

Masculinity: what did Grayson Perry say about this?

Discussion at The Park

Wednesday 2 November 2016 7:30pm at *The Park Tavern, Macclesfield*

Introduction:

In 2016 the meaning of masculinity is something of a minefield. But at a time of war, of financial scandal, of terrorism and violent crime - is manhood itself to blame? Grayson Perry (GP) tried to answer the question "What is it about men?" in a series of three TV films, shown on UK Channel 4. A summary of the three films is here:

<http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2016-05-05/macho-men-are-finished---and-grayson-perry-knows-why>. These films are exceptionally rich in thoughts and questions. Therefore, these discussion notes are unusually long.

1. The first episode, "Hard Man": GP met cage fighters, in the N East of England. He had preconceptions about them. *What would ours be?*

He found them to be quite likeable outside the cage. Their preparations were Zen like. One guy opened up to him about the suicide of his brother, which he had never told anyone else about in the past. He found that cage fighting "calmed me down". He said he was broken inside and felt the need to be tough because life was hard in the North. *What conclusions can we draw about this?*

GP looked at the Durham Miners' Gala which, to him, looked like the celebration of hard men with soft hearts; men who were bread winners, all of which had been taken away. GP found the parade of banners into Durham Cathedral very moving, the only place in England where he had seen works of art paraded through the community. "Strong, stoical providers." "Hewn from steel and brick, like the world they had built." *How well is it working for their sons?*

Suicide is the biggest killer of men under 40, especially in the N East. 80% of suicides are male. Many of those left behind said they had no inkling of the forthcoming event. A mother said of her son, she felt "he wanted to die in the moment, but not for ever". A friend of a suicide said he had always kept the last text he had sent to him. "Like a little tombstone", GP said. "Men felt like strangers, even to themselves." *Why this high suicide rate amongst men?*

Men built up a skin, of tattoos, muscle, bravado and banter, armour that could become a burden. GP compared the cage fighter, dressing up for his performance, with himself dressing up for his performances. We all have a mythical narrative inside. We need to search for that narrative and admit we would like to stand out, some to fight and some to exhibit in galleries. *Comments about this?*

At the end of his time in the N East, GP made a banner, **Death of a Working Hero**, in the style of the traditional Miners' Lodge banners, representing the life of the fighters he had got to know. It so impressed the families that it was carried into Durham Cathedral at the head of a Gala procession with brass band, to be blessed by the Bishop of Durham. This was accompanied by a big vase called **Shadow Boxing**.

2. The second episode, "Top Man": GP examines why 85% of all crime is committed by men and engaged with gangs and police in Skelmersdale. The gang members feel pressure to be dominant and the police see the hierarchy in the way the kids act. It's all about rank and status. The police have it on their sleeves. The gangs have to fight for it. *What is it about men and crime?*

There's an honour and a loyalty in looking after each other against the threat of the other gang, in a microscopic area of Skelmersdale. Stabbings are frequent. One guy thought he was being goodhearted looking after his family and his Nan.

Confused values?

When the women of Skelmersdale were asked what a real man was, there was no answer. Society is not giving the kids on these estates an alternative status. An old lag expressed regret on his wasted life. An ex-girlfriend had a very different idea to her man, who thought he was her protector. She thought him a waster who needed *her* help.

What are our reactions to these sentiments?

Skelmersdale is a new town and, in a promotional video back in the 70s, there was optimism that the new architecture and considered approach to the structure of the town would offer opportunity to the population.

What went wrong?

At the end of his stay with the gangs of Skelmersdale, GP produced **The King Of Nowhere** and **The Digmaor Tapestry**. Young men lost with nowhere to go could cope in the past. But now there is no suitable coping system.

3. The third episode, "Rational Man": GP gets to know financial wizards in the City of London. 84% of senior City bankers are men. A female financier says, "When women are angry, they cry. When men are afraid they become aggressive. So women come across as weak and men as strong. Both perspectives are wrong." Another female banker says, "The masculinity of the City is less obvious, but it is a clever act. They are very good at what they do, but underneath they are very shallow." *What comments about these sentiments?*

The London Metal Exchange is the last traditional 'shouting-floor'. "The City is now dominated by algorithms. So, what is the role of masculinity now? Can Zen calm and machine like objectivity really be the whole story," asks GP, in response to a financier who does indeed spend hours a day in Zen meditation.

Banking is "testosterone driven," a male banker tells GP. "I spend a lot of time limiting the effects of 'overt masculinity' – special diet first thing, yoga and fast all day." " 'Macho' gentrifies as pay rates go up." "City leaders are basically lone hunters and cowboys, playing out the dream of every man." "The term is 'animal spirit' ... the beast still lurks but is very well behaved."

Reactions to these comments?

At the end of his stay in the City, GP produced **Object in Foreground** and **Animal Spirit**. Not all the financiers welcomed his art.

Conclusion: At the end of his time with these groups of men, Grayson Perry concluded: "Men have got to stop looking back and must look forward. What can men be? Should be? Be flexible. Masculinity can be a problem."

And, overall, our conclusions are, what?

Footnotes

For those who would like to watch the full trio of films, after this discussion, they are here. The final works of art generally appear in the last 10mins of each film.

All Man: 1 of 3: Hard Man <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URnQ-q6-thI>

All Man: 2 of 3: Top Man <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7nI6J1X4jQ>

All Man: 3 of 3: Rational Man

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlzQdSOYCPY>