

# Introduction

In his Academy Award winning performance as Claus von Bulow in *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), Jeremy Irons is arguably at his most restrained. Pottering along calmly as the chief exhibit in a show trial designed to test the strength of the US justice system, it is only in his ageing Sloane Ranger, stiff-upper-lip routine that we see anything of the strangeness that he hints at in his time of trial and grief. Protesting his innocence against the charge of killing his wife Sunny (Glenn Close), he appears, nonetheless, almost indifferent to reliving the events that led to her death. Beyond these oddities, to account for his infamy, we must look to the way von Bulow has perversions put upon him like tails pinned on a donkey. In the face of old rumours that he also murdered his mother, Claus himself mentions the more recent rumour that he murdered Sunny in order to indulge his penchant for necrophilia. Later when he is dining with his defence team, a junior lawyer in the group seems only able to digest the idea of von Bulow's relationship with his mistress by thinking of her as his 'love slave'. From what we see of Claus's relationship with his mistress, it is, in fact, a somewhat more mundane affair. In the picture that the film builds of von Bulow as 'the most hated man in America', the additional information that he has a history of going with the meanest prostitutes in the city appears almost as an afterthought. But it is a sign of the way this film operates to alter

our perceptions of what we consider normal and perverse that the most outstanding accusation of his aberrance relates, not to these extreme quirks and oddities, but to questions of his masculinity and his occupation. As his marriage to Sunny breaks down and he seems to spend most of his time getting Sunny what Sunny wants, her calls for him to stop being her butler and to start being a man are matched by her reluctance to let him work: 'Claus, you marry me for my money then you demand to work. You're the prince of perversion.'

Almost all of Jeremy Irons's characters who are the principal protagonists of their respective films are either perverse or are occupied with the business of the perverse. That is to say, when his protagonists are not themselves engaged in one particular perversion or another, they are paired with an antagonist who most definitely is. In this context we think of Meryl Streep's indifference to expectations about her role as a young and unmarried woman in nineteenth-century society in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), Anthony Andrews's dipsomania in *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), Robert De Niro's violence in *The Mission* (1986), Sinéad Cusack's baby-stealing hysteria in *Waterland* (1992) and Annette Bening's narcissism in *Being Julia* (2004). The attraction of his non-perverse protagonists to these perverse antagonists suggests, of course, that the dividing line between the two states is extremely fine. This is made clear by the fact that in two films, *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *Ohio Impromptu* (2000), that perverse antagonist is, in fact, played by Irons himself. The dynamic of perversion and bearing witness to perversion is further emphasized in Irons's more recent film and television work where he has often taken and been cast in key supporting roles. These have enabled him to portray states of subordination (*Elizabeth I*, 2005) and simple and relaxed evil (*Appaloosa*, 2008) that are central to the pursuit of perversion. In any case, in portraying characters who are perverse or who contemplate, witness or play guide and analyst to the freak show of aberrant behaviour surrounding them, the films

of Jeremy Irons, over thirty years, have shown themselves to be constantly concerned with perversion. Furthermore, these films have acted as a site for an audience that is addressed as, if not perverse itself, at least similarly occupied with the business of the perverse.

I am using the notion of perversion in its fullest sense with a particular concern for the way most people experience it. That is, I see these films as engaging with the idea both in psychoanalytic terms, regarding what Sigmund Freud called sexual inversion, and in social terms relating to aberrant behaviour not obviously related to sexual drives. Almost all of Irons's characters can be said to be perverse in that they deviate from the norm, they are rebellious and they hold obstinately to a particular antisocial course. There is certainly nothing unusual in this. In any film, depending on the way the social world is defined, a certain degree of the perverse is essential. In fact in Hollywood melodrama, where the social world is usually so corrupt, the perverse may be said to be the genre's major concern. What distinguishes Jeremy Irons's characters in their perversion is that they are so extreme. These characters hang onto their headstrong course to the bitter end. Classical and contemporary mainstream films usually bring their central protagonists and the world they inhabit into some form of reconciliation. The films of Jeremy Irons rarely do.

Beyond the general social meaning of the perverse, in a psychoanalytic sense these films represent a catalogue of perversions, both enacted and contemplated, which Freud would have instantly recognized. These include incest and paedophilia in *Lolita* (1997) and an associated compulsion towards younger or adolescent girls in films such as *Stealing Beauty* (1996), *Chinese Box* (1997) and *Being Julia*; transvestism, homosexuality and effeminacy in *Dead Ringers*, *M. Butterfly* (1993), *The Lion King* (1994), *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* (1995) and *And Now ... Ladies and Gentleman* (2002); sadomasochism and sexual obsession in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Betrayal* (1983), *Swann in Love* (1984),

*Damage* (1992) and *Elizabeth I*; narcissism in *Dead Ringers*; and manic fixation in *Moonlighting* (1982), *Kafka* (1991), *1914–1918* (1996) and *The Fourth Angel* (2001). As in the previously mentioned example of *Reversal of Fortune*, in virtually all Irons's films we see a hint of mental necrophilia though the workings of loss and melancholia. Perversion predominates in these films through examples of fetishism, exhibitionism, overvaluation of the desired object, an extreme expression of the omnipotence of love, as well as the various acts of homosexual and lesbian love making which Freud catalogued and which still, perhaps, pass for perversions in certain conservative and highly repressed minds.

