

Vulnerable Masculinity as Other: Self/Other Dynamics in Adolescence's One-Shot Gaz

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Abstract: This paper examines how *Adolescence* (2025), a British Netflix drama, constructs vulnerable adolescent masculinity as the Other through the Self/Other framework. Drawing on Hegel's master/slave dialectic, Levinas's ethical encounter, Kristeva's stranger within, Connell's hegemonic masculinity, and Mulvey's gaze, it analyzes Jamie Miller's portrayal as a 13-year-old radicalized by incel ideologies. Through qualitative textual analysis of key episodes, the study reveals how the show's one-shot filming exposes Jamie's external marginalization and internal fragmentation while inviting ethical viewer engagement. Findings highlight *Adolescence's* critique of toxic masculinity, reflecting societal shifts in gender norms. The paper contributes to media and masculinity studies by emphasizing the one-shot gaze's role in shaping identity. Future research could explore non-male or multicultural identities to address diverse identity dynamics.

Keywords: *vulnerable masculinity, Self/Other, adolescence, one-shot gaze, hegemonic masculinity.*

1. Introduction

Identity, a concept both complex and profoundly dynamic, is perpetually shaped through intricate processes of construction, expression, negotiation, and even fragmentation or annihilation. This multifaceted phenomenon is often understood and defined in relation to "Otherness," a fundamental concept that can serve as both a source of profound challenge and unexpected enrichment. In an increasingly interconnected world, where socio-cultural and socio-linguistic communities constantly interact, a nuanced comprehension of the Self-Other relationship is not merely academic but essential for navigating complex social realities. This paper delves into these dynamics by examining the portrayal of vulnerable adolescent masculinity in the critically acclaimed British psychological crime drama, *Adolescence* (Netflix 2025).

Adolescence centers on 13-year-old Jamie Miller, a boy whose arrest for murder unravels a disturbing narrative of online radicalization and internal turmoil. The series is distinguished by its unique "one-shot" filming technique, which immerses the viewer in an uninterrupted, real-time experience of Jamie's unfolding crisis. This formal choice is not merely stylistic; it profoundly shapes the viewer's encounter with Jamie, positioning him as a compelling case study for exploring the construction of identity through and against Otherness. We

argue that *Adolescence* leverages this continuous gaze to present Jamie as an Other in a dual sense: externally, as he deviates from societal expectations of hegemonic masculinity, and internally, as his psyche fragments under the weight of his actions and radicalized beliefs.

Drawing upon a robust interdisciplinary theoretical framework, this study integrates insights from philosophy, sociology, and media studies to decode the intricate relationship between Jamie's identity and his construction as an Other. We engage with R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to contextualize Jamie's external othering, while Julia Kristeva's concept of the "stranger within" illuminates his internal psychological fragmentation. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's master/slave dialectic provides a lens through which to understand Jamie's failed struggle for recognition and power, and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of encounter is crucial for analyzing the ethical demand the show places upon its viewers. Furthermore, we consider Laura Mulvey's concept of the gaze to understand how Jamie is rendered a spectacle, even as the one-shot technique subverts traditional spectatorial distance.

By analyzing how *Adolescence* employs its unique cinematic grammar, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the "one-shot gaze" simultaneously renders the vulnerable male protagonist a powerless spectacle and, crucially, invites an ethical form of recognition from the viewer. This dual function aligns with the call to explore how Otherness, often reduced to stereotypes or perceived as a threat, can also invite "responsible dialogue" and foster a "deeper, more nuanced understanding of identity". Our analysis will show how the series critiques the destructive forces of toxic masculinity and online radicalization while simultaneously challenging viewers to confront their own prejudices and engage with the "other" in a way that prioritizes empathy and understanding. Ultimately, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions in media and masculinity studies by offering a novel theoretical model for understanding how specific cinematic techniques can shape the ethical dimensions of viewing and challenge dominant gender norms, thereby exploring how Otherness can become a source of enrichment rather than mere conflict for individual and collective identities in our increasingly interconnected, real and virtual, world.

