Chapter 10
Rehabilitating Hegemonic Masculinity With the Bodies of Aging Action Heroes

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ABSTRACT

The aging action hero has become an important figure in post-millennial action cinema. Its significance can be seen in how aging heroes can be seen in such franchises like The Expendables (2009 – 2013), Taken (2008 – 2014), The Fast and the Furious (2001 – 2017), Mission Impossible (1995 – 2018), and James Bond (2006 – 2015). In the following chapter, it is argued that the aging action hero and the aging male body is significant because they provide an opportunity to rehabilitate the tropes of hegemonic masculinity and the indestructible male body by emphasizing the benefits of the aging male body and where male toxicity is replaced by wisdom and maturity; egocentricity is replaced by allocentrism. As a result, the presence of the aging hero shows the dynamism of action cinema in offering different and alternative visions of heroism and heroes.

BACKGROUND

The aging hero has become an important figure in post-millennial action films (Boyle & Brayton, 2012). This is significant because the idea of heroic masculinity tends to be associated with an image of young or matured men as its personification and not with aging or middle-aged men (Gates, 2010). If nothing else, the stories of Hercules and Achilles suggest that youthfulness, virility and physical prowess...
all play a role in shaping our ideas about heroic masculinity. Therefore, it can be jarring to see middle-aged or greying actors continuing to play the role of a virile and vigorous action hero. But then again, it should not come as a surprise because (a) action films tend to generate a lot of money at the box office, and (b) men generally have a longer time span as leading men (Terry, Butler & Armond, 2011, p. 145). But more importantly, so long as the actor continues to be bankable at the box office, their positions as action heroes remain secure. But put aside the idea that the studio executives and Hollywood filmmakers are a capricious bunch of people who are only interested in profit and money, it may occur to the viewer that under the right and appropriate conditions, that casting older actors and allowing them to explore the issue of ageing can ameliorate some of the negative tendencies of action cinema; particularly the toxic representation of maleness and masculinity of action heroes. That is because the heroic figure “requires us to recognize, for example, that the hero is inherently an overcoded image: he bears meanings about justice, morality, and law, and about being a man, in the same layered iconography” (Sparks, 1996, p. 354).

So while it is an oft-repeated claim that Hollywood is a young person’s game (Jermyn, 2012), the reception and box office records of big-budget action franchises such as *The Expendables* (2009 – 2013), *Taken* (2008 – 2014), *The Fast and The Furious* (2001 – 2017), *Mission Impossible* (1995 – 2018) and Daniel Craig’s *James Bond* (2006 – 2015) strongly suggest that audiences are not only attracted to action films, but that they do not mind that men of a certain age continue to play action heroes. But while some may conclude that the reason older male actors continue to be cast in blockbuster films is because of sexism and ageism (Erigha, 2015), such a perspective may overlook the benefits of such a phenomenon. While gender inequality does exist in Hollywood and it is an important issue, it is perhaps timely to pull back and adopt a more conciliatory tone in looking at the positive aspects of the aging action hero and how aging engender certain positives changes in the genre.

But what are these changes? Firstly, the issue of age gives filmmakers and actors, if they so choose to embrace it, an opportunity to critically examine the myths of the action hero. Second, it allows the older actor to re-examine some of the assumptions of his younger action persona. Third, it gives the viewer an opportunity to watch and experience the development of both the actor and his action persona as they age on screen. While wider cultural pressures might be the cause of such changes, the reality is that the leading men of Hollywood like Tom Cruise, Vin Diesel, Sylvester Stallone, Liam Neeson, and Daniel Craig are also growing older in real life. And while some actors are not able to maintain their relevance and currency with audiences, it does not mean that age cannot be used in a productive way to advance the narrative of the male action hero (King, 2010).
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