphy's star image, framing him as an actor willing to move on the borderline between genders by breaking the traditional canons of masculinity.

Figure 2: Screen shot taken from *Peacock* (Michael Lander, 2010).

The Villain

2005 marked a turning point in Murphy's career. In addition to *Breakfast on Pluto*, the actor appeared in two other roles that remain among his most well-remembered. Significantly, both are villain parts: that of Jackson Rippner in *Red Eye* and that of Jonathan Crane/Scarecrow in *Batman Begins*, which inaugurates his partnership with Christopher Nolan. The association of an actor with an androgynous image with negative roles is unsurprising, as it fits into a representational tradition that has long equated "sexual deviance" with deplorable moral characteristics. Following conventions that date back to classic Hollywood, where the Hays Code had forbidden the direct portrayal of characters who differed from heteronormative standards, this is often done in an unspoken manner, insinuating foreignness to gender norms through a practice known as queer-coding.[13] While the hero embodies normative masculine or feminine models, the villain's negative positioning is reinforced by a characterization that insinuates his or her possible queer identity. Specifically for males,

> physical characteristics of the queer-coded villain include delicate features associated with feminine beauty. Finer bone structure, high cheekbones, thin bodies unlike the masculine forms of the heroes, and features touched with makeup are some of the characteristics that are often associated with the queer-coded villain.[14]

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12. Kuhn, 49–50.

13. Koeun Kim, "Queer-coded Villains (And Why You Should Care)," *Dialogues@RU*, Vol. 12 (2017): 156–165.

14. Koeun, 156–165.

The similarity of this description to Murphy's features is a clue as to why Hollywood has eagerly resorted to an actor with his screen presence for negative parts. Associated with the villain, his physicality makes for a powerful visual element of queer-coding, which the narrative helps to emphasize: the plot of *Red Eye* for example, centered on the battle between Rachel McAdams' character and the hijacker played by Murphy, unravels around a progressive de-masculinization of the latter. If at first Rippner swaggeringly declares his own superiority, based on the supposed male tendency toward rationality,[15] subsequent events disprove this by seeing him succumb almost comically to the girl's resolve. This is subliminally compounded by yet another element of crossdressing: after suffering a neck wound Rippner dabs it with a scarf pulled from a woman, spending the last few minutes of the film wearing a flamboyant female garment (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Screen shot taken from *Red Eye* (Wes Craven, 2005).

In Scarecrow's character, on the other hand, the conventions of queer-coding are reinforced and specified by its belonging to the superhero genre as well as Nolan's poetics. As a defender of social order and embodiment of ideal masculinities, the superhero figure is often subjected to readings that frame it as reactionary, a champion of a conservative status quo with respect to gender canons.[16] Conversely, "linked to excessive greed, irrationality, and characteristics stereotypically associated with homosexuality and/or femininity, the villain primarily serves as a potent representation of a failed masculine subject."[17]

This dialectic finds a precise positioning in Nolan's authorial universe, characterized by a recurring attention to gender dynamics; in particular, his films appear marked by a conflictual relationship with the feminine: women often play reduced roles, made problematic by a tendency to characterize them in relation to the male protagonists (usually as wives or lovers) and to reduce them to narrative device through the repeated use of the "dead wife" trope. Moreover, films such as *Following* (1998), *Memento* (2000), and *Inception* (2010) offer portraits likened to the *femme fatale* of film noir, where the fractured male psyche of the protagonist is confronted by an uncontrollable and frightening female element.[18]

On the other front, for Deakin (2015) the masculine performance of the Nolan hero, based on the use of lies and forms of masking in the terms of the "re-assertion of a 'new', 'better' 'fictional' self," is linked to the theme of the reinforcement of a masculine gender role perceived as in danger, under

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15. "Lisa, whatever female-driven, emotion-based dilemma you may be dealing with right now, you have my sympathy. But for the sake of time and sanity, let's break this down into a little male-driven, fact-based logic".

16. Terence McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble! Critical Perspectives on the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2018), 25.

17. Lee Easton, "Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity. The Villain in the Superhero Film," *Cinephile*, Vol. 9.2 no. 2 (2013): 39.

