Excursions

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Hard Bodies and Sidelong Looks:

Spectacle and Fetish in 1980s Action Cinema

"It is the ultimate achievement of ideology to become so ubiquitous
as to become almost ungraspable, to become part of the conceptual
air we breathe; and, as a result, hard to recognise for what it really is."
   - Geoff King[1]

"The way [entertainment] presents itself is as [a] perfect form of self-mystification… It tells us that it is not doing anything except what we already
know it to be doing, and because we know there is… no need to find out."
   - Andrew Britton[2]

The mass-produced Hollywood hero has always been a heavily coded symbol, a metonym for the preoccupations of American (and sometimes global) socio-political culture. The figure of the hero in popular cinema, his degree of embodied physicality, his power to impact on the world, his political stance, his relation to women, his version of masculine sexuality and affect, can all be read as markers of his context. And this heroic specificity has seldom been more evident than in the sea change that swept Hollywood production between the 1970s and the 1980s.

The 1970s were a confusing time for American self-perception. Feminism, the struggle for civil rights and the Stonewall gay liberation movement formed a combined challenge to the largely unquestioned dominance of white heteronormative masculinity. The Watergate scandal that peaked in 1974 shook the nation's faith in the moral rectitude of its leadership: corruption reached all the way to the top. Added to this was the 1975 surrender of Saigon, the first time America had failed to be tactically successful and morally superior in a martial situation. Losing the war did

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1 Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2000), p. 12.

2 Andrew Britton, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment," *Movie*, nos. 31/32 (Winter 1986), 1–42, p. 6.

not make sense in terms of the country's view of itself or the national myths that held it together. According to Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, "the period of the 'post-Vietnam war syndrome' was categorised by national self-doubt, military vacillation and a failure of will." [3]

From *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) to *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *The Deerhunter* (1978), these moral fatigues and complications ushered in an era of traumatised and ambiguous mainstream Hollywood heroes, problematic versions of American masculinity that greatly complexified a national manhood often boiled down to the gung-ho authority of John Wayne or the smooth insouciance of Cary Grant. Vietnam and Watergate, Robin Wood writes, "did not undermine confidence merely in a single government, but in the entire dominant ideology, centred on patriarchal law; the crisis in ideological confidence…[called] into question the authority not only of the symbolic fathers… but of the internalised 'father'…, the guarantor of our conformity to the established societal norms"[4]. Troubled, elusive, tortured, violent and unreliable heroes were a symptom of this new questioning of institutionalised patriarchal authority.

But this brief detour into uncharted waters did not last. In 1980 the former actor Ronald Reagan won his first election; in 1982 the film *First Blood*, directed by Ted Kotcheff and starring upcoming actor Sylvester Stallone, initiated a new process of recuperation in the figure of the hero. That film is, ironically, a vicious indictment of the treatment of veterans and saturated with anti-war sentiment; nonetheless it unleashed Rambo on America, and by 1985, with the Reagan years well underway, the character had become an iconic by-word for American toughness, his bulging body, oiled biceps and naively sincere moral stance becoming unbeatable on an ever-widening global battlefield.

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3 Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), p. 200.

4 Robin Wood. '80s Hollywood: Dominant Tendencies'. *CineAction!* vol. 1, no. 1, (1985), 2-5, p. 1.

This is a time when action cinema, which is to say films centred on tough male characters performing heroic and morally impressive feats, crept out of the B-movie backwater and gained blockbuster status. Their budgets increased and their actors scaled the dizzy heights of superstardom. These new heroes marked the first time the male body was displayed onscreen in major productions with such alacrity, becoming a commodity in itself. That body was altered to suit the films, becoming larger, harder, more muscular, more pumped up, influenced by the newly mainstream sport of bodybuilding. This was a golden era for action cinema: it seemed that each film was bigger, better and louder. Box office takings went through the roof.

As the Reagan era progressed Stallone was joined by Arnold Schwarzenegger, that other avatar of superhuman masculine hardness, and then later by less excessively muscular heroes like Bruce Willis and Mel Gibson, who tempered the pumped up bodies with wisecracks and intermittent displays of vulnerability. Indeed, the effects of Rambo can be read in *Die Hard* (1988): Bruce Willis as John McClane is less impervious to pain, physically smaller, far more vulnerable, believable, naturalistic and even likeable than his predecessor, although he still boasts a muscular body and impressive toughness. McClane can feel pain, experience romantic attachment, risk failure and exhibit weakness. The film opens with a close-up of his hand grasping the seat rest of an airplane chair, then pans up to his tense face. His neighbour, noticing the clenched hand, initiates a conversation about how to deal with fear of flying. McClane is introduced to the viewer as flawed and fallible; only when he stands and the startled commuter sees his gun do we find out that he's a cop. He does not need to be an unyielding superhuman hero: Rambo has already legitimised the excessively heroic archetype and re-established its place in the cultural language, so other heroic figures can draw on it without adopting it wholesale.