To consider the notion of perversion in Jeremy Irons's work as merely the sum total of various representations of perverse acts and categories is to miss the real point of the place of perversion in film and, I suspect, in our conscious lives. What the presence of perversion does is to qualify and even define and structure our very idea of normality. This is certainly the use to which Freud put, what he called, the sexual aberrations when he was working on his theory of sexuality in the years following 1900 and the completion and publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which were first published in 1905, it is the first essay on 'The Sexual Aberrations' where we find Freud's most detailed work on the issue of perversion. Preceding the essays on 'Infantile Sexuality' (one of his most explosive papers) and 'The Transformations of Puberty', Freud's chapter dealing with the 'inversions' of adults might seem out of order were it not for the obvious importance he places in the use of perversions for reading sexuality generally. What is most important about Freud's work for understanding the notion of perversion in Jeremy Irons's films is that not only does Freud consider perversion from a neutral position as a highly relative concept, outside prurient moralizing,<sup>1</sup> but he clearly accounts for perversion as the opposite to neurosis. In psychoanalytic terms, if neurosis is the enemy of health and

wellbeing, then perversion, its opposite or negative, can only work in the service of the repression-free mind.<sup>2</sup> In relation to Freud's casting neurosis as the negative of perversion, Teresa de Lauretis puts it succinctly when she writes, 'it always struck me, that phrasing it that way, Freud was in a sense qualifying the perversions as positive'.<sup>3</sup> Beyond his rejection of the social and scientific orthodoxy of his day on the issue of the perversions, Freud has no qualms about expressing the idea that the perversions are 'no great rarity but must form part of what passes as the normal constitution',<sup>4</sup> and indeed 'that a disposition to perversion is an original and universal disposition of the human sexual instinct and that normal sexual behaviour is developed out of it'.<sup>5</sup> In short, Freud recognizes that we are all perverse and we can only really gain any purchase on our socially constructed ideas of normality by reconciling ourselves to the importance of perversion.

Considering Freud's distinction between the aberrations in relation to the choice of sexual object (same sex, hermaphrodite, prostitute, transvestite, child, animal) and sexual aim, the latter category provides us with a wealth of information suitable to reading perversions in Jeremy Irons's films. This is particularly the case in relation to the second of Freud's categories of perverse sexual activity. These are activities which:

- (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or
- (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim.<sup>6</sup>

These categories not only account for the basic perversions of what is usually considered normal sexual life, from kissing through to all forms of foreplay, but extend to the great mental idealizations of the sexual instinct in fetishism, sadomasochism, obsession and fixation to perhaps the most horrifying perversion of all, 'the omnipotence of love'.<sup>7</sup> In this sense the gyno-fixations of the Mantle twins in *Dead Ringers* and the ancient Chinese ways of love making in *M. Butterfly* may point directly to the perversions of Irons's characters in these

films but it is their ‘lingering over the intermediate relations’ which marks their ultimate perversion. As we see in *Swann in Love*, this can take the form of an excessive delay and denial (and then an overcoming by marriage) of emotional submission. *Lolita* highlights the tendency in Irons’s characters towards seeking satisfaction in proxies of desire, in this case Lolita for Annabel and Annabel for that great feeling of loss that sits at the centre of the melancholic Humbert Humbert. The narcissist Mantle twins look to alleviate that same sense of loss in the originary, maternal relationship by denying it altogether and looking to the self as a proxy for the originary relationship. What these perversions, from fetishism to incest, all really point to is the intense idealization of love in these films. These films are Romantic love stories in the real sense. They are not comfortable comedies of safe and sanctioned mating, but death-defying tales of the pain of love. These films may correspond to nothing we have ever experienced in fact but they achieve their influence in our minds for the way they echo feelings we know well. They seem to ask of us, what utterly despicable thing might we not do, or at least contemplate, in the service of our own love stories?

## The Pervert Prepares

With the release of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and *Brideshead Revisited* in 1981, Jeremy Irons became synonymous with the character that I am calling the prince of perversion. The path of my discussion so far, however, has sketched out this character in impersonal terms that appear to contain the pervert prince merely within the workings of film critical practices and Freudian interpretation. This may give the impression that, in the creation of this character, I regard Irons as simply the actor who showed up. In one sense this is true. As Irons himself has observed of the importance both of casting in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and being ‘at the mercy of dialogue and direction’ in Harold Pinter’s script for *Betrayal*,

a great deal of my analysis and discussion of this character relies on the way the prince of perversion is the creation of writers, directors and the processes of critical interpretation.<sup>8</sup> What is more, there is a range of actors, male and female, who can and do play perversion, hitting performance marks not unlike those achieved by Irons. William Hurt has been mentioned by Irons himself as an actor whose work evokes a very similar quality.<sup>9</sup> In the same way Charlotte Rampling appeals to me as an actor equally occupied with the business of the perverse. Certainly, in the discussion that follows in the body of this book, I give evidence to the way that the prince of perversion is a character created by a variety of processes well beyond the personality and performance style of Jeremy Irons. In another sense, however, as Stanislavski would see it, Irons himself and the acting job he undertakes in these films are utterly indispensable to my reading of perverse performance.<sup>10</sup> As Sebastian says of Kurt in *Brideshead Revisited*, 'I couldn't go on without him.'

