**Too old for this sh\*t: aged action heroes, affect, and “the economy of exertion”.**

**Abstract**

This article discusses how old age aligns with ideals of hegemonic masculinity and generic conventions of the action film through the performance of strenuous heroics. Whereas it is commonly assumed that action films omit many characteristics which reference the geriaction hero’s age in order to safeguard his masculine status, aspects of age and aging are in many contexts instead emphasized. The ailments and efforts that come with old age provide a potent source of melodramatic scenarios that set up the action hero as a morally right victim in pursuit of heroic restoration. Using the films: *The Last Stand*, *3 Days to Kill,* and *Taken 3,* an illustration is offered of how action films engage their heroes in an economy of exertive situations to draw power from this victimization and frame the violent actions of the characters as pleasurable.

**Keywords:**

Affect, violence, victimhood, masculinity, melodrama, strenuous life

**Introduction**

In the 2013 piece ‘*Geriaction heroes and the age of aged movie stars’*, Charlie Lyne raises a particularly interesting question relating to age and the dynamics of power. How come that – despite their old age – older­ action stars are the most heroic and mighty of them all. In *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* even the military skills of Channing Tatum and the muscle power of Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson are insufficient to save day. Despite their most ambitious attempts, they are rendered dependent on the then 58-year-old Bruce Willis to have a chance at winning. Or as Lyne states: "it seems that action heroes – like the cheeses with which many of them share an acting style – get better with age”. Coinciding with this observation, many film and cultural studies scholars have attempted to subject the new wave of aged action heroes to critical analysis. It is often pointed out that the role of boomer action stars is somewhat paradoxical, as aged men are not normatively considered to fit the requirements of hegemonic masculinity and physical prowess commonly expected from the action hero (Bühring). In their attempts to find explanations for the genesis of geriaction herohood, scholars typically offer an explanation by looking at the cultural politics of contemporary action cinema or at Hollywood’s industrial practices. The resurfacing of stars such as Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stallone, and Arnold Schwarzenegger as silver-haired men of action is either placed in the specific context of a post-recession crisis in masculinity (Chivers) or as a side-effect of the still-potent star power of the 1980s celebrities (King).

To contrast the above-discussed opinions, this article offers an alternative approach to the origins and operations of aged heroes. Namely that these heroes are not a contradictory component within the action film’s generic requirements, but should instead be considered a logical extension of many conventions and pleasures on which the action film is grafted. First off, aged action heroes are not a recent phenomenon. In *Lethal Weapon* 1, iconic police detective Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) was already nearing his retirement and “too old for this sh\*t”. Similarly, many 1980s action films such as *Firefox* and *Blue Thunder*, foreground aged heroes and heavily play on themes of aging. Corrective to the approach that considers ageing to contravene the foundations of the action film, it should instead be argued that that within iterations of aged men, both past and present, the identity of the action hero as old, strained, and out of place in the modern world, is a potent source of hegemonic masculinity and action film herohood. Action film heroes even perform age, or at least many of its associated characteristics, to tap into the masculine and heroic capital these heroes carry. Through the intersectional forces of masculinity, affect, and genre, action films attempts to construct the heroism of its characters through an “economy of exertion”. Herein, melodramatic structures of offense and endurance are relied on to evoke feelings of compassion and anger, before subsequently mobilizing these affects in the direction of the genre’s demand for retributory violence. To illustrate these observations, this article relies on a close reading of contemporary geriaction films *The Last Stand*, *3 Days to Kill*, and *Taken 3*.

**Acting your age**

At first glance, the notion that age is performed in a manner that emphasizes the difficulties of the action hero’s body seems to contradict much of the scholarly work done on the subject. Hollywood is generally associated with refusing to acknowledge the effects of age and airbrushing the disabilities and obstacles that come with time (Chivers). Action films especially are said to fall in line with a representational strategy in which the male bodies of its heroes are not bothered or hindered by their old age. Lisa-Nike Bühring argues that action films go through great lengths to ensure the spectator that their heroes are never-aging. Referring to *The Expendables 2*, she notices that: “literally from the first scenes the protagonists are staged as men who, despite their aged faces and their age, have neither lost their physical strength, agility, and fitness nor do they suffer from any age-related mental limitations” (44). Several authors (Calasanti and King; Cruikshank) have pointed out that such representations are part of the wider discourse on ‘successful aging’. This discourse fits a masculine imaginary that aims to preserve the status of hegemonic masculinity amongst elderly men by refusing to acknowledge many of the impediments that come with old age (such as slowness, bad eyesight, a loss in physical power and deteriorating health). Since action films are generically built on hyper-masculine renditions of heroic bodies capable of withstanding any type of torment or pain (Tasker), it seems only natural that action films engage in a type of age-denial to safeguard the masculine status of their heroes.

