

Narratives of cultural and professional redundancy: Ageing action stardom and the ‘geri-action’ film

Glen Donnar (RMIT University)

Abstract

Focusing on *The Expendables* films, I identify the importance of discourses of professional and cultural redundancy in ‘geri-action’, an emergent subgenre of Hollywood action film that has revitalised the careers of ageing action stars such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. These redundancies, which hold long-standing significance in 1980s action film, are compounded in geri-action by advanced age and diminished physical capacity. In geri-action, the spectacle of once idealised, muscled bodies is concealed and displaced onto oversized guns, fetishised vehicles and younger action bodies. However much geri-action resists 1980s action stars’ use-by dates, it ultimately admits physical and generic exhaustion.

Keywords: geri-action, Hollywood action films, ageing stars, *Expendables*

The Rise of ‘Geri-action’

The release of a third *Expendables* film in 2014 extended the twilight of ageing 1980s action idols in the so-called ‘geri-action’ subgenre, that is, action films predominantly showcasing male stars ranging in age from their mid-50s into their 70s. *The Expendables* series (Stallone 2010; West 2012; Hughes 2014) features a motley team of elite mercenaries, led by Barney Ross (Stallone), recurrently motivated to take revenge on the all-star action villain after a local woman or beloved colleague is killed, injured or captured. The third film in the series adds such ageing action film luminaries as Mel Gibson, Wesley Snipes and Harrison Ford (replacing Bruce Willis, who left the series after a conflict with Stallone) to the already extensive aged cast led by Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Chuck Norris.

Scholarship on ageing western/action star bodies, largely initiated by Holmlund’s (2002) work on Clint Eastwood, is growing, particularly in relation to Stallone et al. (see Gates, 2010; Boyle & Brayton, 2012; Tasker, 2014). Specifically, Boyle and Brayton (2012; see also Tasker, 2014) explore the first *Expendables* film in relation to notions of ‘expendability’ in post-recession America, and also align this notion to Stallone’s career. However, geri-action encapsulates more than the shared characteristics of key characters and the realities of ageing for the action star, particularly when considering the hypermasculine star images of Stallone and Schwarzenegger. Continuing work done on the longevity of Stallone’s star image (Donnar, 2016), this article argues that geri-action extends, albeit ambivalently, discourses of cultural and professional redundancy that grow out of 1980s action stardom.

The geri-action subgenre offers narratives of star identity in decline, reluctantly showcasing the aged action star body (even sometimes by veiling it), waning audience drawing power, and a generic shift from a lone hero to intergenerational, international star collectives. While 1980s action stars were largely defined via the spectacle of muscled bodies, aged geri-action bodies are largely concealed, with the site of spectacle now notably displaced onto guns and vehicles in an attempt to compensate for dissipated masculine power. This article finally interrogates how geri-action represents the redundancies of hypermasculine action star and genre alike, forestalling but admitting the inevitable physical and generic exhaustion of 1980s action star bodies; bodies intimately aligned with generic ‘muscularity’, but undeniably ageing and fast approaching their generic use-by date.

I begin with an analysis of geri-action’s claim to subgenre status. Genres, rather than being designated via a set of specific, distinguishing characteristics or categories, or a particular set of films, serve assorted groups, particular places and specific times. Indeed, as Rick Altman (1999, pp. 207-208) argues, genres not only “serve diverse groups diversely,” but also “multiple conflicting audiences,” including local and global audiences, producers, directors, critics and scholars. According to Jancovich (2002), genre designation is historically and socially specific, more often a matter of collective and common sense consensus and, as such, liable to change and shift over time. Genres are not impermeable or distinct, with fixed, identifiable boundaries, but fluid and overlapping. Hollywood films have always exhibited hybridity of sorts, mixing multiple and various genre elements. However, Jancovich rightly observes that the particular social contexts in which texts are produced and received inevitably shapes and emphasises certain generic and hybridist tendencies. Suffice to say, extensive debate among genre critics over what constitutes and identifies a particular genre persists. Yet there remains a certain generic ‘legibility’ across time, space and cultures, even if generic designations shift and transform across each. Designations are also shaped by generic traditions. Indeed, Steve Neale (2000) asserts that generic traditions even figure expectations that audiences (and producers) have of particular endings, similar to their expectations of plotlines and narrative structures.