2. Literature Review: Mapping the Landscape of Masculinity and Media

The scholarly discourse surrounding masculinity in media has expanded significantly, moving beyond monolithic conceptions to explore its diverse and often vulnerable forms. R.W. Connell's foundational work on hegemonic masculinity (1995) remains central, outlining the dominant form of masculinity that perpetuates social hierarchies. While powerful, hegemonic masculinity is not static and often marginalizes other masculinities, including those that do not conform to its ideals of power, stoicism, and control. Scholars like Hearn (2004) and Flood (2007) have extended Connell's framework to media analysis, examining how television and film perpetuate or challenge these norms. However, contemporary media has increasingly begun to portray masculinities in states of vulnerability, crisis, or deviance, prompting new analytical approaches that explore these liminal spaces.

The representation of “othered” identities in media is a well-established field. Said’s (1978) concept of Orientalism, for instance, illustrates how media and discourse construct the “Orient” as a diametric Other to the “Occident,” often through processes of exoticization, marginalization, or demonization. This framework, while primarily concerned with geopolitical othering, offers a crucial lens for understanding how media narratives define group identities through contrast and opposition. In the context of masculinity, this “othering” can occur when male characters deviate from idealized norms, becoming figures of fear, pity, or fascination. Historically, male vulnerability was often depicted through a tragic lens, yet recent media has explored more nuanced and even unsettling portrayals, as seen in the rise of narratives around incel culture and online radicalization.

The psychological dimensions of Otherness, particularly “the other within,” have been profoundly explored by theorists like Julia Kristeva. Her concept of the “stranger within” (1991) articulates how the abject—that which disturbs identity, system, order—resides not only outside but also inside the self, challenging the illusion of a coherent, autonomous identity. This internal otherness becomes particularly relevant when examining characters who grapple with societal alienation and internal fragmentation. From a philosophical standpoint, the relationship between Self and Other is fundamentally explored through the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, where identity is forged through a struggle for recognition (Hegel 1807). This dynamic highlights how the Self seeks validation from the Other, a process that can lead to either mutual recognition or profound alienation if recognition is denied or subverted.

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of encountering the Other has been powerfully articulated by Emmanuel Levinas (1969). For Levinas, the “face” of the Other issues an undeniable ethical demand, compelling the Self to respond with responsibility, prior to any cognitive categorization. This challenges traditional notions of spectatorship, moving beyond mere observation to an active ethical engagement. In media studies, Mulvey’s (1975) concept of the “male gaze” has been pivotal in understanding how cinematic techniques position the viewer and the viewed, often in gendered power dynamics. While Mulvey primarily focused on the objectification of women, her framework can be re-evaluated to explore how a sustained, unblinking gaze might impact the perception of a vulnerable or “othered” male subject, potentially transforming passive viewing into a more ethically charged experience. This paper builds on these established fields, proposing that *Adolescence*’s distinctive “one-shot” cinematography offers a unique site for exploring how these theoretical constructs intersect in the portrayal of othered masculinity, fostering a deeper understanding of identity as a dynamic process of (de)construction, negotiation, and potential reconciliation with difference.

3. Theoretical Framework: Intersecting Lenses on Identity and Otherness

To unpack the complex portrayal of Jamie Miller in *Adolescence*, this paper employs an integrated theoretical toolkit, positioning identity as a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional concept inherently constructed in

relation to Otherness. These frameworks allow for a holistic understanding of how identity is shaped through processes of construction, fragmentation, negotiation, and the often-fraught interplay with external and internal "others".

