MASculinity and Heroism in the Hollywood 'blockbuster'

The Culture Industry and Contemporary Images of Crime and Law Enforcement

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This article considers the connections between masculinity and heroic agency in certain versions of popular film. It proposes that how films dignify and celebrate the suffering and striving of their leading men may be quite centrally indicative of durable sensibilities regarding the qualities and virtues seen as defining manliness; and, moreover, that some of the more drastic reaffirmations of rugged masculinity in recent films starring Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and others are in reaction against instabilities in current notions of masculine gender identities. It is in such aspects of representation, and in what they suggest about the appeal of such films to their audiences, that we should now locate discussions of the social influences of screen 'violence'.

Linguists speak of terms as displaying 'marked' or 'unmarked' forms. Until very recently 'he' was in general use as an unmarked personal pronoun: one had to mark departures from a presumed male reader or company of male subjects. Nouns too have marked and unmarked forms. The unmarked cases of 'nurse', 'nanny', and 'secretary' would seem to be feminine, as in a different vein is 'prostitute': they can all be qualified by adding the prefix 'male-', but otherwise they take feminine pronouns automatically. By contrast the unmarked cases of 'prisoner', 'criminal', 'defendant', 'offender', and 'delinquent' (not to mention those of 'judge', 'detective', 'Superintendent', and so on) remain masculine. If this is so, what follows for the understanding of the positions of crime and law enforcement in popular culture from the initial realization that the unmarked case of all the following terms is masculine: 'hero', 'villain', 'cop', 'killer', 'psycho', 'hood', 'private eye', 'con', 'gangster'? And surely more abstract terms are also gendered in their unmarked forms: 'heroism', 'violence', 'action'?

It has by now been pointed out many times that criminology traditionally fails to consider fully the implications of the unmarked gender of its key topics and terms (so often in fact that one might dare to hope that it were no longer true). The doings of boys and men have been so overwhelmingly at the forefront of the discipline's concerns that it has neglected to note clearly just how centrally their boyishness or manhood is constitutive of the activity itself. Something of this sort has also long been true of discussions of media 'violence', in a number of respects. First, we have rarely spoken with sufficient clarity about the startlingly evident fact that historically the heroic agents of popular film and television have, predominantly, been men. Secondly, in discussions of the 'effects' of media 'violence' there is the largely unexamined, but no less overwhelming, point that really it is the 'effects' on the behaviour of males (and more particularly boys) that underlies the social anxiety and animates the research. It is

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perhaps only in respect of pornography that the gendered nature both of representation and reception has been fully and clearly discussed, but even there the sophisticated analysis of the 'performance' of sexuality and the invocation of desire through conventions of depiction is a fairly recent development (see Kappeler 1986). In short, the heroism, the villainy, the action, and the violence are in a certain sense invisible for as long as the masculinities on which they rely remain unmarked and unremarkable.

There are a number of avenues along which the examination of masculinities in the popular media might fruitfully be taken forward by criminologists. This paper is intended as a preliminary exposition of some of these. In particular it seeks to indicate some points of possible connection between certain fields of research (criminology and film/media studies) that often go on very separately. Among the questions that seem to me to be germane (and around which the essay is organized) are the following:

1. What are the sources of the recurrent appeal of masculine heroic figures in film and television and what sorts of significance do they embody for their audiences?
2. Has the nature of the heroic agents portrayed in popular narratives changed recently in terms of the masculinities that they display (or else via the extension of traditionally male kinds of prowess or resourcefulness to female characters?) If so, to what sorts of cultural transformations of sensibility do such changes respond?
3. How might a nuanced approach to the question of masculinity in the media revise or illuminate the enormous but generally rather repetitious and inconclusive debate on the 'effects' of media 'violence'?