The geri-action subgenre, a less-than-kind combination of geriatric and action, (re)emerges in various simultaneous strains: franchise revivals, surprising action star becomings, genre history reassessments, and, ‘new’ all-star collective franchises. Since the early-2000s there have been numerous franchise revivals—symbolic returns in more than one sense—of *Rocky Balboa* (Stallone, 2006), *Rambo* (Stallone, 2008), *A Good Day to Die Hard* (Moore, 2013) and *Terminator Genisys* (Taylor, 2015). A growing cohort of unexpected

action-star becomings of renowned actors—exemplified by Liam Neeson in the *Taken* films and *The Grey* (Carnahan, 2011) and now Sean Penn in *The Gunman* (Morel, 2015)—is seemingly the most resilient strain, and open to more original works. The subgenre’s cinematic roots are hinted at in solemn reassessments of the effects of a life lived violently in films featuring 1970s proto-action film stars, like Michael Caine in *Harry Brown* (Barber, 2009). Nonetheless, the subgenre was coined, somewhat derisively, only with the collective appearances of 1980s action stars in films like *The Expendables* and *RED* (standing for *Retired & Extremely Dangerous*) (Schwentke, 2010), films which, in turn, swiftly generated sequels and even a ‘new’ franchise in the case of the former.¹

In this sense, geri-action’s originary emblematic characteristics relate to the cultural iconicity of its 1980s action stars, including associations with hypermasculinity and hyperbolic spectacle, monosyllabic mumbling, villain-directed witticisms and post-kill catchphrases. The subgenre also showcases an explicit, self-reflexive engagement with 1980s action star images, filmography and genre tropes—admittedly all enduring elements of 1980s action film. *The Expendables* and franchise revivals of star-defining characters reiterate and continue to cultivate this engagement by restaging and reworking iconic moments, music and catchphrases, both in earnest and with levity. Self-referentiality in *The Expendables 2*, for example, is especially excessive, with characters recycling and exchanging well-worn catchphrases, including: “I’ll be back”, “I’m back”, “Yippee-ki-yay”, and “Who’s next? Rambo?” Another key element of the rise of geri-action is linked to broader production, exhibition and film-going trends that continue to favour sequelisation and franchises, international presales, and ageing theatre audiences. Yet audience nostalgia—and, indeed, the stars’ nostalgia for their earlier, ascendant stardom—certainly appears a core reason for *The Expendables*’ success, as Chris Holmlund (2014) notes.

Eighties action – ‘hard bodies’ and ‘muscularity’

Considerations of the 1980s action star image routinely and predominantly focus on what Yvonne Tasker (1993) terms ‘muscular cinema’, a body of 1980s action films that showcase and celebrate the hyperbolic muscularity of their stars, most notably starring Stallone and Schwarzenegger. Even career side moves are invariably read as engagements with this hypermasculine action star image, whether by inverting it or caricaturing it, as Stallone does in *Antz* (Darnell & Johnson, 1998) and Schwarzenegger in *Kindergarten Cop* (Reitman, 1990). The ‘hard-bodied’ persona (Jeffords, 1994) is also consistently linked to Reagan-era American culture, politics and foreign policy, associated with the desire to ‘remasculinise’ Cold War

America post-Vietnam. Eighties action stars mark the vanguard of the cultural counter to perceived threats to ‘white’ male hegemony following post-1960s cultural shifts and 1970s economic instability. The equation of Stallone and Schwarzenegger’s star images with ideas of America, their bodies with ideals of whiteness, and their iconic characters’ struggles with traditional white masculinity is long-standing, albeit diverse. Holmlund (2014), for example, notes the complexity of Stallone’s demarcation as ‘white’, with Tasker (2014, p.250) further arguing Rocky Balboa’s status as an Everyman outsider whose struggles reflect “tropes of self-invention in the context of American mythology” and establish the Italian-American as representing the nation, well before the Cold War conceit of *Rocky IV* (Stallone, 1985). This outsider status is likewise evident in characterisations of the repeatedly abandoned lone warrior, John Rambo, despite being otherwise attributed mixed Native American-German heritage and routinely aligned with primitivism and guerrilla warfare (see Warner, 1992). Schwarzenegger too has long been branded ‘American’, celebrated most notably through his exemplary embodiment of the self-made (and immigrant) man and body. Dyer (1997, pp. 148-150) deems both star bodies white because they are ‘built bodies’. This notion draws not only on white traditions including classical art, Californian lifestyle and, in their endured pain and suffering, Christian imagery, but also on connotations of whiteness as ideal, hard and achieved. In these respects, the 1980s action stars’ recent comeback arguably addresses, and seeks to counter, American economic uncertainty and destabilised white masculinities. Geri-action seemingly articulates cultural nostalgia for a period of supposed American cultural and political certitude and ascendancy, which the vulnerable yet unconquerable muscular 1980s star body served both to allegorise and embody. For an America buffeted by 9/11, the failures of the ‘war on terror’ and the Great Recession, it also evidences long-standing and unrelieved anxieties that the hypermasculine action ‘hard body’ (unsuccessfully) seeks to refute, however unsuccessfully.