3.1. Hegemonic Masculinity and External Othering (Connell)

R.W. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity provides the foundational sociological lens for understanding Jamie's external othering. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity in a given society, characterized by traits such as stoicism, aggression, heterosexuality, and emotional control. This ideal operates by marginalizing or subordinating alternative masculinities. Jamie, as a 13-year-old boy radicalized by incel ideology, epitomizes a masculinity that is both failed (in its inability to achieve traditional forms of power or sexual recognition) and dangerous (in its embrace of violence and misogyny). His social awkwardness, lack of agency, and ultimate criminal act position him as an "other" against the backdrop of acceptable male behavior, highlighting how societal norms dictate a sense of belonging or exclusion. This framework allows us to analyze how *Adolescence* critiques the very structures that produce such marginalized and volatile masculinities.

3.2. The Stranger Within: Internal Fragmentation (Kristeva)

Julia Kristeva's (1991) exploration of the "stranger within" offers a crucial psychoanalytic perspective on Jamie's internal fragmentation. Kristeva argues that the abject – that which is cast out from the symbolic order but remains a part of us – constitutes an internal foreignness, a "stranger" residing within the self. This concept is particularly potent for understanding individuals grappling with identities that are simultaneously constructed and deconstructed, split, or even annihilated under the impact of contextual factors. Jamie's radicalization, his internalizing of violent misogynistic ideologies, and his subsequent psychological collapse reflect this internal othering. The abject horror of his actions, rather than being purely external, manifests as a profound destabilization of his own sense of self, revealing the subconscious conflicts and potential for annihilation of identity that Kristeva describes.

3.3. The Struggle for Recognition: Master/Slave Dialectic (Hegel)

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1807) master/slave dialectic provides a philosophical framework for understanding Jamie's desperate, yet ultimately failed, struggle for recognition and autonomy. For Hegel, identity (self-consciousness) is not inherent but achieved through a struggle for recognition with another self-consciousness. The master gains recognition from the slave, but the slave, through labor and fear of death, eventually achieves self-awareness and, potentially, true freedom. Jamie's descent into incel ideology can be read as a desperate attempt to assert a form of master status, to reclaim perceived power and recognition from women and society that he feels have denied him. However, his actions and subsequent arrest render him completely powerless, trapped in a position akin to the Hegelian slave, stripped of agency and identity, unable to achieve the validation he sought. This highlights how the Self seeks to define itself through interaction with the Other, a process that can

become distorted when the pursuit of recognition leads to domination rather than reciprocal understanding.

3.4. The Ethical Demand of the Face (Levinas) and the Gaze (Mulvey)

The concept of the “gaze” provides a critical bridge between the formal elements of *Adolescence* and its ethical implications. Laura Mulvey’s (1975) theory of the “male gaze” posits how cinematic techniques often position the viewer in a masculine, active, and controlling role, reducing the viewed (often female) to a passive object of spectacle. While Jamie is male, the film’s sustained observation of him, particularly his vulnerability, renders him a subject of spectacle. However, the ethical weight of the gaze transcends simple objectification through Emmanuel Levinas’s (1969) philosophy of the “face.” Levinas argues that the bare, exposed “face” of the Other confronts the Self with an immediate, irreducible ethical demand, preceding any intellectual categorization or judgment. This encounter foregrounds responsibility, compelling the Self to acknowledge the Other’s absolute vulnerability and unique singularity.

In *Adolescence*, the continuous “one-shot gaze” on Jamie’s suffering face forces the viewer into this Levinasian ethical encounter. It subverts a purely Mulveyan spectatorial distance, transforming observation into an urgent call for recognition of his humanity, even amidst his monstrous acts. This dynamic interplay between the Self and Other, facilitated by the specific cinematic technique, becomes an invitation for “responsible dialogue,” urging the viewer to move beyond stereotypes and engage with the complex human being behind the “other”.

4. Methodology: Qualitative Textual Analysis of Adolescence

This paper employs a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine how *Adolescence* constructs and critically engages with vulnerable adolescent masculinity as a form of Otherness. Qualitative textual analysis is particularly suited for in-depth interpretation of media texts, allowing for the exploration of latent meanings, ideological underpinnings, and the subtle ways in which narrative and formal elements shape audience perception (Fairclough 2003; Rose 2016).