The 1980s action hero is a marker of social change. "Reagan did not 'cause' the revolution," Susan Jeffords writes; "rather the circumstances made it possible for him to stand at the head of a changing social and political situation".[5] Both Reagan and Hollywood "participated in a radical shift away from the attitudes, public policies and national concerns that characterised the late 1970s".[6] This revolution entailed a remilitarisation of American society and a redefinition of what masculinity, central to notions of America, could mean. The revival of the hero in Hollywood paved the way for the end of ambiguity and "allowed an affirmative vision to be deployed by conservatives of the sort that liberals seemed at this time incapable of generating".[7]

Reagan reappropriated the nation's mythic history by engaging with cultural tradition. He created himself 'President-as-sheriff', drawing on what Jacques Ranciere calls the dominant fictions prevalent in Hollywood to back up this return to what was posited as 'traditional' American masculinity, drawing on a long mythical history from Wild West narratives onwards that emphasised masculine strength, independence, agency and maverick status. Reagan the former screen star relied heavily on popular culture as metaphor and inspiration, from naming his space defence system 'Star Wars' and referring to his country as the "A-Team among nations" after the popular television show[8] to telling a press conference after the release of hostages from Lebanon, "I saw *Rambo* last night. Now I know what to do the next time this happens".[9] He became the "premiere masculine archetype for the 1980s, embodying both national and individual images of manliness".[10]

Hypermasculine Reaganite politics and the social and moral changes they engendered, then, were the setting for the spectacular rise in popularity that energised action cinema in the

5 Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994), p. 5.

6 Ibid., p. 15.

7 Kellner and Ryan, p. 219.

8 Jeffords, p. 2.

9 Ibid., p. 28.

10 Ibid., p. 11.

1980s, but the embodied portrayal of those films' lead characters was never straightforward. These bodies were necessary to inculcate the 'new' or revitalised masculine ideal but their visuality, the presentation of male physicality as the object of to-be-looked-at-ness, was saddled with a set of concurrent ideological implications and complications. As action films went from B-movies to blockbusters the spectacular male body was brought firmly out of the shadows, with repeated lingering looks at naked skin, sweaty limbs and sculpted torsos becoming a staple in the biggest of budgets. How did this increased masculine embodied visibility intersect with what is often called the voyeuristic pleasure of viewing spectacular cinema?

Man trouble

The public discourse of the Reagan era centred around narratives of recovery: as the man himself said in his farewell address in 1989, "There are two things that I'm proudest of. One is the economic recovery… The other is the recovery of our morale. America is respected again in the world."[11] It is this recovery that interests me, this recuperation, this reintegration of the heroic figure from the questioning, doubtful days of the best-known films of the 1970s to the usually unambiguously positive status of the 1980s.

There are, of course, occasions when the 1980s hero evinces a degree of complexity or doubt. Mel Gibson as Riggs in *Lethal Weapon* (1987), for example, is notorious among his colleagues for being "crazy" and "out of control"; however this self-destructive tendency is only a response to the murder of his wife. He is rehabilitated by his contact with his partner Murtaugh (Danny Glover), who permits him entry by association into a secure and wholesome nuclear family grouping. Riggs' pathology is thus coded as socially acceptable and heteronormative, both in its reason and in its recovery. Rather than being "nuts" or

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11 Ibid., p. 3.

otherwise deficient he is exhibiting an entirely explicable and even heroic response to a trauma, behaving in a gender appropriate fashion rather than exhibiting the internal conflicts and unreliabilities common to men in films from the previous decade.

This decomplexifying of the hero is not to suggest that the 1980s marked, as is sometimes claimed, some specific 'crisis in masculinity'. In his exhaustive survey *Manhood in America* (1996) Michael Kimmel examines the conflicts and contradictions that have long plagued American masculinity, even in eras that expressed them less directly. "Anxiety and insecurity… have always accompanied men's assertions of virility," says Lynn Segal.[12] According to Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim, "Masculinity [in films] is marked, time and again, as delicate, fragile, provisional; it is under threat, in danger of collapse; it is an impossible ideal."[13] Gender is *always* troubled, *always* a category in flux, unstable and subject to constant renegotiation; the reclamation of the troubled protagonist of the 1970s by the hard-bodied hero of the 1980s is just one more step in this constant social and ideological interplay around masculinity.