Let us raise this last point briefly first—and return to it later—as it has the most obvious bearing on some traditional criminological concerns. It has often been noted that both 'lay' and official concern over media violence have a prominent but rather intermittent presence in public debate. The screen violence question is a scab often picked at, but not constantly so nor with consistent intensity. In earlier work I observed that the volume of social research on screen violence has similarly varied: its quantity has a way of tracking barometrically the raisings and lowerings of the temperature of political debate (and its consequences for the flow of research funding) (see Sparks 1992: 19–21; see also Rowland 1983). The easiest way to cope with this sort of phenomenon would be to file it under the heading of 'moral panics'. This certainly has some prima facie plausibility given the kinds of moral enterprise and political opportunism that precede and attend each such episode of clucking concern. On further reflection, however, it is a stance that now seems at best only partially helpful. The notion of moral panic is a rather heavily descriptive and processual one. It sensitizes us to the fact that a moment of heightened moral anxiety occurs but does not in and of itself illuminate what is substantively at stake in the rhetorics that encircle a given issue nor just why that issue should attract a particular kind of attention at some particular time. It is also, famously, a largely agnostic idea which asserts (or silently assumes) that the level and kind of concern evinced over an issue is unwarranted.

This last point is generally much less clearly decidable than the moral panic notion presupposes, as the debates about the fear of crime most amply demonstrate (Hale 1994). Moreover, an expression of concern resembles a moral panic only for so long as it remains trapped within the grooves of received ideas, reiterating familiar strains of moralizing disapproval. It is much less clear that screen violence has no case to answer when one rethinks it not as a miasmic source of cultural decadence, nor yet in terms of
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a positivist attempt to quantify and catalogue behavioural ‘effects’ (the so-called ‘bullet theory’ version of media studies—see Hodge and Tripp 1986: 194), but rather in terms of the transmission and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. This is not entirely a new argument, but it remains more provocative than the rest of the even older old arguments, and I return to some of its implications in conclusion below.

Nevertheless, moral panic theory might well have enjoyed another outing during 1993–4 when, in the aftermath of the grisly murders of James Bulger and Suzanne Capper, press attention again focused with some eagerness on the malign effects of screen violence, and more particularly on the ready availability of unsuitable home videos to children and young teenagers. Some newspapers (the Daily Mirror perhaps in particular) went into campaigning mode; radio phone-ins and television chat programmes were held. The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee took evidence and produced a report (Home Affairs Committee 1994). Little that could be described as new research was forthcoming, although one much-quoted review and synthesis of existing work firmly took the view that behavioural ‘effects’ of viewing violence had been adequately demonstrated (Newson 1994). In short, the perspectives remained recognizably similar, but the centre of gravity of the debate appeared to move decisively in the direction of a consensus of respectable opinion that screen violence had been shown to be harmful.

There was, however, one small but provocative piece of research which raised some new questions. Hagell and Newburn’s study Young Offenders and the Media (1994) undertook a systematic comparison between the viewing habits and preferences of a sample of known young offenders and those of a cohort of young people who were not so identified. The study revealed rather few differences in the media use of the two groups. Those which did exist seemed to flow from differences in the use of daily time rather than differential involvement with or attachment to any particular set of images, violent or otherwise. Moreover, when asked to name their favourite actors or screen heroes the responses of the delinquent and non-delinquent boys were hard to tell apart. To the extent that clear favourites emerged they were largely the same—Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jean-Claude van Damme reigned supreme. Hagell and Newburn provide a somewhat lengthier list for the young offenders than for the other boys, but it continues pretty much in the same vein—Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Lee, and so on.

None of this should surprise us unduly. Certainly there is no reason from the point of view of studies of masculine gender identities (Brittan 1989; Segal 1990) to presuppose that young offenders should be any more attached to images of heroic manhood (or for that matter more misogynist) than their more ostensibly conforming peers. The point is rather that the imagery is somewhat pervasive: it is what the young men have in common rather than what differentiates them. We cannot therefore address the question of the cultural salience of those depictions or of the violations that they include primarily by trying to discriminate between law-abiding and law-breaking men and boys. We must first attend to their wider prevalence and more general attraction.