According to Donnar, the most popular strategy action films utilize in reiterating discourses of successful aging is omitting any components that allude to the heroic body’s waning masculinity. For example, since the aged hero’s figure is less a sight of spectacle and perhaps more a sight of ridicule according to hegemonic standards of masculine physicality, these bodies are – uncharacteristically for the genre – concealed behind clothing to divert attention from their age. In a similar vein, Homlund notices that this negation of the aged hero’s body has resulted in a de-emphasizing of masochistic and tortuous bodily suffering. Whereas a hero’s masculinity used to be communicated through a display of muscularity, these very same bodies are now evidence of a foreworn physicality and can therefore no longer be fetishized within the context of the genre. Instead, Donnar notes, masculinity is displaced from the body onto attributes of the hero, such as oversized guns and vehicles. Shivers points out that another such site of displacement can be found in the aging hero’s spectacular performances, as they redirect attention from his age to the youthful actions performed. In all of the above-discussed approaches, the notion prevails that the action film compulsively engages in discourses of successful aging to negate the physical dispositions of its heroes and maintain their masculine dominance. Through omitting any signs of decay and making its heroes perform a series of compensatory actions, the films, its hero, and the spectator can thus take part in a pretend play that allows the hero to continue masculine heroics as if they are still in their prime.

While these readings of successful aging are entirely warranted, the studies they belong to are somewhat one-sided regarding the role of aged heroes within the generic logics of the action film. Geriaction scholars generally seem to focus on what is omitted or de-emphasized in relation to these heroes and therefore end up with an analysis of how the representation of the action hero body changes in relation to age – focusing on the same limited selection of films to prove their point. However, much rather than ignoring age, geriaction cinema signifies a space in which age is being emphasized by thematically recognizing and engaging with the vulnerability and exhaustion of its heroes. Although statements of successful aging in the action film genre shouldn’t be refuted, the refusal to acknowledge age does not signify the source of the aging action hero’s masculinity. As they fail to compete in the same league as their younger counterparts, aged action heroes simply attain their masculine status in other ways than bodily display. In this sense, old age and masculinity are not necessarily contradictory, but in many ways intersect and affirm one another. After all, physical prowess is only one way for men to imbue themselves with a sense of hegemonic masculinity. Susan Sontag, for example, mentioned that age actually favors the perception of masculine status, as men of age are often considered figures of great maturity and authority. In line with Stella Bruzzi (*Bringing Up Daddy*) or Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, the aging hero can be recognized to play into archetypes of the wiser and experienced father figure. However, this article argues that the decisive source of masculine power lies in the emphasis on the action hero’s vulnerability. In contrast to King, this approach reads the action film as accentuating and thematizing the fragility of its heroes that accompanies their age. This performance of old age and its symptoms is not only a way to (re)establish the hero characters’ masculine authority, but also serves as a powerful affective apparatus that helps cement spectator allegiances and justifies heroic violence. In order to fully understand this, it is necessary to elaborate on action cinema’s origins in spectacular melodrama.

**Strenuous heroics**

Several prominent action film scholars (Gallagher; O’Brien; Eagle) have already pointed out that what we contemporarily define as action cinema finds its origins in the narrative mode of melodrama. According to Linda Williams (1) “melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation or moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action”. Marc Gallagher acknowledges many melodramatic traits in the action film and is convinced that the thrills of the genre are vested in the externalization of inner passions. Harvey O’Brien (2) builds on these notions and argues that the action film is “best understood as a fusion of form and content – a cinema of action. It represents the idea and ethic of action through a form in which action, agitation and movement are paramount”. In melodrama, experiences of pain and suffering are an essential component of herohood, because moral worth is here measured by the ability to endure and exert action. Similarly, the narrative structure of the action film is built around trauma and triumph by making the hero’s journey progress along the lines of painful humiliation and righteous vindication.