18. Sverrir Sigfússon, "Noir Guilt Complex. The Death of Women as a Catalyst for Character Developement and Plot in the Films of Christopher Nolan" (2005).

the sign of that "postmodern crisis of masculinity" typical of the era at the turn of the millennia.[19] From this perspective in the *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005–2012) Batman represents the performative, hypermasculine, ideal mask that the weak and tormented Bruce Wayne projects in his crusade against evil. Of his enemies, Crane (Fig. 4) is the only one who appears in all the films, with brief cameos in the second and third chapters. Though marginal, Murphy's performance makes him a memorable presence, a fragile intellectual counterpoint to the Gotham hero's enhanced and theatricalized masculinity.

Association with villain roles left its mark on Murphy's star image, being instrumental in his choice for an ambiguous, anti-heroic protagonist like Thomas Shelby in *Peaky Blinders*.[20] But if in this one can read a continuity between the two periods, in gender performance the character marks a sharp break with the actor's past, transforming him from an icon of fluidity into an emblem of a far more aggressive and traditional masculinity.
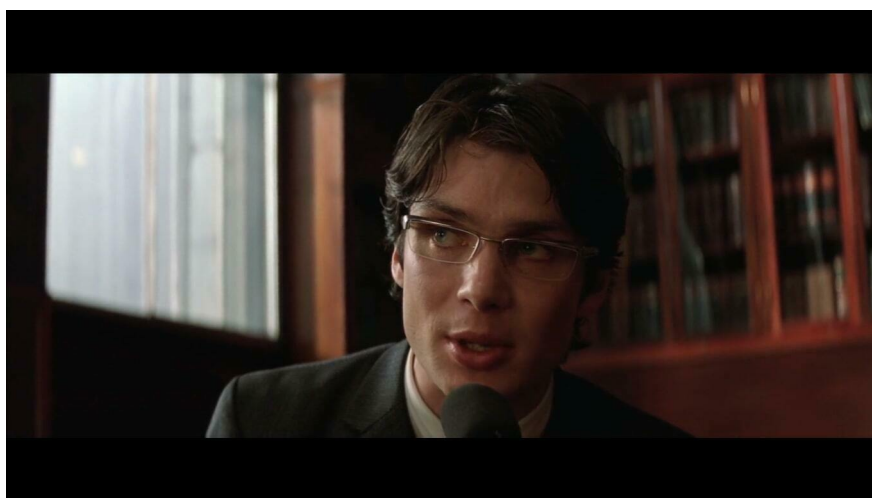

Figure 4: Screen shot taken from *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005).

"The Suit Is on the House. Or the House Burns Down". *Peaky Blinders* between Masculine Performance and Classic Elegance

In a surprising reversal of the image described thus far, the role that gave Murphy his big break is characterized by an almost total adherence to the canons of traditional, conservative masculinity. A creation of showrunner Steven Knight, *Peaky Blinders* (BBC/Netflix, 2013–2022) captivated audiences with its mix of crime epic, period charm and robust injections of modernity, such as the soundtrack composed of rock and folk tunes. Murphy dominates the scene as Thomas Shelby, war veteran and head of the Peaky Blinders gang, who in 1920s–30s Birmingham builds a criminal empire capable of reaching into the upper echelons of politics.

As Eveleigh (2021) points out, *Peaky Blinders* represents an essential case study for understanding the relationship between fashion and male-gender performance in today's audiovisual landscape. Besides interacting closely in the narrative and visual economy of the series, these two dimensions are central to its considerable cultural impact, an example of the influence of media products on consumption and on-

19.   Peter Deakin, "Men in Crisis: Christopher Nolan, Un-truths and Fictionalising Masculinity," in *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan. Imagining the Impossible*, eds. Jaqueline Furby et al. (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2015).

20.   Catherine Byrne, James Leggott and Julie Ann Taddeo, *Conflicting Masculinities. Men in Television Period Drama* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 8–9.

line practices as vectors of identity politics.[21] At the heart of it all is Murphy's performance, so effective as to catapult him to new heights of stardom, but also to radically rewrite his perception as a performer of gender fluidity in favor of a hypermasculinity that places him at the opposite end of contemporary identity discourse. In the following lines we'll see how *Peaky Blinders* and its protagonist approach gender performance and how this is mediated by dress, both narratively and in audience appropriation.

