12

DUMB MOVIES FOR DUMB PEOPLE

Masculinity, the body, and the voice in contemporary action cinema

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The status of masculinity within Hollywood's representational system is explored here through an analysis of four films and their stars: Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* (1988) and *Die Hard 2* (1990), Sylvester Stallone in *Lock Up* (1989), Stallone and Kurt Russell in *Tango and Cash* (1989). These films and stars exemplify, in different ways, a tendency of the Hollywood action cinema toward the construction of the male body as spectacle, together with an awareness of masculinity as performance. Also evident in these films is the continuation and amplification of an established tradition of the Hollywood cinema – play upon images of power and powerlessness at the center of which is the male hero.

Within this structure suffering – torture, in particular – operates as both a set of narrative hurdles to be overcome, tests that the hero must survive, and as a set of aestheticized images to be lovingly dwelt on. Whilst numerous studies have commented on the construction of woman as victim within the American cinema, sometimes speculating on the masochistic pleasures this may offer to female viewers, few studies seem to comment in any depth on the figure of the male hero in this context, pursued and punished as he so often is. It is in thinking about such questions that a consideration of the action film may also allow a wider discussion of masculinity and sexuality within the Hollywood cinema, particularly in thinking through the significance of what critics have increasingly come to see as its performative status.

Indeed talking about men in the Hollywood cinema as 'performing the masculine' seems to be *de rigueur* these days, a critical vogue that is both fruitful and intensely problematic. In quite another context, that of commenting on the self-representations of academic Frank Lentricchia, Lee Edelman poses a question: 'might it not be useful,' he asks, 'to inquire just what, if anything, is getting subverted here or to ask how the miming of heterosexual privilege by a heterosexual male differs from

the persistently oppressive enactment of that privilege in the culture at large?' (Boone and Cadden 1990: 44). Rather arch this, but Edelman's impatience, his irritation with a criticism vaguely based in the terms of supposedly self-reflexive 'performance,' does indicate the importance of, if not refusing an optimistic address to the cinema, then retaining an awareness of the complexities of representations, of their operation within wider systems than the cinematic. I'm not so bold as to seek for subversion here, being in any case unsure as to what it might look like. Paradox and contradiction though, with which Hollywood has always been replete, do come into the equation.

PERFORMING MASCULINITY

That masculinity can be seen as performative, as insistently denaturalized, has been something of a touchstone in recent discussions of the Hollywood cinema. A variety of formulations of postmodernism and postmodernity have been invoked in this critical development. Suspicious critics have tended to perceive postmodernism and its associated buzzwords as providing a depoliticized catch-all framework for cultural analysis. This is an important qualification given the tendency, sometimes manifest in models constructed within the framework of postmodernism, to forget about the operations of power.

It does seem important to ask what is the status of this performativity, a quality which some are keen to embrace and others to refute. How would we account, for example, for the undoubtable marketability of the male body in the 1980s? One context is offered by the changing definitions, within a shifting economy, of the roles that men and women have been called upon to perform, particularly in that crucial arena of gender definition, the world of work.

Richard Dyer notes the tendency of male stars such as Clint Eastwood and Harrison Ford 'either to give their films a send-up or tongue-in-cheek flavour . . . or else a hard, desolate, alienated quality.' Dyer speculates that in a world 'of microchips and a large scale growth (in the USA) of women in traditionally male occupations' the adoption of such tones suggests that the 'values of masculine physicality are harder to maintain straightfacedly and unproblematically' (Dyer 1987: 12).[1]