Film scholars such as Richard Dyer, James Naremore, Christine Gledhill, Pam Cook and others following them have developed an important body of theory relating to the issue of stars that suggests itself as useful here. To the extent that stars are the creation of popular discourse, I have reservations about Jeremy Irons's identity as a star (according to the theory) and therefore about the application of star theory in this case. For all his fame in the 1980s and 1990s there is no real sense of a sustained media, fan and popular discourse across his career as is the case with actors such as Mel Gibson or Hugh Grant. More importantly, however, beyond the role of industry typecasting and mere repetition, there is certainly no evidence of a sustained popular discourse that emphasizes the notion of perversion in relation to Irons himself. If I am engaging with, and contributing anything to, star theory in this book, it is from the position that the lack of a popular discourse should not disassociate a film actor from any notion or performance value that he or she might achieve by other

means. As Lovell and Krämer point out, star discourse has largely neglected the question of acting.<sup>11</sup> What I hope to do is address that gap by demonstrating that there is a category of film star, beyond the presence of obvious media discourse and fandom, that is more substantially the creation of his or her own technique – as well as that of other film professionals. This is why I have focused this book around the characters created by Jeremy Irons and not Irons himself. Whether or not he is perverse I can only imagine. Where I read perversion in relation to Irons lies in that which he and his collaborators put up on the screen.

Jeremy John Irons was born on 19 September 1948, the youngest of three children born to Paul (chartered accountant) and Barbara Ann (home duties). The family lived at Cowes on the Isle of Wight and sent Jeremy to the local private school, Little Appley, before he boarded at the Sherbourne School in Dorset from 1962 to 1966. At Sherbourne, playing drums in a rock band called the Four Pillars of Wisdom stands out as one of the more obvious ways the young Irons found to distance himself from the typical pre-capitalist enterprise of this traditional English middle-class public school environment. Not gaining the marks required for university entrance, when Irons left school he worked for the London parish adjoining the school's metropolitan base, Sherbourne House, and made extra money in the evenings busking with his guitar outside London cinemas. Following a period of working back-stage at the Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury, Irons trained for two years at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School before being brought into the company in 1969. After performing in the repertory company for three years, Irons returned to London where he worked at cleaning houses before getting his first big break in 1971 playing with David Essex in *Godspell*, first at the Roundhouse and then at Wyndham's Theatre. More West End theatre roles followed the two-year run with *Godspell*, as did television work including *The Pallisers* (1974) and *Love For Lydia* (1977), and his first feature film *Nijinsky* (1980),



in which he played the celebrated choreographer, Mikhail Fokine opposite Alan Bates as Diaghilev. Irons met the actor Sinead Cusack on the set of *Godspell* and she became his second wife in 1978. They have two sons, Sam, born in 1978, and Max, born in 1985.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from the fairly typical array of professional engagements, awards, involvements in public activism and items of gossip that might accompany an actor of international repute, the most interesting thing about Irons's career is his choice of roles. In their introduction to an edited collection of provocative essays, *Screen Acting*, Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer raise the issue of the actor's ability to choose his or her preferred role and the complex and sometimes arbitrary way in which on-screen preferment is bestowed.<sup>13</sup> Like all actors, Irons has had a share in these complexities and, to the extent that he has been in a position to exercise choice, his active part in this process has made a significant impact on his career and the characters he has played. In a very real sense, the way in which we read Irons's work therefore should not merely be about how the pervert prepares, but also about the pervert's preparedness. Like many actors, Irons has spoken about the obvious dilemmas of being typecast.<sup>14</sup> The extent to which he has exercised control over his credits, however, demonstrates the substance to Harold Pinter's key observation that Irons does not care if the audience likes his characters or not.<sup>15</sup> This approach has rarely taken Irons to roles that break the middle- or upper-middle-class gentility he established in his early television roles, such as *The Pallisers*, *Love For Lydia* or *Brideshead Revisited*, but it has enabled him to explore and highlight the perverse dimensions of that very gentility, most obviously in the characters I am considering in this book. Of all Irons's great princes of perversion that have come along to disturb what might have been his purchase on an acceptable and less industrially perverse Hollywood stardom, it is his choice to play the paedophile Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* that stands out. In an interview with James Lipton at the Actor's

Studio in 2003, Irons alludes to the professionally difficult three years he had after the film, being so obviously associated with the controversy of its production and distribution.<sup>16</sup> But the choice to play Humbert was a considered one and, in substance, little more controversial than electing to play Claus von Bulow, the disreputable Mantle twins in *Dead Ringers* or the treasonous René Gallimard in *M. Butterfly*.<sup>17</sup> If the mould of middle-class respectability was established for his international career with *Brideshead Revisited*, the path of that career ever since has been dominated by the professional search, not unlike his personal ancestry search in the BBC documentary series *Who Do You Think You Are* (2006), for a character who is both part of the establishment and at the same time outside it – the rebel of good repute.