_Squaring-up: The Constant Hero_

Readers who begin from an interest in laws and law-breaking (in short criminologists) often find much of the work that exists on screen violence very unconvincing. The
experimental ‘effects’ tradition (with its endlessly ingenious manipulations of ‘aggressiveness’) has rarely been able to argue credibly that its concerns have any clear external referent or criteria of validity (for judicious overviews see Noble 1975; Hodge and Tripp 1986). The literature is enormous. Yet it remains rather poorly integrated into larger criminological or sociological debate. Television researchers have rarely gone to great pains to show how their concerns intersect with the kinds of familial, ecological, or economic dynamics that interest other students of crime. Conversely, perhaps indeed disappointingly, no currently important criminological position numbers the assimilation of screen imagery in any very prominent place among its explanatory resources. There is a stand-off. Some students of the media attribute to them a uniquely important and central role in socialization and indoctrination. Criminologists, by contrast, characteristically treat the popular media as if they were wallpaper, ever-present but inert (or else allude to them as a kind of ‘indexical’ explanation, the one we resort to when all else fails).

Other starting points are, however, possible. Film theorists, for example, generally eschew the kinds of questions about causality that so preoccupy public debate about the media in favour of questions about how the media operate. How is a visual image made interpretable as meaningful or pleasurable? How is a sequence of images made into a followable narrative? How do certain images of men and women become established as especially alluring, desirable, worthy of admiration, heroic?

Simplifying freely we may say that film theory has two primary strands in its approaches to these sorts of questions, both of which are of some importance in seeking to develop an account of the prevalence of images of heroic masculinity in popular film and television. The first is an approach to cinematic (and latterly televisual) form (in the influential views of Christian Metz (1974) for example). That body of work is concerned to discover how the film is constructed to provide a meaningful ‘text’ and to identify the units of meaning (or ‘syntagms’) that compose it. This tradition stresses the continuities between narrative structure in film and in earlier popular or folk forms. Such approaches, commonly drawing upon the folklorism of Vladimir Propp (1968), tend to emphasize that the infinite variety of possible real stories is woven from a restricted stock. They suggest that there is an underlying ‘morphology’ whose basic elements include the various ways in which heroes undergo tests, overcome obstacles, gain and lose confederates and finally emerge triumphant. In short, one can argue that a notion of heroic overcoming through struggle is embedded very deep in our sense of what is a well-formed story. On its own this formalism often seems ‘thin’. It is not that nothing real is identified (see for example, Eco’s (1979) witty and provocative extension of a formalist approach to the James Bond sequence of stories). But there is a danger of over-asserting the universalism of the forms and hence of courting a certain lack of historicity or sensitivity to contexts of reception. Moreover, formalism risks telling us what we already know (e.g. that heroes are mostly male) while leaving on one side what to many will seem a more basic and prior set of questions: Why do we enjoy heroic narratives? To what aspects of ourselves do they speak? Just why is the agonistic hero so generally and pervasively male?

Here we come to the second major strand in academic film theory, namely an approach to the dynamics of address and reception (perhaps most celebratedly in the views of Laura Mulvey (1975)). Within film theory the answers to the kind of motivational questions outlined above are often proposed within a version of psycho-
analysis. For Mulvey, in a view subsequently much revised and extended by others (e.g. Neale 1983), the heart of the appeal of narrative cinema is provided by an imagery of desire, identification, and pleasure in looking. In particular Mulvey focuses on the narcissisitic identification of the male spectator with images of mastery and omnipotence:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence . . . (Mulvey 1975: 12)

If this view is correct the depiction of heroic manhood (which is first and foremost a question of men looking at representations of men in a certain way) is a pivotal dimension of mainstream cinema and television. Mulvey and others have been at pains to show that this ‘economy’ of charged and emotive looking does not presuppose a singular male image. Rather there is an array of possible masculinities in various postures of omnipotence and vulnerability, mastery and suffering. To some of these the spectator relates as to an ego-ideal; in other cases the look is complicated by masochistic or sadistic desires. Moreover, heroes can occupy a variety of positions in relation to social institutions: they may be integral or marginal figures, upholders or opponents of secular authority and so on.