The desire to re-masculinise and reassert cultural-professional worth highlights unalleviated anxieties, as Gallagher (2006) similarly recognises, yet scholarly discourse nonetheless typically reads action films as violently redemptive or recuperative texts—of wounded white male and imperilled nation alike. Rambo’s ritualised pre-battle ‘suited up’, for example, seemingly indicates an ideal masculinity, emphasising his musculature in the putting on of his headband, an integral element of Rambo’s enduring iconicity. However, in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985), Rambo fashions his headband from a strip of the *ao dai* traditional dress that his killed Vietnamese would-be lover had earlier used to dress his wound, thereby incorporating the feminine to facilitate retributive violence. In line with Jeffords

(1994), this displays, even more ambiguously, not only the persistent wounding of the muscled action star body, but also its feminisation—fetishized, objectified and vulnerable—in the service of re-masculinisation. Such moments complicate the continued focus on muscularity and re-masculinisation that still frame and dominate scholarly discourse on the 1980s action star image.

This late resuscitation in geri-action film confirms that 1980s action star images endure, and will do so, as long as we watch their old and ‘new’ films. However, since the early successes of the revival, Stallone and Schwarzenegger’s geri-action reinvigoration has largely faltered. Their subsequent non-franchise outings, including Stallone’s *Bullet to the Head* (Hill, 2012) and *Grudge Match* (Segal, 2013), Schwarzenegger’s *The Last Stand* (Jee-woon, 2013) and *Sabotage* (Ayer, 2014), and the pair’s *Escape Plan* (Håfström, 2013), were commercial and critical failures, and *The Expendables 3* and *Terminator Genisys* performed poorly at the American domestic box office. Stallone and Schwarzenegger’s status as action stars and performers seems tenuous. The originary strain of geri-action predominantly turns on the legacy of 1980s action stars and their ability to offer nostalgic narratives of star identities resisting their decline and apparent redundancy. This requires that we re-examine and perhaps re-cast 1980s action stars through the lens of redundancy. Rather than simply considering redundancy to be associated with nostalgia and ageing, I argue that discourses of redundancy are extended and expanded in geri-action. These narratives of cultural and professional redundancy now also address their star identities as aged action stars—and, more specifically, as formerly ‘muscular’ 1980s action bodies—to suggest the twinned symbolic exhaustions of the 1980s action subgenre and the aged action star body.

The cinematic lineage of geri-action

A critical feature of geri-action neglected in popular criticism is an appreciation of its multivalent cinematic lineage. Although newly coined, geri-action films have significant historical precursors in American cinema, most notably in westerns and proto-action films made by aging ‘classical’ Hollywood stars following the decline of the studio system. For example, John Wayne and Jimmy Stewart in *The Shootist* (Siegel, 1976) and Robert Mitchum in *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (Yates, 1973) all play ‘old timers’ struggling against perceived anachronism in a markedly changed world they are not long for.² The later directorial career of Clint Eastwood also features numerous cross-examinations of his western/action star image, and generic and cultural legacies, particularly in films like *Gran Torino* (Eastwood, 2008).

These films, and their stars, exhibit the reflexivity and self-referentiality—always a part of the classical film western through its relationship to western novels—evident in *geri-action*. However, they more sustainedly interrogate their fading stars' screen images, all variously associated with the screen body-in-action, and (genre) frailty and mortality.³

O'Brien (2012) argues *The Expendables* films incorporate numerous elements typically witnessed as a genre matures, including an elegiac tone, self-reflexivity, genre deconstruction and unexpected star turns. Yet it may be the star turns of ageing actors that most clearly signal the twin exhaustion of star and genre. Only the most recent *Expendables* film engages with notions of elegy and loss, when the team unexpectedly encounters its supposedly deceased co-founder Conrad Stonebanks (Mel Gibson), now a ruthless arms trader intent on destroying the *Expendables*. The serious injuries sustained by one member compel Barney—who blames himself for the episode—to disband the old crew. Fearful that they will all meet the same demise as previous members, he enlists a new team of younger—and therefore supposedly less vulnerable—mercenaries. When these new recruits are (unsurprisingly) captured, the old team reunites, primarily in order to assert their continued professional worth and vitality.