The best indication of the success of that search that I ever heard came from a female student who described Irons as ‘a nice bit of upper-middle-class rough’. This description seems to contain the essential contrast between external respectability and internal deviance that denotes the Irons screen identity. In *Damage*, Irons’s character Stephen Fleming, the apparently upstanding MP who pursues an unsavoury private life, immediately comes to mind. Largely based on the inevitable early snapshot typecasting that can so dominate an actor’s career, this screen identity is, however, inextricable from Irons’s background and education. Whatever impact any of these characters have had on the way we read Irons as an actor, they clearly resonate with the pervasively upper-middle-class air about him that we perceive even before he opens his mouth. Tall, dark, attractive and still slightly boyish, even in his early sixties, his entire presentation, in a scruffy pair of jeans or an expensive suit, seems to sign him with a very distinctive mark of English middle-class gentility. As he says of his role as Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited*, ‘I really think Ryder was the man I was educated to be.’<sup>18</sup> In this observation, it is important to note that Irons seems to be talking not simply about Ryder’s middle-class privilege and his education, but

also the repression and, by implication, the possibilities for the resultant perversion that go along with it.<sup>19</sup>

Reading perversion as an acting job for Irons involves an analysis of his physical and vocal work, the way in which he establishes character, and the give-and-take process of collaboration with other actors, directors, designers, cinematographers and ultimately editors through which character is achieved. Considered from this standpoint, separating an actor's own work from that of his production colleagues is a frustrating and, at times, seemingly futile exercise. Attempting to isolate some facets of the division of labour in these films, however, reveals some interesting perspectives on Irons's evocation of the abstract notion of perversion through simple and concrete performance techniques.

For an actor, albeit an English actor, emerging internationally in the early 1980s, the spectre of Robert De Niro's highly physically manipulative performance style, particularly in *Raging Bull* (1980), must have loomed large.<sup>20</sup> Indeed Irons came face to face with the De Niro phenomenon when they worked together on *The Mission*, essentially Irons's Hollywood debut.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the incredible physical transformations of actors like De Niro, however, Irons's own physical performance emerged and has largely remained bound to the scope of his own essential physique. As he told Nick James in *Sight and Sound*, 'I start off with the given: the height I am, the way I look. I can't do much about that.'<sup>22</sup> Certainly he has not shunned the manipulative potential of make-up (*Reversal of Fortune*, *The Time Machine* (2002)), costume and dressing (*Dungeons and Dragons* (2000)) and indeed cross-dressing (*M. Butterfly*, *And Now ... Ladies and Gentlemen*) but never has he made a radical departure from his own essential physicality to the point where he becomes unrecognizable.

For such a self-contained performer, Irons's perceptions of his own general style are paramount to the basis from which he constructs character. Although rejecting the tag of the 'archetypal Englishman', he certainly acknowledges this to

be a frame through which his characters are read, especially outside Great Britain. Where he interprets his own style he emphasizes his interiority and his interest in the conflict between the apparent singleness of the external character and the ‘thousands of other people and problems within’.<sup>23</sup> When speaking with his *Brideshead Revisited* director, Michael Lindsay-Hogg, in 1991, Irons described himself as possessing a ‘dollop of femininity’ and appearing as a ‘thinking actor’.<sup>24</sup> These are passing observations gathered from interview material and do not represent any coherently theorized or practised technique for Irons; indeed, at the Actor’s Studio he seemed to distance himself from the very idea of a learned or too much technique. What these snippets of self-interpretation tell us, however, is that Irons’s approach is at once very simple, perhaps even basic, but also intellectual rather than instinctive – as, indeed, he reads De Niro’s approach.<sup>25</sup>

An example of this simplicity of approach and Irons’s recourse to technical solutions to create performative notions such as femininity and intellect comes from a technique he used to distinguish the Mantle twins in *Dead Ringers*. As he describes it, to highlight and concentrate on Elliot’s more forward and outgoing nature he created an ‘energy point’ on his forehead. For Beverly’s more retiring personality and attitude he focused the energy on his Adam’s apple, which he describes as a more feminine place.<sup>26</sup> As he explains this approach, nothing seems simpler. Although in his conversation with James Lipton he is describing his process with an obvious level of passion and enjoyment, it seems almost too simple, as if he has reduced his entire preparation to its bare essentials. When we reflect on Irons’s performance style in general, however, it so often appears that it is the essentials alone that the actor elects to put in play and that end up on the screen. In this context it appears that such a minimal preparation, as he describes in the *Dead Ringers* example, not only stands for the whole preparation, but rather than opening up acting choices, this minimal technique actually supports the

work of containment going on in Irons's performance. This is a quality that, I suggest, he regularly aims for in his performance, and a quality that makes a significant contribution to the essence of perversion at the heart of his work.