Thus even in a genre such as the Western (so often traduced as simple-minded and two-dimensional) considerable variation is possible, by playing upon the ambivalences that the basic narrative components provide. One of the central oppositions structuring the Western in Mulvey’s view is between the societal reintegration of the hero through marriage or his exclusion through departure (The Searchers, Shane) or death (The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, Ride the High Country). What then can we infer about the nature of heroism from the frequency of the latter two alternatives? In many cases the Western hero is simply unassimilable. He is too primordial; he lives too much by violence and is too fundamentally alone to find a place in any scheme of social convention. The moments which frame the narrative of The Searchers offer perhaps the definitive case. In the first moment of the film we look out through an opening door on to a desert landscape, beautiful but inhospitable, across which a figure approaches towards us. In the last moment the door closes as the same figure Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) recedes into the distance and Ethan is left to ‘wander between the winds’ like his ‘savage’ enemy the native American whom he so closely resembles (Bingham 1994: 68). One of the main aims of the Western is to dignify its heroes by imposing tragic fates upon them, and at the same time to create a foundation myth centring upon their acts of renunciation. That is, as Jane Tompkins (1992: 37) points out, there is an implicit rejection of a feminized civility in favour of a reunion with wild nature. (Indeed Tompkins regards the whole moral structure of the Western as providing pretexts for male violence, a point to which we return below.)

The point is that, with few exceptions, the Western is one genre in which narrative form and visual iconography combine in order painstakingly and deliberately to imbue male heroism with grandeur. In the hands of its most accomplished directors (Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann, John Ford) this is carefully established in relation to the elemental spaciousness of the barely populated landscape—a deliberate attempt to lift the narrative away from mere social or historical contexts. Similarly the choreography of
the genre's climaxes—the convention of the shoot-out most especially—exists to establish the heroes' liminality and their transcendence through battle. If the Western is a reactionary genre it is so because of the artistry that is devoted to poeticizing the struggles of its male heroes.

Police and private eye movies are more sociologically complex genres than the Western. In striving less for a notion of the elemental they also permit a far wider scope and variety of masculinities, in and against a more varied array of settings and narrative problems. In this respect they attain the status of 'myth' only in a far looser and more modern sense than Westerns do. They are for these reasons far more often constrained by reality principles, and more concerned to situate their heroes in circumstances that invite recognition (in Hodge and Tripp's (1986: 116) terminology their 'modal fit' with the viewer's interpretive schemes is much closer). Yet their concern to dignify the hero is often no less acute, and frequently the sketching in of a more plausibly secular and constraining (and frequently corrupt) social world is similarly devoted to allowing the hero to distinguish himself—to demonstrate his integrity, his prowess, his lonely probity. In these respects these films are generally not less lovingly devoted to their heroes than Westerns are. In particular they begin from and extend many of the same assumptions about the discomfort of the heroic male in respect of the norms and institutions that inhibit his autonomy and curb his freedom of action.

Accordingly urban crime films attribute to their heroes a somewhat more extensive (but not essentially dissimilar) set of orientations towards law and institutions than Westerns. These include being external to the law (The Fugitive), or marginally connected to it as a private investigator (Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe), or within the institution but still insubordinately individualistic (everything from Dirty Harry to Beverley Hills Cop), or inside but actively opposing a surrounding corruption (Serpico, Brubaker).

At one time (Sparks 1992; in common with others such as Gitlin 1979 and Clarke 1986) I took the view that placing heroes in such positions had principally to do with an embedded scepticism that Hollywood and the TV networks attributed to their audiences about the legitimacy or competence of secular legal institutions: the hero stood out in relief because the ordinary realm of criminal justice was ineffective, or corrupt, or bureaucratic, and so on. I thought, that is to say, that these versions of heroism primarily addressed our political frustrations. Clearly this view has some merit, and the contemporary cinema is replete with such imageries which can wear either a sophisticated and disillusioned scepticism (Chinatown) or a reactionary populism (Dirty Harry) as their preferred attitude. I have come to suspect, however, that such tropes are somewhat secondary to the more primary logic of the heroic narrative as such; or at least that the order of priority between the story as an opportunity for heroic display, and the psycho-social conditions which lead us as audience to respond to a hero of a certain type, is muddier and more complex than I formerly knew. The main business of many movies is just the evocation of an heroic masculinity whose principles of absolute individuation, solitude, probity, and personal resourcefulness themselves demand the social marginality of the principal figure, much as their Western antecedents did. Raymond Chandler, who knew something about heroism in crime fiction, was quite clear in his view that the prime concern of the detective story was with the hero himself:
Down these mean streets a man must go who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero. He is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man, and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honour, by instinct and inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. (Chandler 1944, quoted in Mandel 1984: 35)