4.1. Case Study Selection

Adolescence was selected as the primary case study due to its timely engagement with themes of online radicalization, adolescent vulnerability, and its innovative use of the “one-shot” filming technique. The series’ focus on a 13-year-old boy radicalized by incel ideologies provides a compelling and highly relevant contemporary context for exploring complex issues of identity formation, alienation, and the construction of “othered” masculinities. Its critical acclaim and significant viewership on Netflix underscore its cultural impact and relevance for media studies.

4.2. Data Collection

The primary data for this analysis comprises the full episodes of *Adolescence* (Netflix 2025). Access to these Netflix episodes, which present each installment in a continuous single take, is essential for a detailed examination of the unique “one-shot” cinematography. Secondary data includes

critical reviews and audience commentary surrounding the series, which help contextualize its reception and broader cultural dialogue.

4.3. Analytical Approach:

The analysis proceeds through close reading and interpretation of key scenes, dialogue, character interactions, and, crucially, the formal choice of the one-shot gaze. Each scene is examined through the integrated theoretical lens described in Section 3, applying concepts from Connell, Kristeva, Hegel, Levinas, and Mulvey. The focus is on identifying patterns in the portrayal of Jamie Miller's identity, how his masculinity is constructed as an "Other," and how the continuous gaze of the camera shapes the viewer's ethical engagement with his vulnerability and culpability. Particular attention is paid to moments where Jamie's internal conflicts are visually manifested, where he struggles for recognition, and where his "face" is presented to the viewer in a way that elicits a response beyond mere judgment. The goal is not simply to describe what is present in the text, but to interpret its deeper cultural meanings regarding identity, Otherness, and the ethical responsibilities of spectatorship in the face of complex human experience.

5. Analysis: The One-Shot Gaze and the Vulnerable Other

Adolescence masterfully employs its unique "one-shot" cinematography to construct its protagonist, Jamie Miller, as a multifaceted "Other," simultaneously critiquing toxic masculinity and compelling the viewer into an ethical encounter. The continuous, unblinking gaze of the camera functions as both a site of spectacle and a catalyst for profound empathy, revealing the complex processes of identity fragmentation and the tense interplay between Self and Other.

From the outset, Jamie is presented as an "other" against the backdrop of conventional, hegemonic masculinity. His arrest, the stark police station setting, and his evident social awkwardness immediately position him outside the normative ideals of male stoicism and control. Connell's (1995) framework clearly illuminates Jamie's marginalization. He embodies a masculinity that is not only subordinate but also, due to his association with incel ideologies and violent acts, perceived as a threat and thus **abjected** by society. The relentless one-shot gaze, in these early scenes, amplifies this external othering. There are no cuts to provide relief or shift perspective, forcing the viewer to confront Jamie's discomfiting presence directly. This continuous observation emphasizes his isolation and awkwardness, underscoring his failure to perform hegemonic masculinity and establishing him as an alienated figure.

Consider the extended scene in the interview room, where Jamie struggles to articulate himself under the probing questions of the police. The camera holds on his face, his fidgeting hands, his evasive glances. This uninterrupted focus denies the viewer the customary psychological distance offered by cuts, making Jamie's discomfort and inadequacy palpable. Here, the gaze functions as a Mulveyan mechanism of spectatorial power – Jamie is exposed, stripped of his defenses, and rendered a powerless spectacle. His desperate, albeit misguided, attempts to assert control or understanding in this environment, fueled by his adopted incel rhetoric, serve only to further

highlight his vulnerability and expose the pathetic nature of his acquired ideology when confronted with real-world consequences. This dynamic, as highlighted by the, showcases how societal “contextual factors” (in this case, the legal system and societal norms) wield “power and (in)direct authority to attribute to the Self a sense of belonging” – or, conversely, a profound sense of exclusion and “non-identity.”