Victimization can thus be considered a pivotal topos in the melodramatic tradition. Jonna Eagle has historically mapped how the position of the victim helped to cement white male hegemony. Through the shared experience of suffering and compassion, affects such as anger, disgust, and indignation are elicited and often mobilized towards violent ends. To Eagle (3): “Sympathy and aggression operate as twinned affects here: the identification with suffering serves simultaneously as an alignment with and implicit endorsement of state-sponsored violence”. This is especially the case for the action film, as the genre consistently finds ways to victimize its heroes. For example, action films do this through the consistent emphasis on physical pain and the narrative motif of torture (Tasker). As with the cowboy of the classic American Western film, it is precisely through displays of suffering that the action hero acquires his heroic status, as well as the aggressive animo to eliminate his enemies. Masculine transformations are central to Western’s mythic resolutions of crises (Neale) and the action film falls in line with many of its generic codes and conventions when it comes to constructing masculinity (Eagle). While this process of masculine becoming in the Western has by Lee Clark Mitchell and others been read as a biological process connected to the display and restraint of violence, the gunslinger’s agency to act can also come forth from the hero’s position as wronged victim. Jane Tompkins (229) refers to instances of victimization as providing moments of ‘moral ecstasy’, because “the hero is so right (that is, so wronged), that he can kill with impunity”.

According to Eagle, the action hero’s heroic status, therefore, doesn’t stem from his ability to be victorious, but his capacity to withstand loss and persevere. Such masculine performance in many ways echoes discourses surrounding strenuous life. Commonly understood as having originated in a Victorian Anglo-American context, the notion of strenuous life came forward from a series of expectations and anxieties around the threatened position of the male body by the effeminized character of modern society. Straining evidently refers to an activity of exertion and signifies a trial for the muscular or psychological capacities, or in other words: the capability to endure. As Benjamin Rader points out, the implied straining bodies are in fact male, making such discourses heavily gendered. To be a man, according to this discourse, means never taking the easy road, but gaining power from the hardness and challenges that you are faced with. What underlies the notion of strenuous living is that there is something ennobling about extreme exertion. The capability to withstand pressure constitutes a regenerative or redemptive potential, because it lifts a man out of his limitations. While strenuous life was articulated in a very specific set of socio-political and historical conditions, many authors argue that these discourses were revitalized in the 1980s (to Purse the cradle of the contemporary action film) and continue to be part of scripts of white Western masculinity to this day (Eagle). Similarly to O’Brien, who terms action films the cinema of the will, Purse argues that one of the action film’s key pleasures is derived from seeing the hero encounter and ultimately overcome obstacles.

The melodramatic affective device of victimization aligns neatly with ideological scripts of strenuous masculinity because within this particular narrative mode the hero’s power stems precisely from his capacity to withstand suffering. This approach helps us to better understand the role of age in action films and the heroic scenarios these action films contrive. While suffering is commonly associated with a lack of masculinity, action cinema’s melodramatic origin finds a way to ideologically rearticulate these weaknesses and transform them into a potent source of hegemonic masculinity and heroism. Pain and other forms of extreme physical and mental discomfort become a performance that functions to emphasize the total amount of pressure the hero can endure without breaking. The gist of this heroic and activating form of suffering lays not in denying that something hurts, but rather in fully acknowledging and even maximizing expressions of hurt so these can be stoically resisted. Through this performance of enduring pain and exerting the bodily and mental capacities, the hero earns his masculinity – and with it, his agency to act. Or in more colloquial terms: no pain, no gain.

**An economy of exertion**

It is possible to approach aged action heroes from a novel perspective by considering masculinity and stoic victimhood as coinciding positions. Instead of negating the weaknesses and wounds that come with old age, action films operationalize, or even weaponize, the frailties of its heroes in a way that sustains the violent rhetoric of the genre. When we consider masculine herohood a form of capital that action heroes accumulate throughout the narrative, it is important to understand that different affective logics help sustain its ideological underpinnings. Complying with the structures of victimization commonly present in the genre, filmmakers make use of geriaction heroes’ identity as old aged to elicit compassion amongst spectators and affectively frame their actions as just. To better understand how the strenuous life of these heroes serves such generic pleasures and ideological projects, the displacement and distribution of masculine power should be understood in terms of an ‘economy of exertion’ in which power stems from a surplus in strenuous effort. Bruzzi (*Men’s Cinema*) notes that in men-oriented cinema, such as action films, the enactment of effort takes center stage. Not only is the action film’s narrative patterned around the trajectory of increasingly difficult tasks, moreover, much of the genre’s stylistic system (such as mise-en-scène and cinematography) is designed to effectively communicate the large amounts of effort heroes invest in their tasks. This focus on heroic exertion aligns with Purse’s (43) definition of action cinema as a ‘body genre’. By making the heroes excessively sweat, bleed, break, and fight in straining positions, filmmakers engage both the bodies of their protagonists, as well as that of the spectators.