Perhaps the source of my earlier emphasis—one which is shared with other commentators—was to read popular crime narratives too much from within the disciplinary horizon of criminology, as if films were documents of a more prosaic kind than in fact they are. The outcome would be to misidentify their ostensible 'topics' as the real sources of their pleasure or appeal. Of course to refocus the issue of heroism around the question of masculinities does not foreclose the possibility of such 'political' readings but only complicates them. It 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.

Consider in this vein the much-discussed example of 'Dirty' Harry Callahan, in the various screen incarnations that Clint Eastwood has given him. Following Eco, Bingham (1994) notes that the successive 'Harry' films reiterate features or 'moves' from the first. They play upon the themes and variations of an already known scenario. Bingham shows that like musicals such films permit moments of departure from narrative while the star does a 'number', except that in Harry's case the 'number' involves pointing guns at people rather than tap-dancing. So, 'Harry' films commonly begin with a set piece, prior to and separate from the main plot, which reintroduces the star and gives him his menacing/wish-fulfilling tag line for the movie ('Do you feel lucky? 'Make my day', and so on) before pitching him into the serious business of the identification and elimination of his arch opponent. Bingham summarizes the purport of these films thus:

The films find aberrant, out-of-control villains of a primal, unfathomable evil. While the threat of these killers would seem to call for a strong authoritarian power, the films deny any suggestion of police-state control . . . by celebrating the authority of the individual. The films vest vigilante power in an 'official hero' (he belongs to the police force) who defies the authority of which he is ostensibly a part. This paradox—an authority figure rebelling against authority—allows the films to avoid actually advocating authoritarian repression, although they condense a wish for it. (Bingham 1994: 184–5)

All of this makes Harry, in Bingham's view, not an anti-hero but an anti-Establishment hero. The hero is defined by his singular capacity for action, and he must free himself from any constraint that inhibits this. He is in this sense a 'primal man' (Bingham 1994: 186), an observation that has led some critics to view Dirty Harry as a 'disguised Western' (Ray 1985). In the 'Harry' films, it seems, nothing social or institutional can compete with the hero as the source and justification of authority—a tendency which led Pauline Kael to comment on Dirty Harry, 'this action genre has always had a certain fascist potential, and now it has finally surfaced' (Kael 1972).

It is of course unwise to centre an account of a genre (let alone a gender) around the agenda of its most extreme instances. Cop and private eye movies have shown themselves to be capable of all manner of inflections, some severely revisionist and disillusioned (Chinatown, Prince of the City), others knowingly humorous (Beverley Hills Cop) and
some featuring versions of masculinity decidedly less overbearing than that of Dirty
Harry (Sea of Love, for example). Even the brief two decades since the moment of Dirty
Harry have witnessed a much intensified focus on the plasticity of sexual identities. This
has given rise to the proposition that masculinity these days is no longer ‘performed’
unproblematically: it is either reasserted with some vehemence (a ‘backlash’ phenomen-
on) or else vested with a certain irony (Bingham 1994: 232; Holmlund 1993: 214).
Let us then briefly consider some of the vagaries of masculinity in the contemporary
cinema.  

