



# Gender and Action Films 1980-2000

**Beauty in Motion**

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Edited by

**Steven Gerrard**

**Renée Middlemost**

EMERALD STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER

# **Gender and Action Films 1980–2000**

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# **Gender and Action Films 1980–2000: Beauty in Motion**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Steven Gerrard

*I love Action Movies. I saw First Blood when my gran hired a VHS player from our local electrical store. The film was a pirated copy, and through the haze and grit of the print I saw the underdog Rambo for the first time:*

*I still love that movie. Since then, I have watched countless action films: some bad, some good, some brilliant. I therefore dedicate this book to three groups: the stars and production personnel of Action Cinema who have entertained me; my friends Griff, Klause, Doctor M, and Rob Shail for supplying me with cheap, fizzy lager for many a year; and, finally to my folks Viv and Ann, the John J. Rambo and Ellen Ripley of the South Wales Valleys.*

Renée Middlemost

*To Dad and Az, possibly the biggest action fans I've ever met. You inspired my work on this project, and my love of action escapism.*

*And Andrew and Sam, who are always willing to sit through another slightly mad movie choice. Big love to you all for your constant support.*

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**Lee Broughton** is a Freelance Writer, Critic, Film Programmer and Lecturer in film and cultural studies. He is the author of *The Euro-Western: Reframing Gender, Race and the 'Other' in Film* (2016) and the editor of *Critical Perspectives on the Western: From a Fistful of Dollars to Django Unchained* (2016) and *Reframing Cult Westerns: From the Magnificent Seven to the Hateful Eight* (2020). Lee edits the *Current Thinking on the Western* blog on-line and is the convenor of the International Scholars of the Western Network. His research interests include the Western, horror films, urban action films and cult movies more generally.

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**Steven Gerrard** is Reader of Film at Northern Film School, Leeds School of Arts, Leeds Beckett University. He has written monographs about *The Carry on Films* (Palgrave-MacMillan) and *The Modern British Horror Film* (Rutgers University Press). He is co-editor for Emerald Publishing's *Gender in Contemporary Horror* series, and editor of *From Blofeld to Moneypenny: Gender in James Bond*. He was instigator and co-editor of *Crank It Up: Jason Statham – Star!* (Manchester University Press). Steve would love to be either *Status Quo*'s rhythm guitarist or the new *Doctor Who*. He'll have a long wait.

**Racheal Harris** is a PhD candidate at Deakin University. She completed her Bachelor of Historical Inquiry and Practice, Bachelor of Arts (Hons) and Master of Arts at the University of New England (Australia). Racheal has contributed to several edited collections on popular culture, including chapters on theological concepts in James Cameron's Terminator franchise, resurrection motifs in the music of Prince and folklore in the CW series *Supernatural*.

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been writing about the *Mad Max* films for over 20 years. Her interests include writing and rhetoric (academic writing, creative nonfiction, print and digital magazines), Australian literature, film and popular culture (including popular music) and street narratives (from masculine car cultures to street cultures more generally), and she is interested in walking narratives and the flâneur. Her first book about Australian magazine editors and about disruption of the media and traditional magazine journalism, entitled *Queens of Print*, was published by Australian Scholarly Publishing in 2019. She also conducts research about the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

**Chin-Pang Lei** graduated from the Department of Journalism at the Chengchi University in Taiwan and earned his PhD in Media and Cultural Studies from the University of Sussex in England. He is now an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Macau, and a columnist for several media in Hong Kong and Taiwan. His research interests are Chinese films, popular culture, star studies and urban space. His articles have been published by academic journals such as *Asian Journal of Communication* and *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. He is also the author of the monographs (in Chinese) 隱形澳門: 被忽視的城市與文化 [Invisible Macau: the Ignored City and Culture] and 夢伴此城: 梅艷芳與香港流行文化 [Dream and the City: Anita Mui and Hong Kong Pop Culture].

**Renée Middlemost** is a Lecturer in Communication and Media at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her research focuses on fan participation, celebrity and popular culture, and has been featured in collections *The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema*; *Crank It Up: Jason Statham – Star!*; *Aussie Fans: Uniquely Placed in Global Popular Culture*; and *Gender and Australian Celebrity Culture*. Her recent work has been published in journals including *Celebrity Studies*, *American Behavioural Scientist*, *M/C Journal* and the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*. She is the co-founder of the Fan Studies Network Australasia and a co-editor of *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*.

**John Quinn** is a Lecturer in Screen and Performance at the University of the West of Scotland, UK. Working within the division of Arts & Media, Quinn's research explores the narratives and cultural politics of popular culture. Quinn's recent publications have explored the representation of masculinity, populism and nostalgia in popular film and television. Quinn's forthcoming publications focus on revisiting representations of masculinity in the film and television of the 1980s.

**Brennan Thomas** is an Associate Professor of English at Saint Francis University, where she directs the university's writing centre and teaches courses in composition, novel and short story writing, and Disney film studies. Her most recent scholarship is featured in the edited collections *Children and Childhood in the Works of Stephen King* (Lexington Books, 2020), *Surveilling America on Screen: Discourses on the Nostalgic Lens* (McFarland Publishers, 2021) and *Performativity of Villainy and Evil in Anglophone Literature and Media* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

**Karol Valderrama-Burgos** is an Associate Lecturer in Spanish, Literature and Culture (Education Focused) at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. Her research interests comprise Colombian and Latin American cinemas, women filmmakers and writers, decolonial thought, and representations of gender. Her work has been published and disseminated in English and Spanish, including the journal *Latin American Perspectives*, *Canaguaro. Revista de cine colombiano*, and forthcoming work with University Exeter Press and the *Journal of Romance Studies*. Her first monograph, which is currently in preparation for publication, is based on the doctoral research held at University of Leicester, which was funded by *Colciencias* (now *Minciencias*, Colombia). The monograph focuses on representations of women's silence and subordination, emancipated women in illegal armed structures, and women's desire and sexuality in contemporary Colombian cinema. She is also a member of the SLAS Committee (Society of Latin American Studies) and co-coordinates *Red Cu*, an emerging network focused on queer studies applied to Colombia and Latin America.

**Lisa Watt** is a Design Historian who has taught undergraduate and post-graduate students in the creative arts, fashion and consumption and the cultural studies field in both the United Kingdom and in Australia.

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This book would not have been possible without the encouragement, help and patience from the entire team at Emerald Publishing, especially Katy Mathers, Lydia Cutmore, Abinaya Chinnasamy and Helen Beddow who have not only encouraged us but also made our work look like it's part of Action Cinema with this wonderful cover. Both Renée and I want to thank our terrific contributors, some stepping in at the last minute, in the way that they have not only produced excellent, cutting-edge and ground-breaking work in this field, but just as importantly embraced the project.

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# Introduction

*Steven Gerrard and Renée Middlemost*

## Abstract

In this, the exciting first volume of a three-volume edited collection, you will be taken on a gender-focused adventure through action cinema's formative years. Through a series of in-depth case studies and analysis, each chapter focuses on the way that gender has been discussed in such films as the *Mad Max* franchise, sword and sorcery films, and the *Angel* trilogy. There are character case studies, including Ellen Ripley in *Aliens*, Sharon Stone in her ground-breaking work as *femme fatale*, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Keanu Reeves. We also take you on a journey through the action cinema of Wong Kar-Wai and Action Women in Colombian national cinema. The collection even takes you into the gendered dinosaur world of *Jurassic Park*. Whilst Action Cinema has often been derided, it has also been celebrated. We hope that this edited collection will make you want to revisit the action movies of the past, whilst we open them up to brand new interrogations.

*Keywords:* Action; gender; masculinity; femininity; stardom; violence

## Introduction

Welcome to this, the first in a three-volume edited collection dedicated to the portrayal of gender in Action Cinema.

Both Renée and I – editors of the collection you are now reading – love action movies. After meeting up at a conference in which we, and a friend Natasha Parcei, delivered academic papers about the British action star Jason Statham, we mulled over some ideas for a collaboration. As we sipped our dry Martinis, it seemed only natural that our discussions would gravitate towards putting together a collection of essays from like-minded contributors that focused on the portrayal of gender in Action Cinema. As fortune would have it, I had recently been involved in editing/writing about gender in horror cinema, television and trans-media for Emerald Publishing, and had done the same duties for them on a collection about James Bond. It seemed as if fate, if you believe in such things,

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was working for us. Renée and I sent out a Call for Papers and were overwhelmed by the positive response we had. Whereas we expected 20 replies, we got over 60 abstracts and expressions of interest from a wide variety of more-experienced writers, recently published authors, new academics, and those from outside the world of academia. Just as importantly, we had supportive messages that clearly showed that people in the wider academic community (and beyond) loved Action Cinema. We approached Emerald Publishing with our ideas for a three-volume collection and they agreed to produce what you now see before you.

This first volume is focused on gender portrayals in Action Cinema from the 1980s to 2000 (with *Mad Max* an exception, and one I am sure you will allow). It was decided that as *First Blood* was released in 1982, so it would be apposite to begin this series around the decade, especially since Rambo's first outing would be 40 years old when this volume is set to be published. Of course, action movies began long before *First Blood*, with epics, westerns, war movies, thrillers, *James Bond* spy capers, martial arts films, Italian peplum films, superhero outings, and many more all exhibiting some form of action sequences in them. But even though there were some bona fide action movies like *Emperor of the North Pole* (Robert Aldrich, 1973), in the main, the action sequences in these films were set pieces that the narrative had placed within them, rather than them providing the fundamental basis of the films themselves. Therefore, what you will find in the three volumes is an overriding examination of gender within the *action film* milieu and not overly focused on action sequences per se. That is not to say that action sequences will *not* be discussed. They will.