Another antecedent subgenre of the action-war film similarly centres on ageing star collectives acting as mercenaries, in films including *The Wild Geese* (McLaglen, 1978), starring Richard Burton, Richard Harris and Roger Moore, and *The Sea Wolves* (McLaglen, 1980), starring Gregory Peck, David Niven and Roger Moore. O'Brien (2012) observes these 'mercenary' films arise from the tradition of 'hired gun' films like westerns and samurai films. Their cultural currency resided in the contemporary workplace context and associated rise of mercenaries post-1968, factors that arguably also influence *The Expendables* films and other post-9/11 'mercenary' films (see also Boyle & Brayton, 2012). As in *The Wild Geese*, the *Expendables* crew members are mercenaries ultimately re-invigorated or motivated for non-monetary reasons—in contrast, perhaps, to the aged action stars who portray them—either by a wounded or killed colleague or a beautiful local woman that they recognise still “stands for something”. In the first *Expendables* film, the crew accepts a mission from shadowy CIA operative Mr Church (Willis) to overthrow a Latin American dictator, who turns out to be the puppet of rogue CIA officer James Monroe (Eric Roberts). After initially aborting their mission, the *Expendables* decide to return and rescue the dictator's estranged daughter, Sandra. This motivation also introduces to the series persistent, ambivalent discourses about capital. The crew is expected to protect supposedly legitimate capital, yet eliminate the threat of 'perverted' capital represented by each villain. For example, in the first film's opening sequence, the crew's assignment is to rescue oil company workers held hostage on a tanker.

Although both Monroe and Barney routinely use business phraseology, Barney seeks to distinguish himself from Monroe, whose tailored suit signals his turpitude. The villain, in a sage comment on the career of the action star, nonetheless taunts Barney at film's end, saying: "And what about you and me. We're both the same. We're both mercenaries. We're both dead inside". In the second film in the series, the team's mission swiftly evolves into a quest for vengeance, with the help of Barney's arch rival Trench (Schwarzenegger) and Lone Wolf (Norris), against rival mercenary Jean Vilain (Jean Claude Van Damme), who not only murdered their newest and youngest member but uses local Bulgarian men and children as worker-slaves to mine the five tons of weapons-grade plutonium he intends to then sell.

'I'm expendable': Generic and narrative redundancy

Geri-action is intimately related to multiple notions of redundancy in *The Expendables* films, as I have observed in discussions of Stallone's star image (Donnar, 2016). Redundancy is a recognised, and oft-maligned, feature of genre films (and mainstream narrative film itself), and of the 1980s action genre in particular. Yet the scholarly focus on 'muscularity' and re-masculinisation that continues to frame and dominate discourse on the 1980s action star image underestimates the integral relation of the 1980s action star to persistent evocations of cultural redundancy. This redundancy is also stylistic, and evident, for example in the flashbacks frequently employed to signify the protagonist's suffering or trauma. Gallagher (2006) further draws our attention to the presentation of a single explosion from multiple angles, and notes that the *Rocky* films consistently open with a recap of the conclusion of the previous instalment. Likewise, repetition is a form of redundancy used to mark out or establish generic terrain. The repetition or overlapping of tropes, themes, images and/or expressions creates predictability, and is even evident in promotional materials such as film posters. In 1980s action—notably the *Rocky*, *Rambo*, *Terminator* and *Die Hard* franchises—particular tropes and themes consistently recur: the outsider figure being 'used (up)' by anonymous and distant powerful others; the isolated warrior battling, and besting, seemingly overwhelming numbers or insurmountable odds; montages of the building and 'suiting up' of the body; wounding and self-repair sequences; and revenge narratives. Such predictability is key to both generic formation and articulation, and a source of textual pleasure for fans, but also leads inexorably towards symbolic exhaustion. Ultimately, such redundancies become excessive—even exceeding what is usual, natural or plausible—and a genre either adapts and transforms or becomes mired in self-reflexive parody, as demonstrated in the 1990s deconstruction of 1980s action and stardom in Schwarzenegger's *Last Action Hero* (McTiernan, 1993).