In Irons's essentialism, his minimalism, his internal focus and in the very simple and basic physicality of his approach, we perceive a resonance of those key qualities of control and order that he sees as important to his characters and to his physically reductionist approach in creating them.<sup>27</sup> Generally these qualities are achieved by Irons's economy of movement across a variety of contexts. Born in the gluttony and gormandizing of *Brideshead Revisited*, the heavily formalized rituals of dining that stand out in Irons's films are a good example of the way in which the actor can make a great deal of the simple business of the particular task before him. Early in *Brideshead Revisited*, when Charles Ryder has dinner at Thame with Anthony Blanche (Nickolas Grace), we see a marked contrast between Irons's contained and upright position and Grace's physical openness and looseness of gesture. Grace lounges slightly, draping his left arm over the back of his chair, sitting on his side, while his right elbow is placed on the table, allowing his right hand and ringed little finger to gesticulate flamboyantly. All throughout the dinner, however, Irons is contained within the frame of his chair. Keeping his arms locked by his side as he raises a fork or wine glass to his mouth in a pronounced manner, he can barely extend himself so much as to move his head to look beyond his shoulder, even in self-conscious attempt to gauge the shock of some nearby elderly female diners. At the drunken club dinner in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, not even an advanced state of inebriation causes Irons to relax and release his body from a pronounced stiffness. When a fellow diner suggests they drive around town and look for sex, Irons leans forward to express his enthusiasm for the suggestion with the limited physical exuberance of a quiet and morose drunk. When they set off on the escapade, having barely found his feet, Irons

quickly loses them again, not through a loose and gradual descent to the floor, but all at once, in one swift fall from a stiff upright position to a stiff recumbent one.

The containment and inwardness that Irons achieves in the limited movement of dining at table or writing in bed is echoed by his regular use of a more dramatically contained and self-enclosed, semi-frozen pose. Sitting abandoned on the stairs in *Brideshead Revisited* and *M. Butterfly*, or sitting hugging his knees to his chest in *Dead Ringers* and *Lolita*, he not only emphasizes an inwardness, but, child-like and abandoned, his position places him as desperately trying to achieve a degree of security through a pathetic display of physical self-comforting. Even with the propensity of his characters to swoon, often in public, with the help of framing, shot scale and editing, Irons manages to give just enough of the indication of the turmoil within, while limiting its expression to suit the self-imposed restraint of the character. Early in *Swann in Love*, Charles Swann is devastated upon hearing a powerful strain of music. With very little movement and limited gesture, however, we must read the battle within simply through the stillness of his eyes and his desperate, although measured, intake of breath. In *Lolita*, once Lo has jumped on him and kissed him flush on the mouth, all Irons does is raise his hand to his stomach, close his eyes and tilt his head slightly. Perhaps slightly more excitable is Charles Smithson on the point of proposing to Ernestina in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The discreet, clipped and correct diction Irons employs, along with a small range of nervous but stagy movements and vocal intonations, indicate a formality that contrasts strongly with the lazy style of Mike, Irons's other character in the film. Furthermore this formality in Charles not only appeals to the nineteenth-century etiquette appropriate to his context, but also to the dictates and standard physical tropes and bodily motifs required by Victorian stage melodrama.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond these relative excitements of characterization, we certainly see Irons playing drunk, hysterical or drug-addled

characters given to more extreme physical exertion. Even in these cases, however, the relative sense of control, order and minimalism about his performance is always present. This works for Irons's perverts because such states are manic expressions, temporally limited and restrained reactions, hardly extracted from a profound and fundamental base of loss. In Irons's performative restraint and its relatively meagre return of a major repression, we can observe a similarity with the work of his colleague and sometime mentor, Meryl Streep.<sup>29</sup> In relating her technique to the research of nineteenth-century acting psychologist and playwright, William Archer, James Naremore writes of her performance of grief in *Sophie's Choice* (1982) in terms that resonate with my reading of Irons: 'Streep tries to register a repressed emotion, so that her look communicates something more like "grief held in check by an attempt to remain calm"'.<sup>30</sup> This is perhaps why it is the seemingly unflappable Irons, as opposed to the manic Irons, that is more representative of his performance style. We see this in *Brideshead Revisited* when, in the face of a barrage of insults from Teresa Marchmain, Irons stands calmly, smiles politely and, above all, manages to maintain his poise. In all of his performances, manic or melancholic, there is an echo of those controlled moments of the dressing ritual that we see particularly in *Swann in Love* and *M. Butterfly*. Even in these vastly different contexts Irons demonstrates a strong element of finesse, precision and fastidiousness about his performance that seems to echo what I will discuss below as the pervert's narcissistic but very simply desire to survive.<sup>31</sup>

