



Gender and Action Films 2000 and Beyond Transformations

Edited by

**Steven Gerrard
Renée Middlemost**

EMERALD STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER

Gender and Action Films 2000 and Beyond

Emerald Studies in Popular Culture and Gender

Series Editor: Samantha Holland, Leeds Beckett University, UK

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Gender and Action Films 2000 and Beyond: Transformations

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2023

Editorial matter and selection © 2023 Steven Gerrard and Renée Middlemost.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80117-519-7 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80117-518-0 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80117-520-3 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

The world of studying, analysing and writing about Action Cinema is – to me – as exciting as watching Rambo vanquishing all before him. As a fan of action movies, I wish to dedicate this book to these unforgettable action heroes: John J. Rambo, Douglas Quaid, John McClane, Chev Chevios, Ellen Ripley, Project Alice and probably many more who have entertained me on their journeys through action movies. But if there is one person who stands out for dedication, it is my co-editor Renée Middlemost – her unswerving support in this project has made it all possible.

In the immortal words of Chev Chelios... ‘Chicken and broccoli!’

– Steven Gerrard, 2022

I dedicate my work on this book to my research partner in crime, Steve Gerrard. I couldn’t ask for a better collaborator, colleague and friend. Our planning meetings for this project truly kept me afloat during lockdowns – here’s to many more academic adventures!

– Renée Middlemost, 2022

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Acknowledgements

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 third volume of Emerald Publishing's *Gender and Action Film* series, the emphasis is placed firmly on the way that Action Cinema has transformed in the post-millennial period. Through a series of in-depth case studies, and using a mix of theoretical approaches and analysis, each chapter will offer comparative gender studies that are both evocative and interrogative of a genre that has often been lambasted for the way in which gender is portrayed. The volume covers such areas as ageing action stars and the roles they portray in geriaction movies, critical examinations of gender in Action Cinema post-9/11, and changes aspects of feminism, gender practices and metamodern narratives.

Keywords: Gender; action; masculinity; femininity; stardom; fandom; violence

Welcome to Volume 3 of Emerald Publishing's exciting *Gender and Action Films* series.

The first volume examined the way that gender has been portrayed during Action Cinema's formative years from 1980 to 2000, focusing on such elements as stars, franchise case studies and genre entries into the canon. Volume 2 shifted beyond and into the new millennium, offering an insight into how the slow changes that had grown throughout the genre's probationary period had now cemented. The focus in the second part of this trilogy again examined such areas as stardom (with its new 'types' of stars in the form of Charlize Theron and Michelle Rodriguez), but then moved into discussions about inter-generational action characters, before segueing into how the politics of race have been interpreted. With new advancements in technology, chapters on gaming and cyberpathy provided a welcome addition to that volume.

For Volume 3, the title 'Transformations' is apt. Everything has its time, and everything changes. This is certainly the case with the movies in Action Cinema. For every new variation on the action genre, something returns from the past.

One the one hand, post-millennial Action Cinema has seen an increase in stronger, more prominent female roles: bold female performances from Chloe Grace Moretz as Hit Girl in *Kick Ass* (2010), Saoirse Ronan as *Hanna* (2011), Melissa McCarthy in *Spy* (2015) and Charlize Theron in *Atomic Blonde* (2017) clearly show that the genre is *not* male-dominated, and that these characters are strong, independent, tough, fierce, loyal to their cause and exciting to watch. On the other hand, the same period has welcomed the return of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Linda Hamilton to the *Terminator* movies, and Stallone to both the *Rocky* and *Rambo* series. Franchises appear to be the order of the day: the seemingly never-ending box office juggernaut of *The Fast and the Furious* franchise (2001–2022) is now on its ninth outing, with a 10th promised to crash through cinema's doors in 2023 (this does not include their 2019 *Fast and Furious Presents: Hobbs and Shaw* spinoff). What started out as a street gang stealing microwaves has seen them steer a course through cartels, wars, parachuting cars out of airplanes, traversing the airspace between Abu Dhabi's three Etihad Towers, and even averting nuclear Armageddon. There is a salute to the action stars of yesteryear with *The Expendables* films (2010–2022), in which Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Willis, Ford, Snipes, Lungdren, Li and many more find themselves battling villains to the tune of millions at the box office on one side, and creaking, arthritic hips on the other.

The volume you hold in your hand opens and expands upon gender portrayals in Action Cinema in the post-millennial period. The collection is catalogued into three parts. The first section, *Ageing*, discusses how action heroes move through the inescapable force of getting older. Ke Jinde considers Tom Cruise's portrayal of Ethan Hunt in the (1996–2024) *Mission Impossible* series in terms of the benefits of mature masculinity, with an emphasis on themes of morality and service. Donnar expands on his previous research on action film and geriaction stars by examining the emergence of unexpected action stars in globally successful French action films. Liam Neeson's late career rebirth as a mature action star in the *Taken* series (2008–2014), and *Non-Stop* (2014), is used to assess broader trends in French cinema towards commercial success, and imitation of Hollywood action aesthetics. Gerrard concludes this section with an analysis of the critical and commercial failure of *Rambo Last Blood* (2019), and Stallone's refusal to retire quietly. Through this case study, the themes of masculinity, fragility and aging are highlighted through the distillation of Stallone's onscreen persona.

The second part of the collection focuses on the *Evolution* of Action Cinema. By using the feminist lens, Gomez and Osman's work on *Charlie's Angels* (2000), Lukancic's insight into the return of Jamie Lee Curtis' Laurie Strode to the rebooted *Halloween* franchise (2018–2023), and Thota's feminist reading of *Mad Max Fury Road* (2015) trace the evolution and representations of women, and in particular what this may mean for action film portrayals in the future. Interestingly, sitting alongside these chapters is Vermaak-Griess and Le Clue's tantalizingly close reading of fandom and fan reaction to the way *Captain Marvel* (2019) uses gender practices in its narrative.

The final part of the volume turns its attention to *Gender, Genre and Narrative Transformations*. The post-millennial period has seen the twenty-first century

embroiled in war, turmoil, famine and world pandemics. Action Cinema has certainly used these events as backdrops to their narratives. It clearly shows that action films and filmmakers want to – however tangentially – use these frameworks not only to parade their stories but to also raise questions about the world around us. Gender portrayals will always remain an important part of this area. Therefore, Cain’s work on trauma in vigilante narratives, Girard’s ideas of feminine objects indelibly linked to the upset of female masculinity and Hines’ investigations into the queer female action spy hero are certainly both welcomed and intriguing in the way that they open these areas not only in the study of gender but to push further into today’s discussions about changing reflections in the subject area.

As you will see from these subjects and the writers’ ideas, their enthusiasm for Action Cinema is evident. They have fashioned their chapters to take account of both older, established work in the field – for example, Tasker (1993) and Jeford’s (1994) writing – and fused them with new work that helps to shape their ideas into invigorating, bold and exciting interrogations of the way in which gender is now portrayed in the post-millennial era. A quick scan of the Selected References at the back of the volume, aided by each chapter’s own list of references, will guide you to not only the works discussed but also open this vast area for you to investigate further should you so wish.

Before we move into the main components of this collection, it is important to remember just how far the Action Cinema has come in the way issues of gender have been raised, questioned and critiqued both within the films themselves and the chapters you find here today. When this project began, both editors were inundated with abstracts from enthusiastic scholars (both old and new to academia) that focused on 50 years of action films. Subjects ranged from case studies of individual stars, franchises, genre standalones, fandom, race, politics, new media platforms and sexuality. This clearly demonstrates that there is still room in which further investigation into gender portrayals in Action Cinema can – and should – occur. What you have before you are chapters that have uncovered merely the tip of the iceberg in this area of study. There is still much more to investigate. So, as you settle down with a cup of tea in your hand to read this final volume (after, we hope, you have read the other two), you can reflect on the adventures of all those action heroes you have loved and would want to revisit them once again.