To illustrate the argument that endurance makes the man, the films *The Last Stand*, *Three Days to Kill*, and *Taken 3* make for a suitable collective case study. Being all three released in 2013-2014, these films prove to be a particularly relevant set of examples because they are part of what can be called the second wave of millennial geriaction cinema. After the financial success of aged hero team-up films, such as *The Expendables* and *Red* several years prior, increasingly more films were released in which the action stars of old set out to reclaim their former territory. That this productional trend coincided with a shift in the promotional and press discourse around these films – as made clear by advertising material and popular articles such as Lyne’s – is evidence that the geriaction film around that time turned into a more self-conscious generic entity. Since heroes their age became a more prominent component of these action films, filmmakers also started to more deliberately engage with aspects of ageing and employed it as a moldable variable that could be directed towards narrative and thematic ends. The three films chosen for analysis all offer a different incarnation of a long-established action star icon as a now aged hero putting up one last fight and signifying the re-introduction (or affirmation) of three iconic action stars (Arnold Schwarzenegger, Kevin Costner, and Liam Neeson). As the heroes of these respective films are all past their prime, yet pushed into a set of extraordinarily dangerous and difficult circumstances, exertion is not a hard thing to find. While commonly assumed that age is side-lined, these films contrastingly emphasize struggles stemming from old age by placing the hero in situations of extreme effort. *Last Stand* is an interesting case to kick off the analysis, for the film signified the first leading role for Arnold Schwarzenegger in over ten years and marked his definitive comeback as a (geri)action star. In *Last Stand* Schwarzenegger stars as Ray Owens; a contemporary Sheriff nearing retirement in the sleepy town of [Sommerton Junction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somerton,_Arizona), [Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arizona). Much of the film’s dialogue and exposition function to illustrate that Owens has had a rough life as an LAPD narcotics officer and wants nothing more than to be left alone and keep the peace in his community. As a couple of FBI agents in the film explain, Owens was the best of his unit and “took home the medal of honor and five bullets” in an unsuccessful raid that killed most of his unit. His deteriorating health and traumatic experiences are thematized within the film, for example when Owen’s survivor guilt proves to be one of the major reasons he left the force. “I’ve seen enough blood and death” voices an emotionally exhausted Owens. When an evil plot unfolds to help a ruthless cartel boss escape to Mexico, it is obvious that he is, like many that came before him, too old for this shi\*t.

Age is clearly not something concealed, nor minimized in the narrative, but forms the crux of the narrative drama, character developments, and generic pleasures played out by the filmmakers. However, not dissimilar to *Expendables 2*, Owens isn’t limiting himself in his abilities, eagerly disposes of a mercenary army and enacts other spectacular feats unlikely for his age. That Owens is still capable of such heroics despite the film overtly marking out that he is an “old man” is an interesting paradox to explore, and a clear indication that age is something performed. In *The Last Stand* indications of Owens’ old age do more to enhance the remarkable nature of his deeds, and with it, his heroism, rather than diminishing his stature as hegemonically masculine. In the economy of exertion, Owens’ age only raises the net value of his actions. While impressive by any account, the strain put on Owens by the life that lays behind him is what makes him more masculine than his counterparts. Furthermore, it is through this same set of circumstances that Owens’ victim-position is conceived. A position from which he can eventually rise as triumphant. The economy of exertion revolves around distilling masculine worth and heroic capital from such a moment of effortful action. Age here factors in as an opportunity for filmmakers to find new and different trials for their heroes to engage with, and simultaneously as an element that raises the stakes and imbues the events unfolding with an additional layer of suspense. As such, through the economy of exertion, aging heroes are conveniently accommodated by the generic framework of the action film.

The choice to describe the role of exertion in the genre as an ‘economy’ is a deliberate one because this turn of phrase emphasizes the role of production, distribution, and consumption in how the performance of pain and effort factors into the action film’s generic affordances. Sara Ahmed’s notion of affective economies is vital here. Using the example of the affect of hate, Ahmed (120) refers to emotions as operating as a type of capital: “affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation”. Distributed through both the social and the physical, emotions always circulate and increase in magnitude by way of their own accumulation. In this sense, the action hero’s strenuous actions can be considered a means of production for the affects of sympathy and aggression, for every act of exertion only solidifies the spectator’s emphatic alliance and the hero’s position as a morally superior victim. Once the action film has sufficiently invested into such affects, they are subsequently consummated by the hero through the enactment of vengeful violence against his foes. To further elaborate on this, it’s worthwhile to make a distinction between three different types of exertion filmmakers employ: physical exertion, social exertion, and symbolic exertion.