Redundancy also implies being in excess, no longer being needed or useful. To be, or be made, redundant is to be marked as superfluous, and deprived of one's job, associated status and worth. Indeed, this point is not only central to the star life of ageing 1980s action performers defined by hyperbolic physicality, but is also true of their defining 1980s action characters. Rather than being primarily a recent development associated with ageing in franchise resuscitations and series like *The Expendables*, redundancy is a long-standing feature, and one that is integral to the 1980s action star image. Numerous scholars, including O'Brien (2012, p. 102), have noted the obsolescence often associated with white male protagonists in 1980s action, protagonists whose gender and professional relevance are openly questioned, even threatened, in a world that seemingly no longer values or needs their particular expressions of each. Eighties action star personae are defined by their characters' announcement and subsequent resistance of perceived cultural, economic and professional redundancies. Stallone's films have long been read as social commentaries on "the victimisation of the working class" (Kellner, 1995, p. 65, cited by Boyle & Brayton, 2012, p. 482), derided as unfashionable and undesirable. The centrality of the redundant, marginalised American blue-collar or working-class male is reiterated and cemented by repeated societal, personal and professional redundancy. Rambo, for example, declares it is because "I'm expendable" that he is sent back into Vietnam to search for possible POWs in *First Blood Part II*. In *Die Hard* (McTiernan, 1988), officer John McClane (Willis) is deemed professionally redundant—most notably figured in his outdated policing methods—and culturally redundant as husband-father—when it appears that he has been replaced in his wife's life by a 'yuppie'. Even the Terminator (Cameron, 1984) is technologically, and thus professionally, redundant by the second film, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron, 1991)—released during a period dominated by United States concerns about Japan's economic ascendance—and the android must figuratively become human/father as a consequence. Thus, while Hollywood globally distributes and promotes 1980s action star images, their star personae turn on (and perhaps exploit) the ongoing, adverse impacts of economic and cultural change on working-class white males post-1960s, post-Vietnam and now post-recession, either directly in the narrative or indirectly via the triumphant representational reassertion of (the centrality of) white masculinity.

Eighties action stars' defining characters rail against perceptions and experiences of professional and cultural redundancy, but do so more ambivalently and with less success than popular opinion typically acknowledges. They seemingly offer fantasies of ascendance and returned white masculine vitality and narrative centrality, likewise enacting dreams of return

and/or victory. However, these uncertain fantasies of reinvigoration and victory are, and can only ever be, partially fulfilled. Rocky's body is spectacularly defiant and resilient, triumphant in its declared capacity to endure. Yet he is defeated at the end of both *Rocky* (Avildsen, 1976) and *Rocky Balboa* (Stallone, 2006). At the close of *First Blood* (Kotcheff, 1982) the traumatised Vietnam veteran, Rambo, breaks down and seeks the consoling fatherly embrace of his commanding officer, Colonel Trautman (Richard Crenna) as he submits to imprisonment, however high the Colonel encourages him to hold his head. And in each instalment of *Die Hard*, the beleaguered McClane is returned to a marginalised position of irrelevance, as wife troubles become daughter troubles, become age troubles, over the series. From Rocky Balboa to Rambo, through to 'used-up' military contractor cum mercenary Barney Ross in *The Expendables*, Stallone's franchise characters exist at the behest of larger, distant forces; trained, shaped and repeatedly abandoned by powerful, anonymous others when their use and value are exhausted. Rather than merely the symbolic 'muscular' embodiment of reinvigorated American neoliberal strength or the re-masculinisation of white masculinity that 1980s action stars are often argued to represent, their characters are also more generally, and recurrently, victims of the neoliberal effects of cultural and economic globalisation and American military imperialism. *The Expendables* films extend this narrative concern, with Barney and the Expendables crew clearly figured as (by-)products of post-9/11 changes to the American military. Their mercenary status is, thus, a dual reflection of the political-economic impacts of both the rapid growth of military contractors and a subsequent winding down of conflicts.

Being past it: Redundancy as (geri-)action star

The notion of redundancy as being *in excess* – marked unnecessary, superfluous and deprived of one's job – is perhaps equally a comment on the figure of the transnational action star. This is particularly so for 1980s action stars defined by hyperbolic muscularity, extending the genre trope of being 'used (up)' by anonymous, distant others onto the stars themselves. Redundancy here centres on perceptions of *being aged* or 'past it' and having passed their supposed use-by date, as Boyle and Brayton (2012) similarly observe. The geri-action resurgence exemplified by *The Expendables* films prolongs the star lives of Stallone and Schwarzenegger, but more intriguingly both disavows and yet displays their redundancy as 'hard bodied' action stars, specifically through numerous dramatic shifts in their 'muscular' star image. *The Expendables* films mark the transition from a highly individualistic star image to a collective one, as the tag line for *Escape Plan* evocatively expresses: "No one escapes