Whether or not one subscribes to Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic architecture of cinema it seems a commonsense assumption that an audience accustomed to viewing one particular type of body – the sexualised feminine – as the legitimate object of a desiring gaze will encounter certain difficulties when a new type of body is inserted into that position, particularly when the body in question is one that has not been ideologically constructed as a desired object. Christian Metz writes, "The cinematic institution is not just the cinema industry… it is also the mental machinery – another industry – which spectators 'accustomed to the cinema' have internalised historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of films."[14] Until the rise of action cinema Hollywood's visual focus on bodies had tended

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12 Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London: Virago, 1990), p. xx.

13 Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin, eds , *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), p. 11.

14 Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1982), p. 7.

largely toward the female, educating the frequent viewer into a specific response to bodily depiction onscreen. Action cinema thus required alterations to this internal apparatus; new strategies in looking developed within the syntax of the genre.

Pleasure in looking

Numerous critics have pointed out the tendency of certain types of film to break down the female body into components. In *film noir*, for example, the *femme fatale* is often shot from the feet up with particular focus on specifically sexualised parts of her body: the throat, the legs, the eyes.[15] But this compartmentalisation of the physical is by no means restricted to the female form; action cinema consistently indulges in a similar visual game, although with different consequences. In the opening sequence of *Predator* (1987), Dutch (Schwarzenegger) encounters his old friend Dillon (Carl Weathers). The pair lock fists in a manly greeting and the camera focuses close up on their clasped arms, black bicep and white bicep bulging, sweat-sheened, filling the frame. Similarly in the opening focus on Schwarzenegger in *Commando* (1985), the camera trails slowly down his bulging bicep, tracing a pumped-up vein and caressing its contours. In *noir* the visual focus on sexualised body parts tells the viewer that this is an eroticised character while in *Predator* and *Commando* the focus on muscularity informs us that we are seeing an effective body, a body which – like the *femme fatale*'s – *defines* the character. These lingering, loving close-ups on biceps and muscles suggest agency and power in a way that a focus on a female throat or thigh or breast never could.

With all its saturated focus on the hard body, what action cinema explicitly avoids is an eroticisation of a male physique that could be too easily read as one constructed for

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15 Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir'. E. Anne Kaplan (ed), *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998).

voyeuristic pleasing in viewing. Our introduction to Riggs in *Lethal Weapon* is a case in point. We first encounter him naked on his bed. We see his built-up torso before he heads to the refrigerator to get a beer, providing the viewer with an unobstructed panorama of his naked back and buttocks. The potential sexualisation of this scene is mitigated, however, by the camera's behaviour. There is no camera movement within the shot. Riggs' body is not broken up into component parts; in fact it is not broken up at all. The camera stays entirely steady, focused on the TV rather than tracking his progress, not forcing the viewer to focus on the naked male body, permitting the character to move through the shot with unfettered agency. This visually codes the casualness with which the audience is expected to read his nakedness: rather than being titillating it is presented as a marker of the character's two essential traits, his physical effectiveness and his unorthodox behaviour. In fact his very nakedness operates as a sort of screen, fending off sexualisation. If this were an erotic body it would be treated erotically; the camera's stubborn refusal to operate within the codes of Hollywood desire actually alleviates and suborns the depiction of Mel Gibson naked. This body, despite its nakedness, is holistic, whole and functional rather than sexual. Handling the bodies of the two genders with such differing codes of representation is one strategy that Hollywood film uses to permit the viewer, with his or her already internalised cinematic apparatus trained to read the camera's behaviour, disavow the possibility of an erotic gaze at the male.[16]

Another mechanism for bypassing the possible complications inherent in constructing a spectacular male body as the object of the gaze is displacement, where the audience is presented with an alternate gaze that can take the place of our own desiring look. At the start

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[16] This paper does not engage with questions about the position of the heterosexual female spectator, whose pleasure in looking at the male body is ostensibly legitimate. However the fact that the sexualised on-screen object is not generally in a position of power/agency within Hollywood's traditional codes suggest that the female spectator does not enjoy an equivalent but opposite viewing position to the male. Additionally, these films are marketed to a young male audience; feminist, queer and otherwise subversive readings are entirely possible but are not inherent in the cinematic ideology of the genre.

of *Terminator 2* (1991), Schwarzenegger lands in the 'present' amid thunderclaps and lightning. His body is posed in a classically athletic position, carefully lit to flaunt his musculature. The camera pulls back as he walks into a nearby bar and we see him from behind, naked buttocks displayed. Within the bar, responses to his entrance vary. The men size him up as a threat but the women gaze in lust-soaked astonishment. We see female patrons appraise his body approvingly and a waitress stare in the direction of his genitals with something approaching awe. We can disavow our interested gaze because we have someone to project it onto; their desiring looks replace our own, leaving us free to gape at the spectacular body without crossing taboo lines of gender or homosocial engagement.