**These old bones**

The first expression of strenuous life is at the same time the most self-evident and the most contested: that of physical exertion. As already outlined above, relating to geriaction cinema, there exists the perspective that even the most aged of heroes experience no hindrance in executing impossible actions. However, the superhuman competences of aging heroes do not mean that their age is wholly omitted from the narrative. In *Last Stand* and *Taken 3*, both aged action heroes integrate an element of exhaustion into their acting performance. Before, during, and after action sequences the aspect of age is injected into the scene by making them act out their tiredness and physical difficulties. During a shootout sequence in *Last Stand*, Owens is hurdled through the window of a nearby diner, and lays immobilized on the ground for several seconds. Seemingly at the point of total exhaustion, he is asked by the diner patron: “how are you, Sheriff”, to which Owens wryly replies: “old”. The diner patron closes the short conversation by stating: “Nah, you got ways to go yet”, before Owens heads out again to finish the fight. Apart from doubling as comic relief, the precise function of these shots and scenes breaking up the film’s action lays in its desire to exhibit Owens’ age. The point is that Owens is under extreme physical stress, but that – as the diner patron notices – this will not hold him back from doing what has to be done.

A similar set of signifiers can be identified in *Taken* 3. While hero Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson) is capable of dispatching, escaping, or outwitting anyone with ease, his age is referenced to by intervals or epilogues in several action sequences. Midway through the chase sequence of the film’s second act, Mills can be seen panting heavily from the effort the pursuit demanded of his physique. The strain placed on Mills is further emphasized by the scene’s close-up cinematography, aiming to fetishize the male body in a state of near exhaustion.When the chase abruptly continues, however, all of Mills’ symptoms of exhaustion seem to vanish as he continues running without further hesitation. The function of this short plug is to give the character a moment to perform age in such a way that the spectator has to acknowledge the endurance Mills displays. Like a wrinkle-studded mask, age can easily be put on and off again. It is an active component of the character’s identity when it needs to be, yet vanishes without a trace when it has no further purpose in the film. This way, the aging action hero can have his cake and eat it too. The old age of the character is a sources of precariousness and victimhood, yet simultaneously does not obstruct him from following all the cues of the competent action hero.

When the age of the action hero does interfere with the action hero’s commonly accepted capabilities, it is most often through the narrative device of disease or illness. In *3 Days*, longtime CIA operative Ethan Renner (Kevin Costner) is diagnosed with glioblastoma at the beginning of the film; a highly lethal brain tumor often tied to the victim’s old age. Renner’s illness not only functions as a death warrant that helps heighten the stakes and instigate events within the narrative, but also provides a limitation to his success in the field. Upon trying to apprehend an international arms dealer, Renner suddenly suffers from severe fatigue, distorted eyesight, and heavy disorientation. These symptoms keep him from completing his mission and return several times throughout the film at key moments (such as the climactic shootout). Bodily dysfunction is a variable the filmmaker can play with in the context of action sequences, as the limitations it sets to the hero’s abilities help generate interesting new scenarios. Furthermore, much of Renner’s victimhood is derived from a constant accentuation of his vulnerabilities. The highly subjectivized style the film adopts (POV, distortion effects, scrambled audition) when Renner has one of his disease-related fits shows the film desire for the spectator to empathize with the character. The visualization of the ailments of the aging body is an affect-laden ‘memento mori’ which helps to reframe the nothing-to-lose CIA operative from stone-cold killer to tragic victim.

While illness and tumors aren’t inherently part of aging, it is interesting that action films feel inclined to rely on this narrative trope to partially immobilize their hero. In action films, such as *Mission Impossible II*, disease is something abstract that even enhances the capacities of the action hero, yet it is clear that only the aged hero is capable of being inhibited in their physical agency. In *3 Days*,age is used as the cause of disease, if not entirely presented as a disease itself. By way of the narrative device of disease or illness, the hero’s age is able to impose limitations to otherwise natural abilities, thus rendering him severely weakened and overly vulnerable. These instances of bodily malfunctioning further strain the hero’s strengths and therefore make his actions all the more suspenseful and impressive. To the personas of Costner, Neeson, and Schwarzenegger, age is far from an emasculating component. It presents a challenge like never before to their actions and with it a new type of opportunity to display their masculine might.