Beyond external othering, *Adolescence* uses the one-shot technique to delve into Jamie's internal fragmentation, revealing the “stranger within” (Kristeva 1991). The continuous gaze acts as an “internal gaze,” forcing the viewer to witness the real-time decomposition of Jamie's psyche as his adopted incel identity clashes with the objective reality of his actions. The fluidity of the one-shot creates an inescapable sense of **co-presence** with Jamie, making his internal turmoil unsettlingly immediate. There are no temporal or spatial breaks to mitigate the psychological impact; every flinch, every moment of self-doubt, every flicker of emotion, is laid bare without the relief of a cutaway.

A pivotal moment illustrating this is Jamie's collapse upon viewing the CCTV footage of his crime. The camera remains fixed on him, capturing the raw, visceral reaction of a boy confronted with the undeniable horror of his own actions. This is not just a moment of profound psychological fragmentation; it is a direct manifestation of Kristeva's “stranger within.” The violent self, fueled by incel ideology and a misguided pursuit of power, is suddenly confronted by the objective reality of its monstrous deeds. The lack of cuts prevents the viewer from escaping this painful realization, mirroring Jamie's own inability to escape the truth. This forced confrontation issues a failed Hegelian struggle for recognition (Hegel 1807). Instead of achieving the masculine power he sought through his violent act, Jamie is rendered a powerless “slave” to the consequences, stripped of the false self-consciousness he had attempted to construct. The identity he tried to forge through domination is annihilated, leaving behind a shattered, abject core. This deep dive into Jamie's psyche exemplifies how otherness can manifest “within the individual, for example, through the subconscious or internal conflicts,” demonstrating identity's capacity for severe fragmentation.

The most profound impact of *Adolescence*'s one-shot gaze lies in its capacity to generate a Levinasian ethical encounter (Levinas 1969). While the sustained observation initially functions as a Mulveyan objectification, rendering Jamie a spectacle, the continuous, unbroken nature of the take eventually transcends this, compelling the viewer into a position of ethical responsibility. The **uninterrupted duration** of the shot, which denies the viewer any emotional or cognitive “breathing room,” becomes paramount. It forces a sustained focus on Jamie's vulnerable “face”—his raw suffering, his terror, his moments of childlike confusion—before any judgment can fully solidify.

For Levinas, the “face” of the Other is not merely a physical countenance but the exposed vulnerability of another human being that issues an ethical command, prior to any categorization or moral assessment. The one-shot prevents the viewer from abstracting Jamie into a simple “monster” or “radicalized youth.” Instead, it confronts them with the raw, broken humanity behind the label. The camera's **unwavering presence** compels a sense of

real-time co-presence with Jamie that is almost unbearable. Unlike traditional editing, which can offer respite or narrative manipulation through cuts, the one-shot traps the viewer in the moment, making them a reluctant witness to Jamie's pain and vulnerability. This technique prevents the viewer from the emotional relief of a cutaway, fostering an almost unavoidable and uncomfortable intimacy with the subject.

This is where the paper contributes to the discussion of Otherness as an "invitation to responsible dialogue." The show presents a figure who embodies societal fears and prejudices (the radicalized, violent other), yet the cinematic technique insists on presenting him as a vulnerable "face." The continuous gaze denies the viewer the luxury of easy condemnation; instead, it issues a primal call to acknowledge his humanity. This confrontation forces reflection, challenging simplistic stereotypes and demanding a more nuanced understanding of identity. By foregrounding Jamie's suffering, *Adolescence* pushes its audience to engage with the complex causes and effects of radicalization, urging them to look beyond the monstrous act to the damaged individual, fostering empathy and posing the critical question: how can we engage with the "other" (even the threatening other) in a way that promotes understanding and potential reconciliation, without denying distinct characters? This ethical confrontation transforms mere spectatorship into a moral imperative, making the viewer complicit not in Jamie's acts, but in the active contemplation of his otherness and the societal responsibility it entails.