Gangsters, Veterans and Masculine Reconstructions

In terms of gender politics *Peaky Blinders* can be taken as an example of a cultural product that celebrates a conservative masculine ideal, comparable to the hegemonic masculinity first theorized by Connell. This term designates the complex of features traditionally governing the male gender role, continually renegotiated in response to sociocultural impulses that intervene to undermine its conformation. Norming how men "should be", hegemonic masculinity simultaneously builds hierarchies based on the fulfillment of requirements regarding sexual orientation, class, racial background, economic success and proximity to individual traits perceived as ideally masculine. Crucial to this model is a demarcation of masculine versus feminine prerogatives, consisting of a power disparity in favor of men and a division of social roles that reserves for men the spheres of earning and working careers at the expense of domestic duties and parental care. Other traits include the sanctioning of homosexuality, a certain capacity for violence, and the ability to suppress or hide emotions by practicing a "stoic" masculinity.[22]

The male model embodied by the Shelby brothers and the other protagonists of *Peaky Blinders* closely resembles the one just described. In terms of its narrative arc and spectacular dimension, the series plays strongly as a masculine aspirational fantasy, linked to the pursuit of a violent, emotionally impenetrable masculine ideal, based on the subjugation of women and the achievement of success that is measured in terms of economic-work performance. The backdrop against which *Peaky Blinders* projects this fantasy falls between the gangster genre and a twentieth-century period drama centered on World War I veterans; it's the intertwining of these two dimensions, each carrying cultural meanings regarding gender performance and the "crisis" of the male role, that allows the creators to stage a conservative narrative, where the violent conquest of power by men symbolically reaffirms their traditional attributes threatened by socio-historical progress.

As male-dominated spaces, gangster films and series constitute "an ideal arena for playing out masculine fantasies and anxieties",[23] thematizing emotional, familial, and hierarchical relationships among men, while spectacularly articulating rise-and-fall narratives driven by ambitions of political and entrepreneurial success. By projecting hypermasculine performances into the past, the gangster narrative allows interfacing with an outdated image, sublimating its reappropriation into a nostalgic attitude:

> the "performance" of hyper-masculinity in many gangster movies is nostalgic for a masculinity that is acknowledged as no longer appropriate. It is as if the earlier ideals of masculinity have now been criminalized ... confined to the screen, it operates as a fantasy, which male audiences can enjoy without feeling culpable.[24]

In *Peaky Blinders* this nostalgia is welded with another trope that responds to a perceived crisis of male identity: that of the traumatized war veteran unable to reintegrate into society. Since the 1940s, when it helped thematize the disorientation caused by the recent entry of women into the workforce,[25] film and television have often used the veteran to symbolically elaborate alarming transformations of gender roles; an "outdated" figure to a society that is witnessing the feminine emerging into public life and leaving

21. Susanna Eveleigh, "Homme Fatale: how the masculine myth of the Gangster can be used for regressive expressions of the male gender." (2021), 55.

22. Connell, 76–86.

23. George S. Larke-Walsh, *Screening the Mafia. Masculinity, Ethnicity and Mobsters from The Godfather to The Sopranos* (Jefferson N.C. & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010), 17.

24. Larke-Walsh, 211.

25. Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street. Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991).

behind the male models of the war era. In *Peaky Blinders* the transformation of the veteran into gangster thus constitutes an opportunity for social vindication, allowing men to "reassert their masculinity and patriarchal dominance in the postwar era".[26]

Moreover, if historically the war acted as last stand to a certain kind of imperial masculinity, in the show it continues to animate the violent actions of Shelby and his men, kept alive by a narrative that subtly uses the pathological experience of PTSD (the veteran trapped in a constant state of war) to perpetuate and celebrate a masculinity no longer socially acceptable.[27] Compared to other narratives on war trauma, in fact, in *Peaky Blinders* any claim to critical discourse on the compulsive violence of veterans is compromised by the spectacularity of the visuals, which imbue their exploits with an air of cool charm, and by the alignment to the character who acts as its main instigator: "Tommy's stoicism, the masculine identity that most resembles traditional concepts of strength and character, remains the heroic center of the narrative".[28] A celebratory approach explicitly claimed by showrunner Knight, who states:

> I didn't want to write an essay about how terrible life was in Birmingham at that time. I wanted to show the audience how fantastic and wild and illegal everything was … I wanted the viewers to imagine characters they could admire.[29]