*Acting Out: Male Heroes and the ‘Blockbuster’*

If masculinity has in any sense become a more openly problematic and contested
notion in recent times, how (if at all) has this been registered in popular film and
television, and with what consequences? We need not look for revolutionary develop-
ments here. The homology between masculine prowess and conventions of heroism is
too deeply embedded for that; and in any case if some form of ‘crisis of masculinity’ can
indeed be discerned, some of its cultural manifestations are at least as likely to wear a
snarlingly retrogressive face as they are merrily to assimilate ideologies of ‘new’ man-
hood. Moreover, questions of gender do not stand in isolation from surrounding cul-
tural preoccupations. If the purposes of the action film include the visualization of a
certain form of order (cf. Ericson et al. 1991: 4)—the challenges it undergoes, the
means of its restoration or repair—then the demands made upon the hero as an agent
of retribution or restoration and the evocation of the world that he inhabits necessarily
stand in a dialectically intimate relation to one another. And if those surrounding
conditions come to be depicted as more and more chaotic, lawless, and disorderly, then
the response called forth from the hero’s saving presence becomes only the more
intense. Moreover, if an equation is drawn (whether explicitly in political discourse, or
implicitly in fiction) between the anomic condition of the world and the subversion of
the masculine order and its ideals, then the stage is set for an especially vigorous re-
assertion of heroic potency and virility (cf. Theweleit 1987).

This does not contradict the view already noted that masculinity has become an
increasingly self-conscious ‘performance’ (or in some versions a ‘masquerade’ (Holm-
lund 1993)) rather than a tradition that anyone can comfortably inhabit. Frederic
Jameson’s remarks on ‘pastiche’ are perhaps pertinent. Jameson argues that the mere
fact that a tradition has become uprooted or exhausted does not mean that it cannot be
recycled: rather the reverse because ‘the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but
the past—the imitation of dead styles . . . ’ (Jameson 1984: 65), but with the addition
of a certain ‘blank irony’. Perhaps what we see in the contemporary Hollywood
‘blockbuster’ is the reactionary face of postmodern pastiche. In this it would closely
recall Giddens’s definition of fundamentalism as the attempt to invoke traditional

One of the ways into these issues that has found most favour with film theorists is
through the star images or *personae* of Hollywood’s leading men. In particular the films
and careers of Mel Gibson, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Bruce
Willis have received much commentary (see Cohan and Hark 1993). One of the most
striking features of most of these stars (not to mention their near peers such as Kurt
Russell and Dolf Lundgren) is their evident, indeed exaggerated, musculature. Many stars of earlier periods (John Wayne perhaps most obviously) have presented emphatically and heftily masculine figures but with few exceptions (Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus*) the detail and definition of their physique has not been dwelt upon so lingeringly. Stallone and Schwarzenegger are not just male heroes: their pumped up bodies signify (nay, yell) ‘Masculinity’ as if these days one showed masculinity by presenting it in excess—a prototypical, warrior essence (see Creed 1987; Tasker 1993).

There are certain other features that have also been attributed to a number of major recent Hollywood action movies:

1. In line with Jameson’s expectations, what we may be observing is really a more drastic performative reenactment of what went before. We see masculinity ‘hyperbolized’ (Bingham 1994: 232) in the ultra-physiques of Schwarzenegger or Stallone; or else we have the ‘hyper-masculine’ close-to-the-edge dangerousness of the Mel Gibson character in the *Lethal Weapon* films (Fuchs 1993).

2. By the same token certain common motifs from earlier movies are also prone to being recycled and amended. Principal among these are perhaps images of male friendship and pair-bonding. ‘Buddy’ movies are nothing new, but some commentators see in recent films an intensification of the emotional and erotic charge of these relationships, one consequence of which is that women are ‘ejected’ from some of these narratives altogether. The cultural ‘togetherness’ that is preferred is that of the cross-racial male pair (*48 Hours; Lethal Weapon*) (see Fuchs 1993; Holmlund 1993).