As you will see from the chapters provided here, there are some credited works that remain a staple ingredient of research into action cinema. One of arguably the most influential works cited in this collection is Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993), in which the author unravels the complexities of action films which appear on the surface to have clear pleasurable and political aspects, but underneath the veneer of explosions, car chases, and fistfights reflect and comment upon complex and shifting ideas in gendered, sexual and racial identities that occurred in Action Cinema during the 1980s. Susan Jeffords' *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994) argues that Action Cinema reflects the then-president's political policies of outward expansion, aggression, and anti-communism. With case studies including the *Rambo*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard* and *Robocop* franchises, Jeffords puts forward the idea that through analysis of such films, so the New Right in America can begin to be understood. Cohan and Hark's collection, *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (1993) examines ideas about the termination of masculinity, and masculinity as a form of masquerade. Inness' *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999) focuses on the examination of strong female characters who provide complex ways in which they break the gender 'norms' and stereotypes of the era, whilst also arguably reaffirming them.

You will see that these works were written at the time of the focus of this edited collection. But time moves on. Since then, and included here (and in the other volumes, where applicable), such notable works include (but are not limited to):

Tasker's *Action and Adventure Cinema* (2004), which focuses on the way that Action Cinema has been shaped through national culture, violence and the 'art' of cinema; Baker's *Contemporary Masculinities in Fiction, Film and Television* (2015) examines how 'masculinity' has been shaped in the post-millennial era by anxiety, loss and trauma; Brown's two works *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (2011) and *Beyond Bombshells: the New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (2015) which challenges existing theories about gender as a performance identity, questions the sexual fetishization of the female in action films, and examines the cultural importance and significance of the action heroine. Inness' work moves towards new interpretations of female action figures in the appropriately-titled, *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (2004). Funnell's work *Warrior Women: Gender, Race and the Transnational Chinese Action Star* (2014) focuses on the strong work of female action stars in martial arts films from the impact of the 1997 transfer of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule, and its impact on identities through numerous case studies of Pei Pei Cheng, Gong Li, Lucy Liu, Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi.

There has also been a focus on providing 'readers' to the action genre, where multiple approaches are discussed, and which prove invaluable to grounding research. Such work includes Pang and Wong's *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema* (2005), Purse's *Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011), and Kendrick's (2019) *A Companion to the Action Film*. There have been numerous individual Star Studies, which focus on various aspects of an action star's career. Notable examples include Holmlund's *The Ultimate Stallone Reader: Sylvester Stallone as Star, Icon, Auteur* (2014), Sean Redmond's (2021) *Starring Tom Cruise, and Gerrard and Shail's Crank It Up: Jason Statham: Star!* (2019). You will notice that these are male-focused star studies, and whilst this is testament to the work of these actors and their importance to Action Cinema, it is notable that female-centric work is difficult to find. One hopes that action film stars such as Angelina Jolie, Michelle Yeoh, Cynthia Rothrock, Milla Jovovich, Pam Grier, Michelle Rodriguez, Linda Hamilton, Kate Beckinsale, Charlize Theron, JeeJa Yanin and many more will become the focus of individual 'readers' devoted to their work in Action Cinema rather than excellent chapters or articles in collections such as this. It is obvious that there is more work to be done in this field.

All the chapters in this collection focus either on an individual actor, a film, or a series of films. Each chapter uses a 'gender lens' to interrogate their subject/s. The book is structured in four parts, which broadly capture the overarching concerns of the chapters within them. The first, 'Masculinity and Anxiety' focuses on the way that masculinity is in crisis. Whilst two of the chapters discuss ideas about femininity, they are done through the lens of 'crises for the male'. The other two chapters analyse the role of the male in the buddy-cop movie and an in-depth examination of the film *Point Break*. The second part of the collection, 'Transformative Femininity' examines how female action characters are multi-dimensional: a case study of Ellen Ripley in *Aliens*, a rape revenge biker in *Shame*, Colombian female warriors, and a gendered reading of 'woman inherits the Earth' in *Jurassic Park* offer discussions about the position of strength that women occupy in

Action Cinema. Part three 'Gender/Politics in 1980s/1990s Action' moves towards the political. Here, the action movies of Wong Kar-Wai, LGBTQ + issues, and populism are examined. The final section is entitled 'Gender and Action Stars' and focuses on an in-depth reading of characters in *Commando*, and finally Keanu Reeves' *Matrix* and *John Wick* personas that push ideas through and beyond the collection and into the 2000s.

Whilst the main purpose of this first volume is to focus on gender at the beginning of the Action Movie, and this was primarily done to coincide with the release of *First Blood*, you may be surprised to see no work on Sylvester Stallone in this collection. That was deliberate. Volume 3 does have a chapter on him and his portrayal of John J. Rambo and was done to show the linkage between the 'old' and the 'new', and the transformations that Action Cinema has undergone. The authors of each of these chapters found in this (and the overall) collection have set out to address the challenges that Action Cinema has undergone over a period of time in which gender and the genre have undergone massive changes. In doing so, they demonstrate the breadth and richness that the genre has, and how it clearly mirrored and engaged with anxieties and preoccupations of the time. Above all else, the book was written for you to enjoy.

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**Part 1**  
**Masculinity and Anxiety**

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