On these premises *Peaky Blinders* paints a male performance close to the hegemonic model, based on violence, the suppression of emotions — perfectly epitomized by the impassible Tommy — and the segregation of gender roles (Fig. 5). The need to subjugate the female element in particular is continually stressed in the series, which from the outset insists on taking back the spaces "invaded" by women during the war (Aunt Polly ran the organization in Tommy's absence). Often strong and unaligned female characters are brought back to their traditional roles, such as Grace, who from being a spy perversely attracted to the criminal in season 1 is then reduced to the role of innocent lover oblivious to his plans; elsewhere the control of female sexuality is staged, as in the relationship between Tommy and Lizzie ("the deal is..you belong to me. My property..no one touches my property" S5 E3). Also exemplary is the plot of S4 E2, which explicitly contrasts a male line of action embodied by John, who wants to wash away in blood an offense, and a female line seeking reconciliation, represented by Polly and an Arthur who is beginning to be affected by the evengelizing influence of his wife Linda. Not only does Tommy obviously advocate the violent solution, but he accuses his older brother of feminizing ("you're getting weak and soft"), inviting him to a more manly absence of compassion.

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26. Evan Smith, " 'Brutalised' veterans and tragic anti-heroes: masculinity, crime and post-war trauma in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Peaky Blinders*," in *The Great War and the British Empire. Culture and society*, eds. Walsh et al. (London & New York: Routledge, 2017), 280.

27. George S. Larke-Walsh, " 'The King's shilling': How Peaky Blinders uses the experience of war to justify and celebrate toxic masculiniy," *Journal of Popular Television*, Vol. 1 no. 7 (2019): 39–56.

28. Larke-Walsh, "The King's shilling", 48.

29. Matt Allen, *By Order of the Peaky Blinders: the Official Companion to the Hit TV Series* (London: Michael O' Mara Books, 2019), 21.

Figure 5: Screen shot taken from *Peaky Blinders* (2013–2022).

The Suit Maketh the Man

It's impossible to discuss *Peaky Blinders* without bringing up men's fashion. In the ten years since its arrival on screens, the show's ability to dictate sartorial trends has surely been the most conspicuous element of its cultural impact. Credit to an unmistakable style (Fig. 6), sporting a classical elegance (three-piece, coat, the iconic flat cap) that interprets period drama in a modern and "wearable" way, as stated by costume designer Alison McCosh.[30] More than just characters, Tommy Shelby and the other protagonists of *Peaky Blinders* are menswear icons, inspiring a revival of classic and vintage cuts that from England has literally taken the world by storm: to name just a few examples, an article in the Telegraph reports how John Lewis credits the show for an 83 percent increase in flat cap sales between 2016 and 2017;[31] in 2019 Primark launched an official line dedicated to *Peaky Blinders*, and in the same year David Beckham — a huge fan of the show — introduced his own collection inspired by its look;[32] meanwhile, barbershops have seen requests for haircuts inspired by the series multiply, with some businesses dedicated exclusively to this type of clientele.

By influencing fashion *Peaky Blinders* shows itself capable of affecting an aspect of consumption crucial to male identity expression. In particular, the traditionalism of this trend — starting with the ubiquitous three-piece suit — builds a bridge between the narrative universe of the series and the cultural attributes associated to this type of classic elegance. For Edwards, "The suit is, in a sense, the very essence of men's fashion and, indeed, masculinity. It is what makes men's dress 'masculine' and, ultimately, what makes men appear as men as opposed to women when clothed."[33] With its shape that enhances the lines of the male body, air of practicality (pants instead of a skirt), and chromatic monotony, the suit historically coexists with and accompanies men in their traditional social prerogatives, exemplifying strength,

30. "How Peaky Blinder's Fashion Designer Brought Period Fashion Back to Life For the Show," Slashfilm, accessed December 10, 2023, https://www.slashfilm.com/1140220/how-peaky-blinders-costume-designer-brought-period-fashion-back-to-life-for-the-show/.

31. "Luggage, coffee shops, Tommy Shelby haircuts: how Peaky Blinders conquered Britain," The Telegraph, accessed November 28, 2023, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/0/peaky-blinders-themed-luggage-coffee-shops-uk-tommy-shelby-haircut/.

32. "The Sartorial Elegance of the Peaky Blinders," Whynow, accessed December 19, 2023, https://whynow.co.uk/read/the-sartorial-elegance-of-the-peaky-blinders.

33. Edwards, 53.

economic success, and rationality.[34]

The emphasis put by *Peaky Blinders* on the elegance of its protagonists thus perfectly complements their traditional gender performance. Indeed, not only does dress in itself signify virility and economic power. It also partakes of a double association with the directives, already highlighted, against which the male performance of Shelby and his men revolves. On the one hand, classic vintage elegance closely dialogues with the fantasies of male power enacted by the gangster genre, especially in those forms that bring it closer to period drama:

> the historical convergence of gangster narratives with the visual and aesthetic spectacle of history secured by the contemporary cinematic costume drama constitutes a powerful artic- ulation of "nostalgia" as the vehicle for retrogressive, antifeminist, and "hypermasculinized" ideologies. The work of "masculinization" is figured in the retro gangster genre through two operations: the resurrection of the dress codes of hegemonic masculinity and the literal and symbolic elimination of women.[35]

On the other hand, if in *Peaky Blinders* the element of war is central in contextualizing and justifying male violence, it should be noted how the gang's adherence to a shared dress code introduces a strong visual connotation of comradeship (Fig. 7). That of the men based at the Garrison pub is not just a look but an actual uniform,[36] which perpetuates and glamorizes the group dynamic of the platoon while amplifying the ability of the gangster narrative to "reflect the multiplicity of masculine identities through groups of men, rather than through the less comfortable notion of a fracturing of individual masculine identities".[37]

Without risking *tout-court* judgments on a vast and varied fandom, which in many cases may simply appreciate and want to reproduce a bygone sartorial style, the impact of *Peaky Blinders* on the fashion world deserves some attention for the link it establishes (or reveals) between the gender politics of the show and fashion as a site of expression of masculinity.[38] Studies such as those by Barry et al. attest to the persistence of sartorial consumption dynamics aimed at symbolizing adherence to traditional gender canons; even today, the need to conform to classic masculine models plays an important role in guiding men's clothing choices, especially when — as in the case of the suit — it involves garments socially linked to the perception of a certain credibility and professional success.[39]

Whether described as pride or anxiety, men experience a prescriptive relationship between what they wear and how it makes them appear in terms of gender performance, refusing to dress in ways perceived as "unmanly" or "not credible", confirming the persistence of the role of dress as a signifier of adherence to gender norms.[40] In this light, *Peaky Blinders*' ability to inspire retro sartorial trends authorizes to hypothesize at least some degree of overlap between these dress-related appropriative dynamics and the dissemination of the series' traditionalist content:

> "the series and its hyper-accessible dress can act as a powerful tool for certain mythic con- sumers who want comfort and stability in terms of their masculine identity, or who want a more active reinforcement of their traditionally defined masculinity."[41]

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34. Edwards, 53.

35. Peter Stanfield and Esther Sonnet, " 'Good Evening, Gentlemen, Can I Check Your Hats Please?': Masculinity, Dress and the Retro Gangster Cycles of the 1990s," in *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*, eds. Lee Griev- son et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 177.

36. Byrne et al., *Conflicting Masculinities*, 181.

37. Larke-Walsh, *Screening the Mafia*, 184.

38. Eveleigh, 63.

39. Ben Barry and Nathaniel Weiner, "Suited for Success? Suits, Status, and Hybrid Masculinity," *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 22 no. 2 (2017): 151–176, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17696193.

40. Ben Barry, "The toxic lining of men's fashion consumption: the omnipresent force of hegemonic masculinity," *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*, Vol. 2 no. 2–3 (2015): 143–160, https://doi.org/10.1386/csmf.2.2-3.143_1.

41. Eveleigh, 61.

The following chapter examines a specific case where the appropriation of *Peaky Blinders* moves in precisely this direction, mobilizing the imagery of the series and the "tailored" icon of Thomas Shelby as symbols of a hegemonic masculinity celebrated and elected as an aspirational model. Paradoxically, the actor at the center of all this is the same who for nearly a decade had embodied opposite values, portraying characters far removed from a traditional conception of masculinity. Watching him in *Peaky Blinders*, it seems impossible that Murphy so long embodied an ideal of androgynous performer, capable of trying his hand at queer roles such as *Breakfast on Pluto*. Thomas Shelby's look intervenes on several fronts to correct his natural feminine appearance, from dapper suits to a military cut that emphasizes the sharper lines of his face, not to mention considerable physical toughening and a direction that often camouflages his diminutive stature with perspective tricks. Rarely has a single role had such an impact in reconfiguring an actor's image in terms of gender expression, confirming the iconographic power of fashion in accompanying and characterizing the performances of masculinity that populate the contemporary audiovisual landscape.

Figure 6: Screen shot taken from *Peaky Blinders* (2013–2022).