6. Conclusion: Reconciling Self and Other in an Interconnected World

This paper has explored how *Adolescence* masterfully navigates the complex terrain of vulnerable adolescent masculinity, constructing its protagonist, Jamie Miller, as a profound "Other" through the strategic deployment of its signature one-shot gaze. By integrating theoretical perspectives from Connell, Kristeva, Hegel, Levinas, and Mulvey, we have demonstrated how this unique cinematic technique functions dually: simultaneously rendering Jamie a powerless spectacle while, more significantly, creating an unavoidable ethical encounter for the viewer. This analysis reveals *Adolescence's* potent critique of toxic masculinity and its underlying radicalization, but crucially, it also highlights the show's capacity to foster a deeper, more nuanced understanding of identity and Otherness.

Jamie's journey, marked by external marginalization from hegemonic masculine norms and profound internal fragmentation (the Kristevan "stranger within"), serves as a compelling case study for understanding how identity is deconstructed and even annihilated under the weight of contextual factors like online incel ideologies and societal judgments. His failed Hegelian struggle for recognition underscores the perilous path when the desire for self-affirmation turns inward and becomes distorted. Yet, *Adolescence* refuses to simply condemn; instead, the continuous, unblinking eye of the camera insists on confronting the viewer with Jamie's bare, suffering "face," initiating a Levinasian ethical demand. This is where the paper's contribution most

strongly aligns with the core inquiry into how Otherness can become a source of enrichment and responsible dialogue, rather than merely conflict.

In our increasingly interconnected world—both real and virtual—where migration, technology, and intercultural exchange are constantly reshaping the boundaries between Self and Other, *Adolescence* offers a critical space for reflection. The series challenges us to consider how otherness, often reduced to cultural stereotypes or simplistic images reflecting societal prejudices and fears, can also be an invitation for deep engagement. By forcing viewers into an uncomfortable, sustained intimacy with Jamie, *Adolescence* demands a re-evaluation of assumptions. It asks: How can Otherness, even when manifested in alarming and threatening ways, become a source of deeper understanding for individual and collective identities? The show, through its formal choices, suggests that languages and discourses (in this case, cinematic language) play a crucial role in constructing otherness, but also in dismantling superficial social hierarchies and challenging power relations. The one-shot gaze, by refusing to offer easy escape or moral distance, underscores the inherent tension in the Self-Other dynamic, yet simultaneously pushes towards a path of critical reflection and empathy.

The portrayal of Jamie as an “other within” through his internal conflicts resonates deeply with the question of how otherness manifests within the individual. *Adolescence* suggests that confronting this internal otherness—the darker, unacknowledged aspects of self and society—is a prerequisite for true ethical engagement. It exemplifies how media can create “hybrid cultural spaces” that provide fertile ground for reflecting on the diversity and complexity of human experience, even when that experience is disturbing. The show's refusal to romanticize Jamie's pain underscores its call to redefine masculinity through empathy, urging recognition in a globalized, digital landscape where radicalization and alienation are pressing concerns.

Ultimately, *Adolescence* asks us how identity and otherness can be reconciled within multicultural societies without each losing its distinct character. The paper concludes that the one-shot gaze, by fostering an inescapable ethical encounter, provides a powerful model for achieving this. It does not deny Jamie's distinct (and problematic) character but insists on the viewer's responsibility to recognize his underlying humanity, even as his actions are condemned. This type of responsible dialogue, where differences are explored and re-evaluated rather than denied, is essential for navigating the complex existential landscape of contemporary identity. By examining how *Adolescence* uses specific cinematic techniques to shape the ethical dimensions of viewing, this paper contributes significantly to media and masculinity studies, offering a novel model for challenging dominant gender norms and fostering crucial conversations about empathy and recognition in the face of profound Otherness.

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