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Part 1

Ageing

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Chapter 1

Tom Cruise as Ethan Hunt: Virtuous Masculinity and Ageing Heroes in Geriaction Cinema

Kelvin Ke Jinde

Abstract

The presence of mature masculinity is slowly reshaping contemporary action cinema in the twenty-first century. It is a phenomenon that rejects the unrealistic view that action heroes are embodiments of Apollo and Ares in human flesh. Instead, action heroes are viewed as flawed characters who cannot escape the realities of their corporeality, mortality and humanity. The following chapter is an examination of a particular type of action hero archetype that combines ageing with virtuous and mature masculinity. Here I use Tom Cruise's development and portrayal of Ethan Hunt in the *Mission: Impossible* series as a lens through which to highlight the presence of the virtuous and mature hero archetype in action cinema.

Cruise's representation of heroic masculinity is significant because it achieves three separate goals. First, Cruise's mature masculinity repudiates the hardbody model by showing its deficiencies as a male archetype. Second, it introduces a version of an action hero that emphasises the benefits of ageing and mature masculinity. Lastly, Cruise's onscreen presence redoubles the idea that heroic masculinity is motivated by a deep sense of morality, duty and a desire to serve the greater good. As the model of the mature and virtuous hero becomes more prevalent, as I argue, it not only reshapes action cinema but also produces cinematic representations of heroic masculinity that are more positive in terms of showing the importance of maturity, virtue, and public service.

Keywords: Ageing; action cinema; geriaction heroes; mature masculinity; virtuous masculinity; Tom Cruise

Action cinema, or rather the action hero, has frequently been treated by critics and audiences as a *bête noire* within film and cinema studies. Unlike art cinema, action cinema is often thought of as being a simplistic and infantile genre. This general negativity is partly the result of the popularity and dominance of what Susan Jeffords (1994) calls the 1980s ‘hardbody’ hero archetype. Embodied by actors such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger (George, 2015), the hardbody archetype led many within the film and cultural community to associate the idea of an action hero with the idea of a hardbody action hero. Specifically, these two ideas are conflated into a model or archetype that is inextricably linked with authoritarianism, violence, jingoism, nationalism, sexism, racism (Fear, 2019), in addition to ageism, bigotry and vigilantism (Frame, 2021). Furthermore, the hardbody variant continues to inform the image of heroic masculinity, both on and offscreen.

While it is true that the action hero archetype has been used to portray a certain type of heroism and masculinity, it is untrue that such a representation of a male hero is the ideal representation of male heroism and masculinity. In contrast, the ageing action hero – or ‘geriaction’ (Donnar, 2016) phenomenon proves that heroic masculinity is not uniform and homogenous. So, while the geriaction hero is repurposed as a ‘solid bastion of hegemonic masculinity’ (Soberon, 2021, p. 166), by stars such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Willis reasserting their dominance by reviving franchises such as *Rambo*, *Terminator* or *Die Hard*, I argue that this particular geriaction hero is but an extension of the ‘hardbody’ variant, and not representative of heroic masculinity or masculinity as a whole. In this chapter, I focus on another variant of the ageing action hero, the mature and virtuous geriaction hero, positing that heroic masculinity is not about power and domination. Rather, it is about exercising one’s morality to ‘doing the right thing’, which is to serve, protect and defend one’s community (Yogerst, 2017, p. 27).

This chapter is a textual analysis that uses a close reading of Tom Cruise’s character Ethan Hunt (*Mission Impossible*), to examine the representation of the ageing hero in action cinema. The analysis intersects archetypal analysis with star studies to argue for the development and significance of the mature and virtuous geriaction hero. While Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald (2019) suggests that screen persona helps construct an actor’s branding, the focus of this chapter is not on Cruise’s celebrity status or star image, rather, on analysing and tracking Ethan Hunt as an ageing action hero and character. In the context of shifts within action cinema, I examine how Tom Cruise uses the increasing discourse about ageing, maturity and geriaction stars to change his action man persona from a young upstart to an elder statesman. Here, I focus on Cruise’s development of Ethan Hunt over four decades, where he has been allowed to grow, mature and develop as a character alongside the actor. This maturation period has allowed for Cruise to portray the cultivation of virtues such as courage, justice, temperance and practical wisdom through Hunt. Thus, as I will demonstrate, Cruise’s portrayal of Ethan Hunt provides a particular model and representation of heroic masculinity that problematises the idea that heroic masculinity must necessarily be associated with violence and hostility.