Figure 7: Screen shot taken from *Peaky Blinders* (2013–2022).

"He's a God, He's a Man, He's a Guru". Fashion and Online Practices in the Sigma Male Grindset

The cultural influence of *Peaky Blinders* is not limited to clothing consumption. The fandom's appropriation of the series also finds space on the Internet, where the character of Thomas Shelby once again acts as purveyor of conservative gender values. In particular, Cillian Murphy's image in *Peaky Blinders* accompanies the content posted on Tik Tok by creators ascribing to the Sigma Male Grindset, a community with lax boundaries and poorly systematized, but united by its exaltation of hegemonic and reactionary male traits. This confirms on the one hand how the audience's engagement with the series includes, at least in certain cases, an aspirational dimension linked to the promotion of conservative ideologies. On the other hand, the fact that the *image* should be the vehicle of such content — consistent with a highly visual platform such as Tik Tok — sheds further light on the narrative and symbolic role of the outfit as a gendered signifier within film and television universes. A significance that remains intact on the Internet, where moreover it represents a semantic dimension difficult to intercept for the regulatory systems filtering out extreme or disrespectful content on these platforms.

The Sigma Male Grindset constitutes one of the most recent developments within the online galaxy known as the manosphere, described as "a noteworthy conglomerate of 'niche' communities, roughly aligned by their common interest in masculinity and its alleged crisis ... growing in size and in their involvement in online harassment and real-world violence."[42] Composed of groups heterogeneous in origin and thought, including Men's Rights Activists, Pick-up Artists, Men Going their own Way, Redpillers, and Incels, these share some common features, in particular: "the critique of feminism and its association with a feminized and misandrist society ... and the need to reclaim and reaffirm a vision of masculinity perceived to be under siege."[43] Also recurring are sexist and/or misogynistic discursive practices, which tend to dehumanize and objectify women while reaffirming traditional gender hierarchies. According to Solea, the gradual spread of manosphere content on platforms such as Instagram or Tik Tok marks a migration of these ideologies from the fringe communities that originated them to the

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42. Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al., "The Evolution of the Manosphere Across the Web," *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, Vol. 15 no. 1 (2021): 196, https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v15i1.18053.

43. Maddalena Cannito et al., "Doing masculinities online: defining and studying the manosphere," *About Gender. International Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 10 no. 19 (2021): 1–34.

mainstream scene, bringing their philosophy and language to reach a wider audience at the expense of a certain dilution of the more extreme content, which struggles to get past the filters of the platforms.[44]

Having developed primarily on Tik Tok, the Sigma Male Grindset presents itself as a synthesis of theories, ideologies, and behavior ideals typical of the manosphere. These range from the expression of misogynistic ideas, common to most groups and particularly associated to Incels, to the belief in the existence of male hierarchies typical of the Red pill, according to which (in radical contrast to the positions of feminism) the levers of social and sexual power are in the hands of women and a few Chad or Alpha men, to the detriment of all others who would discount the absence of hegemonic physical traits with marginality, humiliation and romantic-sexual failure. The Sigma Male Grindset also incorporates elements of hustle culture traceable to groups such as the Pick-Up Artists, who through aesthetic refinement, body grooming and the adoption of seduction strategies aim to achieve an enhanced masculine performance. This all revolves around the aspirational figure of the Sigma Male, defined as a model who embodies hegemonic traits but at the same time breaks away from social hierarchies:

> "Having broken the binaries of the Chad alpha and Virgin beta, he is the wolf without a pack, operating outside of social systems and hierarchies ... he is succesful and popular, but also silent and rebellious. He has a near-fundamentalist approach to self-improvement and is well-tuned in the ways of hustle culture. He makes regular gains at the gym and invests in crypto — sometimes simultaneously".[45]

In constructing this figure, creators ascribing to the Grindset draw heavily from pop culture, identifying in film and television characters the personality traits of the Sigma Male. Scrolling through these pages it's easy to come across Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of *American Psycho* (2000) played by Christian Bale; John Wick; Joker, in the 2019 version with the face of Joaquin Phoenix; Jordan Belfort from *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013); and Thomas Shelby of *Peaky Blinders*. All of these characters indeed share some traits with the hegemonic/independent Sigma Male model. For example, all but Belfort embody a violent masculinity; Bateman, Belfort, and Shelby (two Wall Street brokers and a gangster) represent self-made and hyperbolic economic success; Wick and Shelby exhibit stoic traits and control of emotions; Joker, Wick, and Shelby are lone wolves, the former as a victim of a society that marginalizes him, the latter as an independent practitioner of the art of murder. As for Thomas Shelby, although his figure embodies dominant traits, it should be noted how the narrative always frames him as the outsider fighting higher powers, whether it be the federal police, the IRA, rival gangs from America, the Church, or — in the last seasons — the fascists headed by Oswald Mosley. The series thus invites the audience "to align with the rebels and criminals, suggesting that it is through resistance, not compliance, that 'true' masculinity is constructed."[46]