3. Men do emote, but within a narrow compass. The primary emotions that they evince include grief (for lost love or slain partners) and rage (for the same reasons). Consider the moments in *Black Rain* for example when Nick (Michael Douglas) broods over his murdered partner’s possessions and lastly carefully unwraps his gun: it is the emotional palette of the revenger’s tale. Heroes suffer, and they care. They undergo grief, loss, and physical pain (on the prevalence of torture imagery in blockbusters see Holmlund 1993; Tasker 1993). There are variations, of course. Male pairs can embody different dimensions of masculine virtue, as with the domesticity of Murtaugh versus the isolation of Riggs in the *Lethal Weapon* films. Moreover there are attempts to present a cuddlier, less severe image of manly strength, for example Arnold Schwarzenegger’s undercover assignment as an infant school teacher in the absurd *Kindergarten Cop*.

4. There is a potent strain of anti-establishment feeling in almost all blockbusters. In some cases authority figures are explicitly villainous (*Lock Up*) or have used and abandoned the hero (*Rambo*) or are uselessly incompetent and obstructive (*Die Hard*). In each case the hero is singularly alone and thrown back on his own resources. In several instances such images are overlain by strongly dystopian images of the near future which either pit struggling humans against implacable machines (*Terminator, Blade Runner*) or heroize the machines themselves (*Terminator II, Robocop*) by subverting the human/machine distinction. Even where a movie takes place in the present (*Die Hard*) it invokes its most fearful aspects (terrorism). Many of these films seem to imply the failure of politics as such: there is a vacuum into which the hero must step, motivated not by profession, duty, or patriotism but rather by his purely personal and familial bonds, or by a still more basic instinct for survival (Tasker 1993).

5. The concluding passages of most of these films are exceedingly spectacular, not to
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say cataclysmic. They are marked by explosions, vast pile-ups, fires, deaths of the wicked, and miraculous escapes of the virtuous (in *Total Recall* Arnie provides Mars with a breathable atmosphere). They are replete, therefore, with signifiers of unreality (even though the effects and stunts have to be convincing as never before). What are we to make of this? And what has it to do with the question of ‘violence’?

**Conclusion: Further Thoughts on Heroism, Men, and Violence**

It has often been suggested that heroic fictions presuppose some sort of failure of social arrangements—or their violent disruption by a figuratively or literally alien force—in a way that makes redemptive intervention from without necessary. It is a moot point whether we tell ourselves such stories in order to ratify our desire for heroes or whether we feel the need for heroes when we already find the world alien and hostile. Arguably what we see in some recent Hollywood cinema is a magnification of these antique starting points. Much mainstream cinema offers us scenes from the apocalypse as a way of introducing, justifying, and winning our support for the hero. The social world evoked in *Robocop* or *Total Recall* is dangerous, lonely, chaotic, and deeply hostile, littered with industrial ruins and seething masses of anomic humanity. In many such movies narrative problems have been pared down to their manichean essentials (and as such are marketable and followable anywhere in the world). Identification and rejection are uncomplicated—heroes are outcasts unsullied by attachments or institutional connections, yet they remain ‘of the people’ and their painstakingly crafted physiques recall in imagination the hardness of men’s physical labour.

To say that these figures address male fantasies is to state the obvious. What is more difficult and more interesting is to say how they do this and with what consequences. The tone of some of the ‘screen violence’ debate has shifted lately. It has become less complacently agnostic on the importance of the issues, but at the same time less certain and more cautious on questions of proof and the status of the evidence (Hodge and Tripp 1986). Yet we find it no easier now than before to specify what happens when we view or how this relates to the transmission or acquisition of any attitude or outlook.

The term ‘violence’ of course resists codification (Barthes 1985). Violence in stories has no separate, independently definable existence (see Hall 1976). It is embedded in narrative, imbued with meaning, invested with aesthetic concerns, laden with moralities. It is simply not helpful to seek to isolate the question of violence from the regimes of representation in which it occurs. But this does not betoken any lesser concern. For instance, the mere fact that what happens in many Hollywood movies is consciously and deliberately marked as ‘fantasy’ does not in and of itself deny it any emotive or suasive force. As Rosalind Coward (1987: 26–7) has pointed out:

Nobody can persuade me that the way in which this culture currently deals with violence and aggression is anything other than deeply destructive and dangerous. [These fantasies] also often present violence as something integral to masculinity . . . For feminists the whole question of the relationship between fantasy and reality has always been a much more pressing political question than for most men.