alone”. This is an aspect Holmlund (2014; see also Gates, 2010) identifies as integral to their box office success. The 1980s action star’s waning physical powers and ability to draw audiences mandates multi-generational ensemble star casts, covering multiple markets and action subgenres. Stylistically, the films hybridise (and cannibalise) other action subgenres, such as martial arts and wrestling, and other markets and periods, such as 1990s Hong Kong action and 2000s action film aesthetics. Such savvy marketing and style choices maximise the films’ audience and demographic appeal—capitalising on both under and over 25s—but also evidence certain anxieties. These anxieties transcend those typically associated with the oft-discussed hypermasculine ‘presenting’ of 1980s action stars, to include anxieties about their continued capacity to ‘perform’ and declining star value. Now commercial survival necessitates teaming with fellow aged luminaries of 1980s ‘muscular’ cinematic masculinity, such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Willis and Norris, and stars popular in key international markets—most notably Jet Li with Chinese-speaking audiences—and martial arts fans. Success also requires enlisting younger, fledgling action stars, such as Jai Courtney, Liam Hemsworth and Ronda Rousey, in a mutually beneficial association, where the older stars lend their action star genre pedigree and gravitas and the younger stars their muscular physiques, vitality and access to youth audiences.

In order to survive, aged 1980s action stars must disavow notions of professional redundancy as action performers. This denial of redundancy, around which their stardom has always revolved, signals their decline and exhaustion as action stars and bodies. The 1980s action star’s masculinity is largely defined and narrated via the spectacle of his body, and the transformation of the body is key to his star image. This is either in its building-up, its (return to an) ideal status, or the spectacle of the body’s wounding or beating. Yet the aged geri-action body, while remaining impressively muscled, is now largely cloaked in *The Expendables*, rather than nakedly celebrated, including in the most recent *Rambo*, *Die Hard* and *Terminator* films. Gilligan (2012, p. 177) notes a change in recent science fiction and action cinemas, whereby the construction and performance of masculine identities has been displaced from the body onto clothing and gadgets. While partly attributable to wider cinematic trends, including the substitution of performed action by CGI and special effects, this concealment in geri-action seeks to veil the transformation of the aged action star body and represents a telling shift in the presentation, or absence thereof, of formerly idealised 1980s action bodies.

In geri-action, the aged action body apparently needs to be concealed. Rather than nakedness revealing the body’s inadequacies and vulnerability, as Dyer (1997, p. 146) cogently observes, its covering now intriguingly highlights its frailties. Barney’s copious upper

torso tattoos—his life literally inked onto and over the star body—primarily serve to distract from the momentarily unveiled aged star body in *The Expendables*. More than simply revealing the character's life history, they conceal the aged star's transformed body; scarification for obfuscation rather than revelation.

Even the archive of promotional materials, including interviews and posters, subtly admits the deterioration of the action star. The promotional materials from recent franchise revivals strain to invoke the stability and persistence of genre tropes and star images by referencing earlier iconic images. However, instead of heralding a reinvigorated return, they disclose growing anxiety and uncertainty, with Stallone and Schwarzenegger's aged bodies now clothed rather than showcased. The poster for the 2008 *Rambo* clearly recalls the iconic image from *Rambo III* (MacDonald, 1988) of Rambo's muscled torso, shot from behind, glistening and unmarked, as he 'suits up' for battle. However, Rambo's body is now not only covered by a t-shirt, but he is also wounded, with his head downcast, weighed down equally by a life lived violently and the wasted aftermath of battle. Likewise, Schwarzenegger's biceps and chest are no longer fetishized in *Terminator Genisys* or *The Last Stand*, as they were in *Predator* (McTiernan, 1987) and *Commando* (Lester, 1985). In line with this, lingering shots and montages of the muscled male body 'suing up' for war—the body being quite literally weaponised—are expunged as subgenre conventions, with *Rambo* (2008), for example, instead fetishizing the production of a weapon.