A further dimension of significance that unites these figures in their adoption by the Grindset is that of classic masculine elegance. From Jordan Belfort's pinstripes to Thomas Shelby's 1920s outfits and Patrick Bateman's sartorial obsession, the idols of the Sigma pages are characterized by a close relationship with menswear as a signifier of male power. Even in the case of the Joker, the sequence immortalized by these contents is often the cathartic dance at the top of the staircase, where the character sports a dazzling red suit (Fig. 8), while for John Wick one of the most popular images is that of the killer in the tailor's atelier, intent on having his measurements taken.

This confirms the existence of a zone of overlap between the way a certain conservative fandom appropriates these media products, and the cultural associations linking gender performance with men's fashion. More or less justified by the narrative, the Sigma pages extract from these characters a core of meanings that restore traditional, hyper-performative, misogynistic masculinities, basing much of their rhetorical force on the visual impact of the sartorialized male icon. Moreover, in the context of the migration of

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44.   Anda Iulia Solea et al., "Mainstreaming the Blackpill: Understanding the Incel Community on Tik Tok," *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, Vol 29 (2023): 311–336, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-023-09559-5.

45.   "Rise and grind: how 'sigma males' are upturning the internet", Dazed, accessed November 23, 2023, https://www.dazeddigital.com/science-tech/article/55208/1/rise-and-grind-how-sigma-male-memes-are-upturning-the-man-o-sphere.

46.   Byrne et al., *Conflicting Masculinities*, 6.

Figure 8: Screen shot taken from *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019).

the manosphere from internet niches to the mainstream, the emphasis on image can be seen as strategic in making the pages less susceptible to removal and blocking. Indeed, analyses conducted on the presence of discriminatory content on Tik Tok suggest that the platform's filters are more effective in locating and removing based on the lexicon used by pages, finding more difficulty where hate ideologies are promoted through visual means such as symbols or emojii.[47] In this sense, fashion too can serve to hide the dissemination of discriminatory ideas in plain sight, playing on its ingrained and recognizable associations with the traditional gender performance promoted in these online spaces.

"Now I am Become Death". Conclusion

2023 and 2024 were the years of Cillian Murphy's ultimate establishment as a Hollywood star. Having consolidated his position in the industry thanks to the role of Thomas Shelby, the Irish actor came back for the sixth time to collaborate with Christopher Nolan, finally as a leading man. *Oppenheimer* was a critical and commercial hit, breaking records as the most profitable biopic ever,[48] and Murphy's performance was hailed among the best of the year, sweeping the awards season in a triumphant run that culminated in the victory of the Oscar for Best Actor at the 96th Academy Awards. Well-deserved accolades, for an actor whose chameleonic talent had too long remained the prerogative of a niche cult. But also indirect confirmation of an evolution, the one we have tried to trace here, that from the fluid aura of the early days has led him increasingly to position himself as an emblem of traditional masculinity. In this sense, there is no better test case than Nolan's cinema, with its rigidly codified gender dynamics revolving around the dialectic between a marginalized and feared feminine, and a masculine declined through heroic performances that reaffirm its uncertain and wounded identity. *Oppenheimer* is no exception, depicting a universe inhabited almost exclusively by (great) men, where women play supporting

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47. Ciarán O'Connor, "Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on Tik Tok," *ISD Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (report 2021): 41.