The opening sequence of *Die Hard* uses the same strategy. As McClane makes his way down the plane's aisle the camera focuses on the appraising and approving look he is given by a young and beautiful air hostess. The audience is being effectively told that this is a desirable erotic object but that they do not need to engage with him as such because the film is peopled with women onto whom desire can be displaced. There is a similar moment in *Rambo III* (1988) when an Afghani woman in a burqua gazes at Rambo as he enters her village. Although only her eyes are seen, they "clearly do not show distaste, fear or repulsion, but instead interest, possibly admiration, at the least fascination."[17] Like the on-screen gaze that allows the viewer to disavow erotic interest in the heroic body, this look tells the viewer how to respond, using the mechanism of projection.

Rambo II (1985) uses narrative focus on the importance of the hero's inner life to temper its visual attention to his physique. In *First Blood*, the first film in the series, Rambo's handler and mentor Colonel Trautman (Richard Crenna) arrives in the small town his protégé is terrorising. He tells the local police force, "God didn't make Rambo. I made him," emphasizing the character's lack of autonomy and mental acuity. Local sheriff Will Teasle

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17 Jeffords, p. 47.

(Brian Dennehy) responds to Trautman's intervention, "You came out here to find out why one of your machines blew a gasket." Yet by Rambo *II* – just three years later – the character is laying claim to a reliance on the intellect he was sorely lacking in his first incarnation. The film opens with Rambo being shown the high-tech equipment the government has brought in to assist him. He responds, Zen-like, "I've always believed that the mind is the best weapon," laying claim to a reliance on the intellect that has no relation to the character we encountered in the first film. Gregory Waller points out, "For all the narcissistic attention it bestows on his well-honed, unexpendable body, the film, in fact, accords the greatest number of close-ups to Rambo's face and alert eyes – windows not to the soul but to the 'mind' within."[18] In *Rambo III* Trautman regales his charge with the parable of a sculptor who, rather than creating anything, released the statue trapped in a block of stone: "We didn't make you, Johnny. We just taught you to be what you already were." This scene serves to finally de-emphasize Rambo's constructedness, giving him free will and internal agency and making a permanent break from the troubled youth of *First Blood*. The appeal of gazing at his hard body can be disavowed by virtue of the constant reiteration of the importance of his mind.

The matter of bodies

The question that needs to be asked here is why. Why, when there are so clearly strategies needed for avoiding the wrong type of looking at the spectacular male body, does that body reappear so frequently in mainstream action cinema of the 1980s? In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* Slavoj Žižek offers Hollywood's collusion with the Bush regime in thinking up anti-terror strategies after 9/11 as the "ultimate empirical proof that Hollywood does in fact function as an 'ideological state apparatus'".[19] This may be a Žižekianism too far

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18 Gregory Waller, '*Rambo*: Getting to Win This Time.' Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (eds). *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997), p. 121.

19 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 16.

for some readers; nevertheless, it would difficult to argue the point that low culture big budget Hollywood production both echoes and informs the concerns of the dominant hegemony.

Kaja Silverman says, "If ideology is central to the maintenance of classic masculinity, the affirmation of classic masculinity is equally central to the maintenance of our governing 'reality.'"[20] The ideological project of the Reagan years is, as we have seen, recovery: recovery from the ambiguities of earlier eras, recovery from the moral and economic turpitude that ushered the decade in; and this recovery is predicated on the construction of a new, or rather reclaimed, masculinity, one that requires the effects of the spectacular body to make its point to the audience. These bodies *do* matter; they are ideological texts, blueprints for the dominant fiction's version of white American manhood and, concurrently, of America. The discomforts and broken taboos that may be a side effect of the public screening of the male body-as-spectacle are acceptable within a consideration of what that screening performs, what it suggests to the culture about itself.