Geri-action also conceals and displaces the diminished action capacity of its stars. Ramaeker (2014) identifies Stallone's astute use of contemporary film style in *Rocky Balboa* and *Rambo*, via hyperbolised stylisation and intensified continuity, to contemporise each franchise.⁴ This deployment of intensified continuity (Bordwell, 2006)—the post-1960s quickening and heightening of 'classical' narrative style, editing principles and generic structure—conceals the stars' aged bodies and diminished action capacities, masking their attenuated agility and speeding them up. The enduring celebration of the hyperbolic spectacle of the destructive 'hard body' is displaced onto more agile and mobile star bodies, such as Jason Statham, throughout *The Expendables* films and multiple younger would-be stars in *The Expendables 3*. Statham is largely a proxy for Stallone's now too-obviously-limited action capabilities, repeatedly achieving the hand-to-hand action quotient for the older star. In the second film, Billy The Kid (Hemsworth) symbolically weaponises Barney—with the younger man's sniper's rifle and bullets a lethal wish-fulfilment for the unarmed older man—who 'shoots' the attackers that surround him with 'loaded' fingers. Most poignantly, in *Terminator Genisys* the aged, fully clothed Schwarzenegger even wrestles his younger, naked self—having

time-travelled back to 1984, the time of the original Terminator's arrival—yet the camera focuses on, and is drawn to, the younger body. The aged Terminator might be, in his own words, 'not obsolete', but it seems the aged Schwarzenegger body is, at least so far as the unforgiving, no-longer-interested gaze of the camera is concerned.

The site of spectacle is displaced not only onto preposterously large guns, but also onto an excess of ostentatiously outfitted and decorated vehicles. Oversized even by 1980s action standards, these extend Holmlund's (2002) observation about the ageing Eastwood's employment of increased gun size. Vehicles, fetishized throughout *The Expendables*, are the first objects seen and heard on-screen in each film—objectified, fragmented and lingered upon in place of the now veiled (aged) action body. For example, the first sound heard in *The Expendables* is of motorcycles, and the first 'body' shots are also of these bikes. The film later offers similarly loving gazes on a seaplane and truck. Vehicles in the second film are even more extravagant, serving not only as 'muscular' surrogates for the body—they have all been extensively retrofitted—but compensating for aged star bodies. The closing credits sequence in each *Expendables* film similarly privileges hardware over 'hard bodies'. For example, while the Thin Lizzy song, "The boys are back in town", hails their return—and heralds a further instalment—the closing credits feature a montage of motorbikes. Even the female gaze marks this transferral, and when Maggie (Yu Nan) first meets Barney in *The Expendables 2* her interest focuses solely on his bike: "Is it custom?" and "Did you build it yourself?" Moreover, although Barney is injured in each film there are no vehicle repair scenes. Indeed, the manner in which his classic pick-up truck is at one point spectacularly riddled with bullets—and, so, clearly wounded—in the first film implies it is the truck rather than Barney that is the intended target for assassination, reiterating the shift in spectacle and the vehicle's surrogacy for the now-concealed body.

Even when the films make humorous reference to age-based redundancy, or 'being past it', this admission is relocated onto, or mediated by, deficient vehicles. In the opening of the second instalment, the "60 year-old death trap you call a plane," as Christmas (Statham) labels Barney's seaplane, is now openly identified as a stand-in for the 'agedness' of Stallone's body, rather than its vitality, strength or resilience. Equally, after Willis' Church gifts the crew a replacement plane at film's end, Barney declares, "That thing belongs in a museum" before Schwarzenegger's Trench retorts—cue riotous laughter—"We all do." As well as mediating and displacing, these quips seek to deflect anxieties about ageing by making light of it. The unconscious acknowledgement of the significance of vehicles for aged action star bodies lies in Church's collection of an airport courtesy car during the climactic battle in the second film.

Trench rips off the door to get in, signalling its inadequacy but also his anxious need to ‘re-masculinise’ both the vehicle and himself. Church correspondingly breaks off his door, as the two men’s oversized guns further compensate for their diminished vehicular transport... and star bodies.