48. "Christopher Nolan's Oppenheimer Overtakes Bohemian Rhapsody as Highest-Grossing Biopic Ever," NBC Insider, accessed January 2, 2024, https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/oppenheimer-becomes-highest-grossing-biopic-of-all-time#:~:text=After%20hitting%20$912%20million%20in,grossing%20biopic%20of%20all%20time.

roles or fall into the usual stereotypes of the dead love interest and the hysterical wife a-la *Inception*.[49]

While these themes have long been known to Nolan scholars, what is novel in *Oppenheimer* is Murphy's placement within this dialectic, where the actor had initially inhabited borderline roles: first as queer-coded villain Jonathan Crane in the *Batman* movies; then as a "weak male" in *Inception*, where his character (much like Marion Cotillard's) was passively subjected to the "implantation of an idea" by the protagonist played by Leonardo Di Caprio. Something began to change with *Dunkirk* (2017) where Murphy appears as a traumatized and suffering war veteran, in a transitory role somewhat reminiscent of *Peaky Blinders*. Finally, thanks to the star power and masculine charisma attained through the series, the actor arrives with *Oppenheimer* to take on the role of the Nolan hero, precisely the one to which he had previously played the antithesis.

Something of Tommy Shelby evidently lingers in his Oppenheimer, from his authoritative, tormented presence to his old school look (Fig. 9): short hair, flat cap replaced by a fedora, pipe instead of cigarette, and a parade of suits and coats that give the character a period elegance not far removed from that sported in *Peaky Blinders*. "Oppenheimer, an unlikely fashion icon, resurrects the suit", titles a Reader's Digest article devoted to the film's outfits,[50] simultaneously certifying Murphy's status as a key influencer for the world of classic elegance and the masculine performances that feed its media imagery. Meanwhile, in the pages of Sigma Male Grindset, Murphy's image as Oppenheimer peeps alongside that of Shelby, welding the two characters in the sign of that conservative appropriation that seems to have subtly punctuated the second phase of the actor's career. A career that thus stands as emblematic of fashion's role in mediating male performance in contemporary audiovisuals, showing how the difference between alien and alpha male passes also, and perhaps especially, through dress.
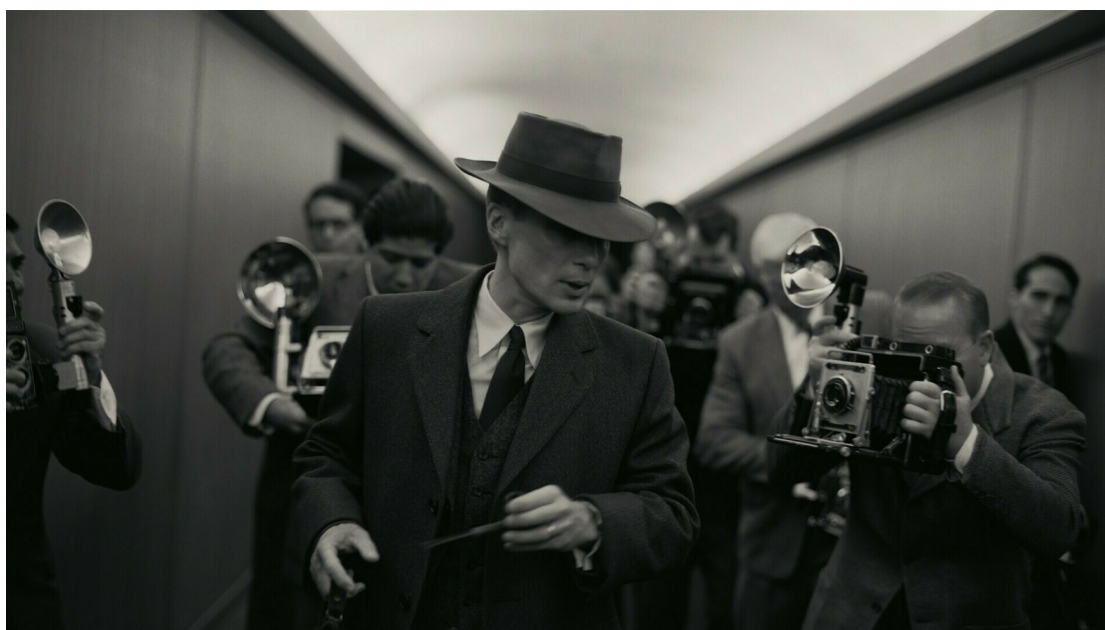

Figure 9: Screen shot taken from *Oppenheimer* (Christopher Nolan, 2023).

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49. "Justice For The Women Of *Oppenheimer*," British Vogue, accessed December 28, 2023, https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/oppenheimer-female-characters.

50. "Oppenheimer, an unlikely fashion icon, resurrects the suit," Reader's Digest Uk, accessed December 02, 2023, https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/culture/oppenheimer-an-unlikely-fashion-icon-resurrects-mens-suit.

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