"The spectacle," writes Guy DeBord, "is ideology par excellence."[21] With the increase in budget attendant on the blockbuster phenomenon, the spectacularity of action cinema increased exponentially. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault wrote that the spectacle of the scaffold, of punishment written on the martyred body of the criminal, serves to entrench the rule of the dominant power.[22] Likewise, on the spectacular body of the action hero is written the 'truth' of the dominant fiction, which is to say the 'truth' of the moral certainty, indomitable strength and all-around good guy-ness of the heroic figure as metonym and signifier of America, a role he has played since the founding frontier myths first sent lone crusaders off to conquer the nation's hinterlands.

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20 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 16.

21 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. (Michigan: Black and Red, 1983), p. 215.

22 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).

Historian George Mosse says that visibility "is the key mode of national identity formation… It is how citizens *see* themselves and how they *see* those against whom they define themselves that determines national self-perception."[23] This nexus of visibility is twofold: first, it allows the subject to define him or herself, creating both racism (what I see is *not* me) and patriotism (what I see *is* me), and second it is the mode of transmission of the spectacle, "the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue. [Spectacle] is the self-portrait of power."[24]

How, then, do these spectacular bodies operate as a means of fomenting national identity and unity behaviours? To paraphrase Freud, the fetishist is a subject who knows that the mother lacks a penis but has found a way to get around that distressing knowledge. By overvaluing the fetish into a sexual object with the importance of the absent maternal phallus, the subject manages to know and yet at the same time not know, which is to say disavow, that the mother's penis is missing. Extending this perversion from individual to culture, the fetishised on-screen object permits us to disavow distressing knowledge or knowledge that would be threatening to the harmonious status quo. Just as awareness of the lack of the maternal phallus threatens the child with the possibility of his own castration, so certain types of knowledge threaten to destabilise the dominant fiction behind the hegemonic system or at the very least expose it as questionable, not precluding doubt, not omnipotent, not protected by what Bills Nichols calls the unshakeable "obviousness" of ideology.[25]

Disavowal, say Laplanche and Pontalis, is "a primal defence mechanism for dealing with external reality."[26] In this sense the radically overdetermined heroic male body is in itself a fetish. The viewer sees this strong image of potent heterosexual white American

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23 George Mosse, quoted in Jeffords, p. 6.

24 Debord, p. 24.

25 Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema And Other Media* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 2.

26 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. (London: Karnac Books, 1988), p. 119.

manhood and through it can disavow knowledge of any weakness, uncertainty, indistinctness or doubt that may have been attendant on pre-Reaganite versions of the masculine heroic. Action cinema gifts the American spectator with the enlivening possibility of disavowing both the potential of fragility in the body politic and the unpleasant, perhaps frightening, awareness of the weakness of his or her own body and its failure to match the American ideal.

According to Kaja Silverman, "Whereas the Freudian account of that psychic mechanism [of disavowal] explicitly posits it as a male defence against *female* lack, 'Fetishism' implicitly shows it to be a defence against what in the final analysis is *male* lack… the castration against which the male subject protects himself through disavowal and fetishism must be his own."[27] These cinematic bodies, which on an ideological level strive to reassure their audience as to the solidity of the white male experience, also point out the beleaguered insecurity of that masculinity. Their excess reveals anxiety. "Because it attempts to disavow the evidence of the senses," Metz writes, "the fetish is evidence that this evidence has indeed been recorded… The fetish is not inaugurated because the child believes its mother still has a penis… for [then] it would no longer need the fetish."[28] Similarly, according to Kellner and Ryan, "The necessity of ideology testifies to something amiss within society, since a society that was not threatened would not need ideological defences."[29] Action cinema's fascinated gaze at the spectacular heroic body signifies a deeper concern, the possibility that the hegemony may be weak, that the power here glorified may be illusory and transient.

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27 Silverman, p. 46.

28 Metz, p. 76.

29 Kellner and Ryan, p.14.

Bodily functions

Body-as-fetish thus permits disavowal of ideologically unsound awareness but at the same time body-as-fetish subverts certain ideologically crucial behaviours, creating the complex knot of looking, pleasure-in-looking and disavowal-of-looking seen in the cinematic machinations I discussed above. Torn between the need to disavow hegemonic male weakness and the taboo against viewing the male body as a particular sort of erotic object, action cinema often becomes hysterical, overcompensating for the disagreement between these antagonistic desires.