What all this manifestation of control really emerges from and reflects upon is the base that Irons is interested in locating through his, essentially Stanislavskian, process of establishing character. This centres upon what Irons sees as the vital importance of finding the subtext of whatever he is working on. Emerging from his general interest in the inner life of a character, Irons's process comes from the spark of interest in 'how people cope', their fears and their very common

sense of loss or melancholia.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, as in the example of creating Claus von Bulow on the model of his own father, for Irons this approach is largely about establishing empathy for the most troubling or offensive of characters.<sup>33</sup> This ultimate ability to establish empathy is the reason that Irons has no fears about playing disreputable characters or indeed any reservations in appearing ridiculous, defeated, humiliated or suborned. The comic absurdity of Charles Swann chasing Odette all over Paris, the public humiliation endured by René Gallimard in *M. Butterfly* and the private shame and disgrace of Humbert Humbert may threaten the spine of an actor with an international reputation to preserve. In the context of Irons's work, however, none of these characters is fake or insubstantial and all of their emotions are subject to the actor's empathy. Representing their debasement is simply part of turning their inner struggles into art. Where this becomes really humiliating for the actor is not in these moments of appearing absurd or ridiculous, but in the moments where we perceive the startling incongruity between the power of the inner life and the minimalism of its performative expression. When, as Humbert Humbert or René Gallimard, we see Irons covered in great blotches of cheap lipstick, we do not experience his humiliation because he looks like a bad drag queen. We experience his humiliation because as a representation of his perversion, his appearance is a pathetic and hopeless attempt to represent a far more substantial unconscious struggle to embrace and internalize his lost object of desire.

So much of our experience of the prince of perversion in this book concerns the way he is seduced, suborned and generally imposed upon. Notwithstanding some of the more active measures employed by Irons, we cannot ignore the role of directors, cinematographers, editors, designers, animators (in the case of *The Lion King*) and other actors in the creation of this character. As Irons revealed in his interview at the Actor's Studio, his path into the Bristol Old Vic was smoothed by the idea that its director thought he would be able to wear



costume. Furthermore a key metaphor he employs when thinking about his acting work is the game of tennis and a lot of waiting to see what the other actors are going to send back to you over the net.<sup>34</sup> The work of others has been largely intertwined with the examples of character creating I have already outlined. Some more brief examples, however, will complete our picture of the on-set task of creating perversion.

The cinematographer's use of long and extreme long shots in, for example, *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Mission* has the effect of rendering Irons's characters as small and occasionally diminutive figures, dwarfed by the immense natural and artificial splendours of the locations they inhabit. As in the examples of *Lolita* which places Irons on his knees, chasing Dominique Swain around the room and begging for favours, or in *Bridehead Revisited*, which has him lying on Diana Quick's chest, his face partially buried in her breast, or enduring the act of her whipping his face with a thorny rose, the work of actors and directors to establish the blocking of a given scene frequently has the effect of placing the actor in highly submissive positions emphasizing his lack of agency. The combination of high-contrast lighting and a chic but cold, ultra-modernist design and décor in *Dead Ringers* demonstrates the extremes of cleanliness and decay that coexist in the world of the Mantle twins. Such a *mise-en-scène* seemingly represents the safe and clinical world they have created for themselves. When the furniture and the darkness close in, however, as in the elaborate, expansive and ultra-protective bright red surgical wear they sport as high priests of the operating theatre, it quickly becomes apparent that they are as trapped by design as much as they are protected by it. From Humbert and his humbling hat to the Prufrockian prominence of stiff shirt collars, frock-coats, ecclesiastical cassocks and Japanese kimonos, costume, whether formal or decrepit, similarly plays a vital role in the containment and subordination of the prince of perversion.

Emerging from a critical point of view that seeks to expand the previously marginal interest of cine-psychoanalysis

in acting and performance,<sup>35</sup> my reading of Jeremy Irons as the prince of perversion throughout this book derives from an understanding of issues relating in part to his biography, but largely to his technique and to the broader findings of *mise-en-scène* analysis. In this context, if not in the context of popular discourse, Irons both creates and stands for the prince of perversion. To his creation of the middle-class rebel, the ‘nice bit of middle-class rough’, is added a performance style emphasizing obscured anxiety and minimalist values of control, interiority and subordination. The result is that Irons creates a character of restraint, economy and containment, in which a little bit of emotional and physical outburst makes a significant impact. This character generally looks nothing like that man whom Hamlet thought of as ‘passion’s slave’, but this is exactly what he is. So when passion comes in Irons’s performance it is manic and seems exaggerated and can be awkward and uncomfortable for the audience. The real perversion in his performance, however, lies in the contradictions, the constraints, the slow-surfacing of unconscious ideas and the delays found, as Freud might put it, in lingering over the intermediate relations between passion and repression.