Scott Benjamin King's analysis of the American cop show *Miami Vice*, a series which has attracted much critical attention and is perhaps the original 'Armani with a badge,' echoes Dyer's comments on the world of work. King offers a critique of those who understood the stylized visual beauty of the show and of its male protagonists, via postmodernism, as a narrative emptiness, seeing such perspectives as, at worst, a rather alarmingly literal interpretation of the 'end of narrative.' Instead of seeing the show as pure spectacle, as a refusal of narrative, King points

out that *Vice* offered the repeated re-enactment of narratives of failure, the significance of which he locates within the context of contemporary articulations of masculinity. A reorientation of the relationship between men, masculinity, and consumption in the West necessarily affects those definitions of male identity achieved through production. King surmises that 'if postmodernism is a crisis of the excess of consumption, and, further, a crisis related to shifting definitions of masculinity, it is also a crisis in the concept of work' (King 1990: 286). In particular King signals the importance, in the construction of Sonny Crockett's character, of failure within the realm of work. Crockett's work consists of getting the bad guys, work that he is unable to perform effectively, work that is carried out in a context over which he has no control. It is such a lack of control that is in turn crucial to the scenario of the two *Die Hard* films, where the hero finds himself in impossible situations controlled by incompetent bureaucracies.

Barbara Creed situates the pin-up muscleman star within the critical frameworks of postmodernism in her comments on the tendency of images and texts in the 1980s to 'play with the notion of manhood.' Creed suggests that Stallone and Schwarzenegger, the muscular stars of the decade, could only be described as 'performing the masculine.'

> Both actors often resemble an anthropomorphised phallus, a phallus with muscles, if you like . . . They are simulacra of an exaggerated masculinity, the original completely lost to sight, a casualty of the failure of the paternal signifier and the current crisis in master narratives.
>
> (Creed 1987: 65)

The 'current crisis in master narratives' is seen by Creed not as the inability to tell a good story, but in terms of the failings of the key terms around which stories are constructed, terms which include a coherent white male heterosexuality along with the rationality and binary structures it is often taken to propose. For Creed it is the sheer physical excess of the muscular stars that indicates the performative status of the masculinity they enact, an excess quite different, indeed rather more obvious, to the qualities of tone, say a sense of parody or of alienation, that Dyer refers to in passing.

Muscles raise a familiar paradox over the coming together of naturalness and performance which Dyer has characterized in terms of the way in which muscles can function as both a naturalization of 'male power and domination' and as evidence precisely of the labor that has gone into that effect (Dyer 1982: 71). The 'strain' that Dyer identifies in the male pin-up stems from this paradox, from the self-conscious performance of qualities assumed to be natural. Dyer warns us against the dangers of 'causal logic,' the temptation to read images of men in terms

only of male power. The performance of a muscular masculinity within the cinema draws attention to both the restraint and the excess involved in 'being a man,' the work put into the male body and the poses that it strikes. But if the cinematic hero is in the business of performing manliness not only at the level of physique, what is the significance of this performance, and what is the nature of the charade that he is acting out? The movies considered here insistently work through a set of motifs related to sexuality and authority, motifs which are mapped on to both narrative structure and the body of the male hero. Linking the questions of the male hero's effectivity at work, the embodiment of an excessive physical performance and an anxious narrative of male sexuality, is the crisis of the paternal signifier to which Creed refers.

'RAMBO IS A PUSSY': STARS AND MASCULINITY

The phenomenon of stardom provides a useful starting point for thinking about the performative aspects of masculinity in the cinema, perhaps because spectacle, performance, and acting all function as both constitutive components of stardom and significant terms in those writings concerned with the sexual politics of representation. Within the action cinema the figure of the star as hero, larger than life in his physical abilities and pin-up good looks, operates as a key aspect of the more general visual excess that this particular form of Hollywood production offers to its audience. Along with the visual pyrotechnics, the military array of weaponry and hardware, the arch-villains and the staggering obstacles the hero must overcome, the overblown budgets, the expansive landscapes against which the drama is acted out, and the equally expansive soundtracks, is the body of the star as hero, characteristically functioning as spectacle.[2]

Richard Dyer locates the 'central paradox' of stardom as the instability of 'the whole phenomenon' which is 'never at a point of rest or equilibrium, constantly lurching from one formulation of what being human is to another' (Dyer 1987: 18). Particular star images are no more stable than the phenomenon as a whole. Embracing contradictory elements and constantly shifting the ground, star images present themselves as composed of so many layers, as so many slippages. Performances in films, gossip in newspapers and magazines, publicity that is both sought and unlooked for: all these elements work to constantly displace and reconfirm our understanding in an endlessly played out revelation of 'the truth behind the image.'

In this sense the territory of the star image is also the territory of identity, the process of the forging and reforging of ways of 'being human' in which a point of certainty is never ultimately arrived at. Inevitably the ongoing formulation and reformulation of ways of 'being

a man' constitutes an important part of this process. Paradoxically this process sits alongside the absolute certainty with which we often feel able to identify a particular type and to speak about what it may mean – in the context of debates around masculinity John Wayne provides perhaps the most longstanding and oft-cited example, a figure whose meaning seems absolutely fixed.

The two Stallone pictures considered here are more than exemplary since, while any film redefines and works over star images, these movies set out, more or less explicitly, to rewrite their hero/star. Both *Tango and Cash* and *Lock Up* operate in part as attempts to shift the grounding of Sylvester Stallone's star image. The star's publicity began to use new strategies after a series of dents to his public persona: *Rambo III* (1988), something of a disaster with the 'untimely' Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan where the film was set, the break-up of his marriage to Brigitte Nielsen, and a wave of bad publicity about being a wimp over his failure to turn up at Cannes, allegedly through fear of becoming a target for terrorism, as well as the accusations that Stallone dodged the draft during the Vietnam War. With a spectacular economy Stallone's image absorbed the wimp tag, using the associations to distance the star from his Rambo persona and present him as a softer, more likeable guy both in 'real life' and his films. *Lock Up* was to be an 'action picture with heart,' something it was felt *Rambo III* hadn't been, whilst *Tango and Cash* was to emphasize a more sophisticated Stallone. His character, Ray Tango, wears suits and spectacles, deals in stocks and early on sets out the terms of a new image by delivering the joke line 'Rambo is a pussy.'

An attempted redefinition of Stallone's star image in these films is conducted through both the body and the voice. A shift away from the physical, the body as the central component of Stallone's image, is also a move into the verbal and this emphasis, basically the shock value of the fact that the hulk could talk, was echoed and exploited in the surrounding publicity. An *American Film* feature sets about this sort of renegotiation, suggesting that although 'you think of Stallone as a heavyweight, up close he appeared more of a middleweight, with quick moves and a light, almost spritely grace.' We also learn that for the interview Stallone 'spoke quickly,' that he wore glasses, was 'well-tailored, well-barbered and very smooth of face,' and that his voice 'was a little higher pitched than usually heard in his movies.' The smaller build, the clothed body, the higher pitched voice – all these aspects of Stallone's dress, speech, body, and his new movies are used in this feature-interview in order to distance the star from the macho roles and physical display which made him famous. That these marks of a new image are distinctly feminizing provides a significant gloss on how to sell a male star as something other than a hunk/hulk. With more or less degrees of cynicism

and humor, magazine features laid the pitch of a new sensitive Stallone who appeared as an art collector and as an artist, exhibiting and selling his paintings. Within the terms of pop discussions of masculinity at the time the shift can be expressed as one from Neanderthal man to New man.

Tango and Cash sets out to be humorous, taking swipes at Stallone's he-man image within a buddy movie format. The film can work with such a redefinition of Stallone's seemingly well-established strong silent type persona, partly because of the presence of Kurt Russell, and also because of its comic tone. *Tango and Cash* plays off two male types in its buddy pairing from the 'bad cop, worse cop' scene which serves partly to tell us that, despite the glasses, Tango is no softy, to the boldly (or crudely, depending on your point of view) drawn contrast between the two men's styles. Russell plays out a well-established persona, the macho slob sent up in Carpenter's *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), worshipped in *Backdraft* (1991). An extraordinary but regular guy, Russell retains a tough guy aura whilst exuding those qualities that pass for normality. The opening sequences of *Tango and Cash* are concerned to establish the differences between the two cop heroes – their offices, guns, clothes, appearance, eating habits, and social graces. Both Ray Tango and Gabriel Cash are media stars, cops who get very public results and who, whilst they have never met, maintain a rivalry over their respective press coverage. Cash dismisses Tango, whose picture is featured in the newspaper, as 'Armani with a badge,' and Tango's captain paraphrases the press coverage as 'Down Town Clown versus Beverly Hills Wop,' which about sums it up.

As the film progresses Tango and Cash move from rivalry to friendship, partly drawn together by the plot to frame them, and partly through the character of Kiki/Katherine, Tango's sister. They survive the ordeal of prison together, escape together, and proceed to unmask the conspiracy of drug dealers orchestrated by arch-villain Perret. From the separate press photos we see at the beginning of the film they progress to the final newspaper image, a take-off of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, with the two clasping raised hands. By the end of the film they are finishing each other's sentences. Russell's presence allows for repartee between the two tough guys, swapping jokes in the shower and so on. Giving Stallone a chance to talk and dress up, it is Russell who gets his shirt off within the first few minutes of the film. And it is also Kurt Russell who ends up in female drag, posing as the butch 'property' of Tango's sister in order to make a getaway from the club where she is a dancer. Because this is a comic film and there is thus an implicit promise that nothing too 'dreadful' is going to happen, there is a space for male and female drag and for jokes about the male image and sexuality which are not permissible within the earnest prison drama of *Lock Up*. Playing upon

notions of dressing up and acting out different star images, Tango and Cash are offered as good to look at, 'two of the department's most highly decorated officers.'

MEN WITHOUT WOMEN: *LOCK UP*

Of course 'men without women' is somewhat misleading since there is a woman in *Lock Up* – there is a woman in all four films, a figure who seems to be necessary even if she has little to say or do. Anxieties to do with difference and sexuality increasingly seem to be worked out over the body of the male hero – an economy in which the woman has little space or function. In *Die Hard 2* Holly McClane (Bonnie Bedelia) is literally suspended in the air until the final minutes of the film, trapped in a stranded plane which circles the airport where the action takes place. If we are seeing the performance of masculinity in these films, the action cinema for the most part prefers all-male environments as the stage for such a performance, arenas such as sport, prison, and the world of work, including the military and the police force. The family is generally avoided, only rarely occupying much screen time.

Lock Up works through some of the most privileged sites for the performance of masculinity, sites which are also charged with homo-eroticism. The opening sequence maps out these sites. We see Stallone as Frank Leone at home, a popular local figure with a loving girl friend, Melissa. Light in tone, the opening sequences joke with images of Leone going 'to work,' his friendly repartee with the prison guard at Norwood playing off what we already know from the film's publicity – that his role in the film is that of a convict rather than a prison guard. The opening credits offer us both Leone's past and his present as he cleans up old framed photographs which offer a nostalgic history of his place within male arenas – messing around with cars, playing football, drinking beer, father and son poses. Through these pictures we see Leone growing up as a regular guy. The activities imaged here are all reprised, in distorted form, on the inside.

Lock Up sets out to dramatize brutality and the conflict between desire and the law. Leone, a model prisoner, is abruptly transferred from the relatively open regime of Norwood to the monstrous Gateway prison run by Warden Drumgoole (Donald Sutherland), an old adversary. Drumgoole declares that 'You have no rights unless I give them to you. You feel no pleasure unless I tell you you can.' Defining hard time as 'hell' he promises Leone the 'guided tour.' A demanding and irrational father, Drumgoole asserts his complete control over the situation. The narrative from this point consists of Drumgoole's attempts to push Leone to the edge, looking for a violation that will keep him in prison, as state (and as Drumgoole's) property. Much of the film consists of outlining

Figure 28 Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*

Leone's physical and psychological torture, his struggle against this regime and the rules of prison life. One familiar cinematic definition of masculinity constructs restraint, a control over the emotions, as providing a protective performance. Such a pattern quickly becomes apparent in *Lock Up* in which the rules of prison life involve not betraying emotion, looking away – refusing, for the sake of survival, the challenge that a look proposes.

If anxieties to do with sexuality and difference are increasingly worked out over the male body and its commodification as spectacle, then there seem to be two dominant strategies in the action cinema. Resorting either to images of physical torture and suffering or to comedy, the body of the hero, his excessive 'musculinity,' is subjected to humiliation and mockery at some level. In this sense action movies which echo with straightfaced sincerity and those which resort to comedy may well be operating on similar terrain. *Tango and Cash* and the two *Die Hard* films incorporate comedy, as do action films such as *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and its sequel or those in which Arnold Schwarzenegger dispenses his notorious one-liners. *Lock Up*, by way of contrast, relentlessly stresses the hero's suffering, amplifying a tendency evident in many of Stallone's films.

Within the walls of Gateway the sequences which opened the film and which defined Leone's 'normality' are grotesquely reprised. A football game played with the neighborhood kids becomes the vicious game in the prison yard, not a game but a lesson. Leone's work as a car mechanic,

signaled both in the photos and in the garage location in which he cleans them, is paraphrased in the cons' loving restoration and the warden's destruction of an old Mustang. It is not the gruesome spell in solitary that finally drives Leone into an escape attempt, but the threats to those he loves. In Gateway the role of Melissa is taken up by the character of First Base – so named because of his naivety in relation to the prison system, but not without a sexualized overlay. Indeed given the scenario – pin-up bodybuilder type in jail – it's hardly surprising that *Lock Up* draws heavily on homoeroticism. Yet in the action movie the threat of prison is, more or less explicitly, the threat of a homosexuality expressed in terms of violence, rather than the tenderness seen in Leone's friendship with First Base. Spotting a sign of weakness, Drumgoole attempts to use this affection, employing a group of convicts to kill First Base. The scene for this drama is the gym where First Base has his chest crushed by a set of weights. The threatening aspects of these masculine arenas – the football field, the gym – are brought out. With First Base dead, Melissa resumes her role as threatened object. Whilst the film borrows from homoeroticism, delighting in lingering shots of the star's body, physical contact is something else, and Leone can only bring himself to walk around First Base's dead body, reaching out to touch him and pulling away.

Emphasizing the visual at the expense of dialogue – the body of the hero and the prison environment rendered in dramatic lighting, bright and artificial or filtering through from the world outside, with rapid editing, extreme close-ups, and long lingering shots – creates a space in which to enact an intensified emotional drama. One reviewer smirked over Stallone's 'fatal fondess for naff montage,' referring to the central section in which the cons fix up an old motor car, and the scene in which it is destroyed, both of which are rendered through music and montage. It is only within the montage that Leone and First Base get to touch each other, playing games and spraying each other with water as they work together. One wonders, however, what there is to say within this situation, and also what is unsayable.

PROBLEMS OF PLACE: *DIE HARD*

The primacy of the body and of the voice, and the different masculine identities they propose, are played off against each other in these four films. In conceptualizing the relationship between masculinity and power the ability to speak is fundamental. Securing a position to speak from is crucial in order to invest the voice with authority. It is in part the search for such a position, one that John McClane ultimately usurps, that is enacted in both *Die Hard* and *Die Hard 2*.

In the action cinema struggles over position and authority, military

rank for example, serve metaphorically as a space for the problematics of class. Such an articulation is reasserted and modified through the body of the hero, a uniform which may protect him. In this sense the body of the hero, produced as spectacle, is invested with potent signifiers of class. Commenting on Stallone's *Rocky* cycle of films, Valerie Walkerdine speaks of boxing as turning 'oppression into a struggle to master it, seen as spectacle' (Burgin et al. 1986: 172). This production of both struggle and labor as spectacle is central to the articulation of a class-based definition of masculinity in the action cinema. If muscles are signifiers of both struggle and traditional forms of male labor, then for many critics the muscles of male stars seem repulsive and ridiculous precisely because they seem to be dysfunctional, 'nothing more' than decoration, a distinctly unmanly designation. The body of the hero may seem dysfunctional, given a decline in the traditional forms of labor that he is called on to perform, but also essential in a last stand, operating as both affirmation and decoration. A paradox is played out through the figure of the powerful hero who operates in a situation beyond his control, in which he is in many senses powerless.

A rather different set of negotiations is at work over Bruce Willis's star image in *Die Hard*, a film which capitalizes on the wise-cracking persona derived from his role in the hit TV series *Moonlighting*. This comedy/drama/detective series centered on the Blue Moon detective agency, though little in the way of detection ever happened, and the action consisted mostly of verbal confrontations between Willis and Cybill Shepherd in a variety of guises. Whilst *Die Hard* gives us Bruce Willis as action hero pin-up, his persona is very much defined through the voice, more wise-guy than tough-guy. Willis scored a huge success, for example, as the voice of baby Mikey in *Look Who's Talking* (1989). Indeed the particular type of masculine identity that Willis enacts as John McClane in these films has something childlike about it, a trait shared with his rôle in *Moonlighting*. A perpetual adolescent, even if a knowing one, there is a sense in which he seems to be playing games (cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians). *Die Hard* has Willis/McClane cracking jokes to himself along with a facial expression which carries a sense of surprise and confusion that these explosive events are happening to him.

For much of the film he communicates with both the 'terrorists' and the world outside through a radio taken off one of the bodies. Not wishing to reveal his name over the air, he is asked to choose an identity for himself. The chief 'terrorist,' Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman), taunts McClane in an attempt to discover his identity – 'Just another American who saw too many movies as a child. An orphan of a bankrupt culture who thinks he's John Wayne, Rambo, Marshall Dillon?' – before finally settling on a contemptuous 'Mr Cowboy.' Searching for an appropriate

reference point, and refusing those that are offered to him, McClane styles himself as Roy Rogers, the singing cowboy. McClane acts out this role and keeps up a running commentary at the same time – a variety of self-aware performance which fits well with Willis's image, his self-mocking macho bravado.

It is perhaps the failure of work, the lack of effectivity with which his efforts are greeted that, as much as anything, allows an understanding of the cynical vision of the populist hero that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and which is crucial to the characterization of John McClane in the two *Die Hard* films. This characterization is marked by both the hero's frustration and his ultimate triumph. In *Die Hard* John McClane is a New York cop in Los Angeles and, while he has transferred to the LAPD for *Die Hard 2*, the drama is enacted in Washington. In both cases he has no official place, as a stream of officials and bureaucrats insist on pointing out.

The narrative of *Die Hard* operates around the terms of performance with a miscrecognition at its heart. The film centers on the Nakatomi Corporation's building in Los Angeles which is taken over by a group of assorted European 'terrorists.' McClane happens to be in the building attempting a reconciliation with his wife, Holly, who is Nakatomi's number two executive. McClane's interventions are unwelcome not only to the 'terrorists' but to the Los Angeles police and the FBI gathered outside. The terrorists' entire plan revolves around their faith in the FBI machine. Sticking to a well-worn operational routine for dealing with a hostage situation, the FBI cut all power to the building, thus breaking the final time-lock on the company safe which the gang can't crack from within. The FBI, assuming the gang are terrorists, act according to the book and in the process play their part in the heist. Both groups attempt a double-cross, and the lone cop hero is stranded in the middle. Such a structure is also used in McTiernan's earlier film *Predator* (1987) in which Schwarzenegger's crack military squad, thinking they're being tracked by enemy agents as they plough through an unspecified jungle location, act accordingly. Not realizing that they are in a science-fiction movie and that what's killing them off is a chameleon-like monster, they are unable to take effective action.

Die Hard 2, set in Dulles International Airport, continues the double bluff used by its predecessor, so that the crack military team brought in to deal with the evolving terrorist crisis are themselves in on the caper. The plot centers on the attempts of a military group led by Col. Stewart to prevent the film's Noriega figure from being put on trial in the United States. Once more bureaucracy seems to present insurmountable obstacles for the hero. The airport police and authorities exclude him from their discussions; having him removed from the center of operations by security guards, they effectively attempt to prevent him from being

heroic. McClane needs the help of the janitor, located in a private subterranean realm below the airport itself, to save the day. After his exploits at Nakatomi McClane is now a media star, as is his opponent Col. Stewart, and he is told not to 'believe his own press,' articulating a suspicion that McClane is acting up to a fabricated image of himself as hero. In a further layer of complexity the head of the anti-terrorist unit, Major Grant (John Amos), initially gains McClane's trust precisely by playing the anti-bureaucracy card so effectively as a cover, presenting himself as a no-nonsense soldier. McClane himself uses the jargon in order to fingerprint a corpse, telling the bemused orderlies that he's 'Got a new SOP for DOA's from the FAA.'

By and large the hero of the recent action cinema is not an emissary of the State or, if he is, the State is engaged in a double-cross, as in *Rambo* (1985). The hero may be a policeman or a soldier but he more often than not acts unofficially, against the rules and often in a reactive way, responding to attacks rather than initiating them. The hero recognizes that he is, as Rambo puts it, 'expendable.' Representatives of the State utter myriad variants on the line, 'this mission never existed.' In the *Die Hard* films McClane, like so many action heroes, opposes himself to authorities that are both bureaucratic and duplicitous.

The body of the hero, though it may be damaged, represents almost the last certain territory of the action narrative. In hits like *Robocop* (1987) and *Total Recall* (1989) neither the body nor the mind is certain, both being subject to State control within a science-fiction dystopia. There is a moment in *Total Recall* when Schwarzenegger's character is asked to step back and consider his position – is he an intergalactic spy caught up in an intergalactic conspiracy as he claims, or is he just an ordinary manual laborer with paranoid delusions as they claim? The moment is funny partly because we don't know very certainly as viewers ourselves, though we can guess what Arnie's reaction is likely to be, but also because as a star and as a character within the film Schwarzenegger inhabits both positions – an extraordinary ordinary guy caught up in a nightmare narrative.

Similar problems of identity afflict Murphy/Robocop in Verhoeven's earlier film. Such images draw on the generic currency of science fiction, and whilst the films considered here emerge from the tradition of the war film and the political thriller, they are similarly conspiratorial. When all else fails, the body of the hero, and not his voice, his capacity to make a rational argument, is the place of last resort. That the body of the hero is the sole narrative space that is safe, that even this space is constantly under attack, is a theme repeatedly returned to within the action cinema.

PERFORMANCE, IDENTITY, AND THE CINEMATIC: SOME CONCLUSIONS

The action cinema is often seen as the most 'Neanderthal,' the most irredeemably macho of Hollywood products. I've tried to argue that the films considered here work out a series of problematics to do with class and with sexuality, and that this is situated within a cultural context in which masculinity has been, to an extent, denaturalized. The psychoanalytic notion of homeovestism, defined as 'a perverse behaviour involving wearing clothes of the same sex,' is useful in this respect (Zavitzianos 1977: 489). In the cases Zavitzianos describes the use of garments associated with paternal authority, and most particularly uniforms associated with sports and the military, provides a way to stabilize body image, to relieve anxiety and to raise self-esteem. Of course Zavitzianos, in an all too familiar clinical tone, tells us that with treatment 'the homeovestite may improve and evolve from a homosexual object to a heterosexual one.' Maybe it is precisely because the boundaries between different categories come so close in this structure that talk of improvement is felt to be necessary. The paraphernalia of masculine uniforms and identities is nonetheless seen as part of a fantasy structure which is invented. Psychoanalysis, at least potentially, offers a structure which allows for the possibility of moving beyond any simple opposition between perversion and normality as they are commonly construed.

A less pathologizing version of this notion is to be found in Lacan's concept of male parade, in which the accoutrements of phallic power, the finery of authority, belie the very lack that they display. In a similar way the muscular male body functions as a powerful symbol of desire and lack, heroism as a costume. Within the narratives which I have discussed here the position of the father, a position of authority, lacks credibility in various ways. This lack of credibility is part of a denaturalization of masculinity and its relation to power, a shift that can be seen to be enacted in the virtually woman-free zone of the action narrative. Whilst it is played out on a huge stage, McClane's despairing struggle is also a small drama, a family drama. Both *Die Hard* and *Die Hard 2* draw to a close with McClane searching for his wife amongst the debris, covered in blood and crying out her name, seeming like nothing so much as a child. Indeed while Holly McClane provides the term which holds the narrative together, since neither the job of cop nor patriotism provides the hero's motivation, they are rarely together, the moment of reunion constantly postponed. Only once, in the first film, do we see the family together, with McClane as a father – glimpsed as an image, a frame photograph in Holly's office.

Postmodernity, whatever else it is taken to designate, signals significant shifts in the definition of work and the masculine identity that it proposes.

Postmodernism also calls into question the production and status of knowledge and categories of truth. These developments help to situate and historicize the shifts in Hollywood's representation of the male hero. In turn Andy Medhurst has characterized postmodernism as the heterosexual version of camp, a discourse in which both the play of multiple identities and acts of appropriation are fundamental. Sincerity, says Medhurst, is 'the ultimate swearword in the camp vocabulary' since while it 'implies truth; camp knows that life is composed of different types of lie.' (Medhurst 1990: 19).

This suggestion returns me to those suspicions that cast doubt on the possibility of making a distinction between a parodic performance of masculinity and the oppressive enactment of that performance. To say that the enactments of masculinity seen in the action cinema seems like nothing so much as a series of exercises in male drag could well fall foul of such a criticism, since it is the awareness of performance that distinguishes the masquerade from sociological conceptions of social roles. Yet, within the cinema, whose awareness are we speaking about – the producers', the stars', the audience's? When Rae Dawn Chong, watching Schwarzenegger strut his stuff in *Commando* (1985), sighs 'I don't believe this macho bullshit,' whom is she speaking to? There are a whole range of experiences and identities – those of lesbian and gay audiences, of black and Asian audiences, of all the margins that make up the center – that are rarely addressed directly by the Hollywood cinema in the way that white men seem to be.[3] Yet the enactment of a drama of power and powerlessness is intrinsic to the anxieties about masculine identity and authority that are embodied in the figure of the struggling hero.

NOTES

My thanks to Val Hill for all her help in thinking through these ideas.

1 Obviously these comments apply most particularly to big-budget action movies.

2 Though it is important to note that the success of action pictures, such as the *Rambo* series, is not limited to the West.

3 Of course Hollywood doesn't constitute the totality of cinema, though it provides the focus for this essay. We should also note that there is an important tradition of black American action narratives, made both within Hollywood formulas and in modes derived from the Hong Kong cinema. The Hong Kong martial arts tradition itself, as well as the white western versions of it that have appeared through the 1980s, remain immensely popular. In my experience these films are often only accessible through the video market. Generally made on relatively low budgets and often falling foul of the British censors, such films nevertheless provide an important counterpoint to Hollywood's action entertainment tradition.