Steve Neale, attempting to map Mulvey's theory onto films in which the male body is the primary visual focus, discusses her association of the voyeuristic gaze with sadism and thus action. "War films, Westerns and gangster movies," he writes, "…are all marked by 'action', by 'making something happen'… All of which implies that male figures on the screen are subject to voyeuristic looking."[30] The question here is how the films deal with the discomfort of this male body-as-object-of-gaze. Neale continues, "The anxious 'aspects' of the look at the male… are embodied and allayed not just by playing out the sadism inherent in voyeurism through scenes of violence and combat, but also… by stopping the narrative in order to recognise the pleasures of display, but displacing it in the overall components of a highly ritualised scene."[31] Here we see another method of mitigating the discomforting gaze. The look at the male body is justified by bringing out the sadistic elements of voyeurism – the physical torment experienced by the hero – and also by providing the viewer with a spectacle at which the look can be aimed so that it no longer needs to acknowledge that it is looking at that problematic male body. Explosions, gun fights, car chases, fires, crashes and

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30 Stephen Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle'. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 9-20, p. 16.

31 Ibid., p. 17.

similar striking set pieces are the staple diet of action cinema. From McClane dropping a bag of explosives down the lift shaft of the Nakatomi Plaza to the Terminator blowing up a truck full of liquid nitrogen in *Terminator 2*, action cinema is built on spectacle, and not just the spectacle of the heroic body. These explosive devices permit the viewer to look somewhere other than at the body whilst still seeing that body. This conception, of something looked at in order to avoid looking at something else, parallels again the construction of the fetish - "I know but I do not know" - which implies that, when it comes to action cinema, *spectacle is fetish*.

Thus there are two forms of the fetish in operation. If the muscular body must be presented onscreen to facilitate the disavowal of knowledge that white masculinity and thus the authority it stands for can be anything other than infallible, then the films must provide sufficient (fetishist) spectacle that the voyeuristic gaze at a potentially eroticised body can also be disavowed. We are not watching Rambo, we are watching *the effects of his actions*; we need not engage with his physicality because, impressive as it is, we are permitted to treat it as a facilitator for the action. That this is a defence, a denial, a disavowal is clear in the excess elicited by the displayed male body. The torture scene in *Lethal Weapon*, for example, sees Riggs electrocuted, tormented, covered in blood, convulsing and screaming. His naked torso on display is irrelevant, a by-product of narrative necessity; yet in a similar scene his black partner/sidekick Murtaugh, precluded from genuine heroic status by his race, wears a vest throughout, avoiding that bodily display that is intrinsic to Riggs' ideological functionality.

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Action cinema in the 1980s succeeds to a degree in its project to legitimise and normalise the heroic figure, and consequently the masculinity he embodies; but it also creates new anxieties about what that masculinity means. It presents us with an apparently coherent vision of what mythic American manhood should be but insists on ignoring the contradictions that lurk beneath this serene surface. The fear of loss of individuality through economic and technological progression, the threats presented by the visibility of women and non-white people, antipathy towards the Soviet Union and the enemies of the Reagan state: all of these concerns are dealt with by creating an invincible onscreen ideal who progresses and grows along with the Reagan era and its much-vaunted recovery. The hero is given new life so that he can counter the difficulties facing white heterosexual masculinity as a signifier for American-ness; but while one set of anxieties is stilled, another is created. Action films present the viewer with an unambiguous hero who can withstand the attacks of feminism, political corruption, military failure and racial turmoil and walk out of the burning building with a wry grin on his face but the cinematic depiction of this hero unsettles established conventions of gender portrayal, leading to even more upheaval.

The hero's hard body signifies the dominance of the society he stands for, but the only means of establishing this admirable physicality is by placing the heroic body in the to-be-looked-at position usually reserved for the female body. The films negotiate a series of uncomfortable compromises that permit the viewer to get away with seeing only the ideological meanings of that body, but nonetheless camp and subversive pleasures-in-looking seep through and upset the careful hegemonic balance that Hollywood attempts to strike. These movies, notable especially for their enormous commercial success and for following strict generic conventions, appear to be the perfect products of a secure system. But closer examination has proved that behind their apparent coherence lurk instability, insecurity, and trouble. That the issue of the dominant ideology cannot help but be so flawed, so reductive,

so secretly dangerous, indicates the very systemic vulnerability that Hollywood, as an ideological state apparatus, attempts to counter. The strong, impenetrable hero stands upon an uncertain ground made up of disavowed dramas and abjected outsiders; the masculinity that he embodies remains, despite the best efforts of the cinematic system and the pervasive ideologies of America, a category in crisis, wed to its fundamental instabilities.

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