## In Pursuit of Perversion

So much about perversion is concerned with environment, setting and, to extend Jeremy Irons’s tennis metaphor, what gets sent back over the net. Irons’s performance is in many ways, as I have indicated, an active process of creating perversion. This performance, however, is so dependent upon values of subordination, submission, enslavement and seduction that the impact of *mise-en-scène* and the work of others on the Irons presence is of the utmost importance to our pursuit of perversion in these films. In the chapters that follow, therefore, Irons and his characters centre the analysis but do not always provide the driving force of perversion. For this type of male protagonist, perversion is as much a passive experience as an active one.

In chapter one, I introduce the key critical ideas that contribute to our understanding of perversion in Irons's films and in cinematic representations of male desire generally. I argue that Irons's filmic pervert is frequently beset by an experience of seduction leading to an anxiety that he is, in fact, a depressed woman. Picking up on a notion articulated in relation to melancholia made by psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, I refer to this anxiety as the 'intolerable idea'. This depressed woman anxiety directs the prince of perversion on two courses – narcissism and an encounter in which he finds himself in the dual role of father and paedophile (a condition that I call, after Shakespeare's great heroine, 'Imogenism'). Drawing on brief examples from Irons's films and some examples from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970), these ideas are discussed in relation to works by Sigmund Freud, Kristeva, Tania Modleski and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as some key critical readings of the father–daughter dynamic in the plays of Shakespeare and Shaw.

In chapter two, I present an analysis of the enduringly popular television series, *Brideshead Revisited*, which established Jeremy Irons's career internationally. I demonstrate the way femininity and the maternal, central forces of the prince pervert's unconscious are represented in the series in architecture and places (Brideshead Castle, Oxford, Venice), key protagonists (Teresa, Julia) and in the institution of the Roman Catholic Church itself. I read *Brideshead Revisited* here as an Oedipus and the Sphinx encounter between Irons's character, Charles Ryder, and a series of maternal surrogates playing upon him, ever-threatening to overwhelm him.

In chapter three, I outline the way *The French Lieutenant's Woman* operates as a parody of the cinema of male melancholia, the concerns of which are evoked in exacting detail. Both in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century plot lines, the film establishes the essential strain of melancholia in almost all Jeremy Irons's films that would see him become identified as

the premier male melancholic character actor in international cinema. As Charles Smithson in the nineteenth-century plot, melancholia is the pattern of his obscenity and his perversion. As Mike in the 1980s plot, it is his 'actor's melancholy' that demonstrates the largely performative nature of male perversion.

To the great offence of mainstream audiences and neo-Proustian sceptics alike, Charles Swann, Irons's character in *Swann in Love*, the subject of chapter four, is highly aware that it does not befit a man to prostrate himself before the altar of female desire. But just as it reveals his obsession for Odette as socially perverse, *Swann in Love* demonstrates that the repression of the concept of 'love conquers all' is itself the real perversion. Swann may well redeem himself in the eyes of his peers by using the lawful institution of marriage as a means of putting out the fire of his love for Odette. In this film, however, the result of this particularly perverse renunciation, if not also the processes of repression and narcissism operative along the way, can be little else other than his own death.

In chapter five, I chart the famous Mantle twins' eradication of the maternal presence in their lives and the depth of their narcissistic attachment to each other. Looking back beyond and destroying the maternal idea altogether may be an outstanding perversion but, as Freud observes, the narcissist's quest is always one of survival. Like the great Romantic lovers that they are, Elliot and Beverly Mantle (both played by Irons) literally cannot live without each other. The only chance they have for survival lies in each other. Eradicating or deprived of a maternal identification, and the subsequent object identifications of normal psychosexual development, they are alone. Like the one individual ego that they represent, their story seems to reflect the idea that the struggle for survival is ultimately a lonely one, a journey beyond not only the mother but also the father.

René Gallimard's perversion in *M. Butterfly* is that he cannot love Song Liling, the object of his desire, as a woman, or

as a man, but only as the ideal of Oriental beauty. This is not to suggest that she is useless to him, however, merely that she is simply an image of sexual desire. Through a comparison with the heroine of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, Cio-Cio-San, and by placing that comparison within critical understandings of stage and screen melodrama, I demonstrate in chapter six that René's use for Song is substantial. From this reading we can see that his real perversion is not that he wants to possess her, but that he wants to be her.

Finally, through a detailed and close filmic analysis of *Lolita* in chapter seven, I attempt to bring together the various critical strains introduced in chapter one and demonstrated in the case studies throughout the book. Unlike the blackly comic figure of Kubrick's film, Irons's incarnation as Humbert Humbert is a melancholy one. Annabel is an ideal against which all desire is measured for Humbert. The experience of Annabel's life and death in Cannes in the 1920s provides Humbert with an original seduction that sets in train a continuous cycle of depressed woman anxieties and intolerable ideas – as we see in his encounter with Charlotte – and Imogenistic fantasies – as we see in his unconscionable and ultimately fatal desire for Lolita.