An intimate association with guns and explosions is an established part of the 1980s action star toolkit, but their size and significance in *The Expendables* is inversely figured, as Tasker (2014) similarly recognises. The aged action stars’ oversized guns are no longer indicative or representative of ‘muscularity’, as they are in *Predator* and *First Blood: Part II*, but have become compensatory, dwarfing the now hidden ‘hard body’ in *The Expendables*, *Rambo* and *The Last Stand*.⁵ No longer appendages—an extension of the star’s muscled body and power—the weapons now serve (much as the younger star bodies do) to distract our attention from the concealment of the ageing star bodies, while still delivering the requisite ‘muscular’ apparatus of action cinema that Jennifer Baker (2009, cited in Holmlund, 2014) describes. Such distraction is apparent in the opening of the second *Expendables* when the crew rescue Trench from bound restraints, averting his imminent torture in order to, it seems, fetishize a vehicular and weaponry spectacle. Trench immediately (and somewhat anxiously) announces, “I need a gun. Something big.” Yet even this absence (or, at least, de-emphasising) in *The Expendables* of the masochistic and tortuous bodily suffering typically endured by the ‘hard-bodied’ 1980s action star/protagonist, which Holmlund (2014) cannily observes, signals the stars’ collective redundancy. This suffering of the muscled male body, contorted in beautiful agony and pain, is exemplified in Rambo’s torture and repeated electrocution by a sadistic Russian officer in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and in McClane’s barefoot run across shattered glass in *Die Hard*. Although Stallone is badly beaten in each *Expendables*, the reticence to linger any more upon the aged action body-in-suffering—particularly in a post-9/11 cinematic period typically considered to hold increased representations of torture (Aston & Walliss, 2013)—perhaps finally concedes that it has exceeded its use-by date. Geri-action does not want to show—seemingly assuming audiences no longer desire to see, much less gaze upon—the aged action body endure suffering, precisely because it would reveal its ‘agedness’ too readily, and thereby confirm the generic redundancy so anxiously disavowed.⁶ After all, what is the ‘hard bodied’ action star if his ‘hard body’ is concealed and its spectacularity, even in suffering, wholly displaced?

Conclusion

The geri-action revivals of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger seek to resist and even disavow age and expiration, but in so doing they announce the redundancy of hypermasculine 1980s action star and genre alike. Despite its early, though now intermittent, success, the revival represents and registers the symbolic physical and generic exhaustion of a particular type of star and genre. Although their star labours continue to extend their star lives and defy redundancy, Stallone and Schwarzenegger paradoxically admit this redundancy through ever-greater—but patently more anxious—hypermasculine efforts, attempting to deflect attention from ageing bodies and onto ever more, larger and affected guns, vehicles, explosions and younger action bodies. The 1980s action stars endure, and will do so as long as we watch their films, but endure only tenuously now as action stars and performers. This lament is perhaps admitted at the end of *The Expendables 3*, as Christmas tells Barney that he is watching the young/new members of the Expendables crew perform karaoke like a ‘demented father’. It is as if Stallone finally acknowledges the approaching end, and his failing powers of endurance, as he watches immobile from the bar as his progeny perform Neil Young’s “Old man”, singing of *their* present and *his* past: “Old man, look at my life/I’m a lot like you were”. This shift is further evident in *Creed* (Coogler, 2015), a *Rocky* spin-off, in which Stallone not only assumes the ancillary role of the boxing trainer, but is persistently portrayed as vulnerable and aged, mourning for his lost family and suffering from cancer.⁷ In their seeming resuscitation then, the ‘hard bodied’ action stars and the 1980s action subgenre they represent move inexorably towards a conjoined use-by date. Their now-concealed action bodies likewise admit the redundancy of the undeniably aged 1980s action star body intimately aligned with ‘muscularity’; a conclusive, if unconscious, acknowledgement of a looming cinematic sunset. Of course, it would be mistaken to think these idols will ‘go gentle into that good night’. As the prospect of *The Expendables 4*, *Rambo: Last Blood*, and *The Legend of Conan* spectacularly, if ambivalently, attests, these ‘geriatric’ stars will tenaciously forestall redundancy for some time yet.

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EndNotes

¹ *RED* also includes other action star ‘becomings’, including Helen Mirren playing a former KGB assassin.

² A similar phenomenon is also apparent in 1970s French cinema.

³ Only the acclaimed recent *Rocky* spin-off, *Creed* (Coogler, 2015), the first of the series that Stallone neither writes nor directs, fully examines the frailty and mortality of character and star alike.

⁴ Ramaeker (2014, p.49) also observes how Stallone’s use of more dispersed crosscutting in the climactic battle in *Rambo* (2008) positions the aged Rambo as one amongst a team of mercenaries rather than a lone warrior.

⁵ This is despite, for example, the enhanced physical size that Tasker (2014) observes in Stallone’s most recent incarnations.

⁶ This waning capacity is possibly admitted at the close of *The Expendables 2*, as Vilain couches his final fight with Barney, when it seems he is easily besting the older man, in cultural-economic terms—“I want my money’s worth!”—that mirror the supposedly unremitting audience’s desire for spectacular action.

⁷ Stallone’s performance in the film garnered an Academy Award nomination and Golden Globe win for Best Supporting Actor.

Author

Glen Donnar is a Lecturer in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. He has published diversely on popular cultural representations of masculinities, terror, monstrosity and disaster in American film and television, including on 9/11 and the Great Recession in action, horror and post-apocalyptic film.