To put the matter another way, one thing that the debate on screen violence and masculinity can learn from developments for example in the study of pornography is that one can develop a sophisticated grasp of how the genre works (as a form of sig-
without lapsing into agnosticism about its moral and political implications (see Kappeler 1986; Itzin 1993). The study of screen violence is perhaps on the point of breaking with its traditional dependence on notions of ‘pseudo-mechanical rather than semiotic causality’ (Hodge and Tripp 1986: 201).

Let us remind ourselves, therefore (though we should not need reminders), that images that are cognitively ‘unreal’ can nevertheless remain psychically and emotionally terribly powerful. We know more and more clearly now from studies of audience reception that screen images are multiply interpreted, often in ways that resist or query their ‘preferred reading’ (see for example Schlesinger et al. 1992); but the more perplexing issue is what happens when we do view with pleasure and involvement, allow ourselves to be enraptured, and so on. As Hodge and Tripp soberly note, even in fantastical images, ‘an image of violence is still an image of violence, and viewers who enjoy it are still endorsing those impulses in themselves’ (1986: 117). For these reasons the moral structure of the narrative—its commitments, its endorsements—is crucial to any understanding of its possible ‘effects’. What happens so that we actively want our heroes to act forcefully? For Tompkins this is

The entire purpose of the pattern . . . to get the audience to the point where it can’t wait till the hero lets loose with his six-shooters . . . Vengeance, by the time it arrives, feels biologically necessary . . . This is the moment of moral ecstasy. The hero is so right (that is, so wronged) that he can kill with impunity. (Tompkins 1992: 228–9)

These then are not quantitative issues about how much ‘violence’ one witnesses. They are filmic issues about narrative structure and point of view and other aspects of mise en scène. As Bingham comments on the controversial rape scene in High Plains Drifter, which he sees as being validated and endorsed within the film, can we not envisage a spectator who would be appalled by the scene? To which the answer is ‘of course . . . but the film was clearly not made for such a spectator’ (1994: 166).

Finally, there is an often overlooked strand within contemporary criminology that has gone to some pains to explore those aspects of crime that have principally to do with fun, excitement, risk-taking, and pleasure. This perspective is perhaps most fully developed by Katz (1988), whose emphasis lies on the experiential ‘foreground’ of law breaking—the forbidden pleasures that lie beyond its ‘invitational edge’. For Katz some of these have to do with often momentary experiences of ‘dizziness’, underlain by a will towards ‘transcendence’. Similarly, Cusson (1982) stresses that action, excitement, and play as aspects of delinquency are experienced as ends in themselves, undertaken for the sheer thrill of the sensation of living intensely.

I have no intention of pronouncing on whether the demand for action as its own reward is exclusively or predominantly male. But it does seem that when undertaken by men and boys its imaginative scripts are peopled with images of proud, undaunted, courageous, romantic masculinities. Meanwhile, for most of us men—seduced into conformity rather than crime—that realm of transcendence and of heroized masculinity is available vicariously. Most of us are not risk-takers most of the time; but we do like sensation and arousal and the frisson of imagined fear. We take our ‘edgework’ (Lyng 1990) at second hand. And, moreover, the kinds of ‘dizziness’ that we so enjoy (Mel Gibson’s ‘crazy’ performance in Lethal Weapon, for instance) are legitimated and given permission by being attached principally to heroic law enforcers. Those of us who continue to involve ourselves in what one of my female students so aptly described
as 'just dodgy blokes' films' could fruitfully reflect on what aspects of our own identity are satisfied (or at least gratified) by Hollywood's muscular masculinities. Whether such stories ever do 'script' the activities of those who really do take the more dangerous paths is still uncertain. But it remains open to us to ask a question parallel to Katz's 'what are people trying to do when they commit a crime?': 'what is it that we do when we view?'

References


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