Although I refer to a number of Irons's more recent films and television programmes throughout this book, the six films under primary analysis here all belong to his work in the period between 1981 and 1997. This book is not intended as a career overview and I have selected these films because they appeal to me as the most interesting and most representative of the key concerns of perversion under discussion. This is not to suggest that Irons's work in the decade or so since *Lolita* is perversion-free and my references to films after 1997 attest to this. Nor should my selection of case studies suggest that Jeremy Irons's work since the 1990s is less interesting. In fact, in many ways, the issue of his casting and his choice of roles, the last decade for Irons as an actor has been equally interesting. Considering my inability to find space or use for detailed analysis of any of the more recent films,

however, does suggest an important point about the nature of the male screen protagonist perversion I am writing about. Obviously since the late 1990s the focus of Irons's career has been both out of the mainstream of international entertainment cinema (*Callas Forever* (2002)) and, when not, into the supporting roles of the mainstream (*Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *Eragon* (2006), *Appaloosa*). Given my interest in the notion of subordination in this portrait of perversion, Irons's relative withdrawal from the limelight of his leading male period suggests a tantalizing line of enquiry. The fact that his art-house and supporting roles are, no doubt, more to do with the professional and personal dynamics of his career beyond the age of fifty than some hyper-dedication to the ultimate portrayal of screen perversion suggests caution. These roles, however, and indeed those in films such as the children's television tale, *Danny, Champion of the World* (1989), which do not fit neatly into the perversion focus of this book, tell us two important things about male screen perversion as played by Irons or, indeed, anyone else. These are that the portrayal of perversion requires scope and depth of character, and, most importantly, it can never be meaningfully contemplated at an excessive distance from the mainstream – as Freud would concur.

## Notes

1. Sigmund Freud. 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905)', in A. Richards (ed), J. Strachey (trans). *The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 7, On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*. London: Penguin, 1991, 74.
2. Freud, *Three Essays*, 80 and 155.
3. Teresa de Lauretis. *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, 24.
4. Freud, *Three Essays*, 86.
5. Freud, *Three Essays*, 155.
6. Freud, *Three Essays*, 62.
7. Freud, *Three Essays*, 63–75.
8. Jim Baker. 'Interview', *GQ* 4 (1984), in Doug Tomlinson (ed). *Actors and Acting for the Screen: Roles and Collaboration*. London and New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1994, 285; Karen Jaehne. 'Interview', *Film Comment* 10 (1988), in Tomlinson, *Actors and Acting*, 286. See also Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer. *Screen Acting*. London: Routledge, 1999, 2.

9. Michael Lindsay-Hogg. 'Jeremy Irons's Effortless Style', *Men's Fashion of the Times*, supplement to the *New York Times Magazine*, 17 March (1991).
10. Sharon Marie Carnicke. 'Lee Strasberg's Paradox of the Actor', in Lovell and Krämer, *Screen Acting*, 80.
11. Lovell and Krämer, *Screen Acting*, 6.
12. *Inside the Actors Studio* (2003); *Who Do You Think You Are* (Clare Lewins, BBC TV, 2006); Janet Cawley. 'Jeremy Irons: The Man Behind All Those Sinister Characters', *Biography*. 4.7, July (2000), 92.
13. Lovell and Krämer, *Screen Acting*, 7–8.
14. Cawley, 'Jeremy Irons: The Man Behind All Those Sinister Characters', 92.
15. *Inside the Actors Studio*.
16. *Inside the Actors Studio*.
17. Nick James. 'Humbert's Humbert', *Sight and Sound*. May (1998), 23.
18. Cawley, 'Jeremy Irons: The Man Behind All Those Sinister Characters', 92.
19. Notwithstanding the range of challenging critical writing on stars by Richard Dyer, James Naremore, Christine Gledhill, Pam Cook and others, locating Irons within that particular discourse, while potentially fruitful, is not my concern in this book.
20. Barry King. 'Articulating Stardom', in Christine Gledhill (ed). *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. London: Routledge, 1991, 176–177.
21. Interview from *Stills* in Tomlinson, *Actors and Acting*, 286.
22. James, 'Humbert's Humbert', 23.
23. James, 'Humbert's Humbert', 23. See also Cawley and *Inside the Actors Studio*.
24. Lindsay-Hogg, 'Jeremy Irons's Effortless Style'.
25. Interview from *Stills* in Tomlinson, *Actors and Acting*, 286.
26. *Inside the Actors Studio*.
27. Cawley, 'Humbert's Humbert', 23; *Inside the Actors Studio*.
28. James Naremore. *Acting in the Cinema*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988, 34–67.
29. *Inside the Actors Studio* and Martin Torggoff. 'Interview' in Tomlinson, *Actors and Acting*, 285, both show the extent to which Irons feels technically indebted to Streep.
30. Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 65.
31. Matt Roth in '*The Lion King: A Short History of Disney Fascism*', *Jump Cut*. 40, March (1996), 15–20 indicates how in this animated film Irons's character is represented as 'Mannered and aristocratic ... pointedly gay'.
32. *Frost Over the World* (Al Jazeera, 2009).
33. *Inside the Actors Studio*.
34. *Inside the Actors Studio*.
35. Lovell and Krämer, *Screen Acting*, 3.