**Father knows Best**

The second type of straining comes not from the action hero himself, but from external forces. The wisdom the aged action hero possesses is articulated as both a burden and an opportunity for redemption. Because the action hero is here reconfigured as a father, much of his social exertion is derived from raising and protecting a child or protégé bestowed upon him. While Sheriff Owens in *Last Stand* has no child of his own, the young deputy Jerry (Zach Gilford) takes up the role of a surrogate son. At the beginning of the film, Jerry comes to Owens asking for advice and a recommendation to join the LAPD, complaining about being bored of serving as a deputy and being ready for some action. Having had a long and violent career with the LAPD himself, Owens is skeptical of this decision and warns him about the heavy toll such a life takes. In a fatherly fashion, Owens attempts to protect Jerry and considers it his responsibility to guard over his team. Throughout many scenes, we see his flock of deputies as likable yet incompetent figures who even have trouble handling the weapons they are expected to fire. Because the spectator can rely on Owens’ competence as an action hero, much of the film’s suspense and concern is displaced onto the supporting characters that Owens mentors. This social responsibly puts a heavy strain onto the hero and even become a component that is integrated within the action sequences, for example when Owens has to protect his deputies and townspeople amidst shootouts. This responsibility to raise and protect is a form of social exertion. It is further intensified when Owens arrives too late during an ambush and fails to protect Jerry from harm. Owens’ failure to rescue his young deputy imbues the Sheriff with a form of surrogate victimhood and much of the film’s ensuing violence is enacted in the name of this tragic loss. This failure to protect becomes a traumatic marker that further strains the hero and can only be absolved through achieving revenge upon those responsible.

In a similar vein, the attempt to reconnect with family and loved ones is a commonly tackled theme in films with aged action heroes. In *3 Days* and *Taken 3,* the attempts of the heroes to reconnect with their estranged daughters presents an arguably greater source of exertion than fighting the armies of mercenaries besieging them. Part of the dramatic conflict in both films lays with them coming to terms with their absence as a father during their many years of government service. To make up for lost times, Renner and Miller start off with attempts at reconnecting by bribing them with gifts (such as an oversized panda toy) and imploring to spend more time together (“I found a bunch of old home-videos. How about we watch them together”). Such attempts are evidently unsuccessful, because within the masculine logic of the action film young girls are hot-tempered and perpetually confused creatures. Much of the films’ narrative is patterned around different attempts the fathers make to be more intimately involved in the life of their children, and being scolded and shunned for these attempts at reconciliation. In *Taken 3*, when Miller shows up three days early for the birthday of his daughter, in an attempt to show his daughter that he is not always “predictable”, his daughter reacts with equal shock and reservation. It is clear from their interaction that Miller is an unwelcome guest and not acknowledged in his authority as a father.

*3 Days* similarlyshows the action hero as a figure that is unable to exert control over his family. Years of absence have made his wife move on and his daughter grow weary of expecting anything from her father. The scenes in which Renner tries to amend their old dynamics and restore his position as head of the nuclear family deliberately play out as uncomfortable and always end on a sour note. The tragedy of the action hero’s domestic life again fall in line with the conventions of the classical Western. He is the rugged frontiersman who is needed to protect society, yet pays the heroic sacrifice of not functioning in society himself (Slotkin). Not dissimilar to the gunfighting heroes of *The Man from Laramie* and *Shane*, Renner is good at killing, but it seems not at much else – the least of which, being a father. This incompetence in fulfilling his role as a father figure is an opportunity for eliciting compassion, but also for masculine restoration, as the hero is eventually accepted by his daughter. Ironically, the key to the hero’s success lays precisely in the heroic violence that distanced him from his family in the first place. Such father-daughter reunions do not succeed through classic notions of fatherhood, but rather through the use of Renner and Miller’s special set of skills, such as torture, surveillance, and killing. Fatherhood is transformed into merely another mission the hero has to complete, with all the same tools, techniques and violent practices that serve the objectives of their careers in special services. Their daughters are usually molded into responsible young women by way of their rescue from dangerous situations, proving once and for all that they are not yet ready to be as independent as they would like to be. The dramatic scenario of kidnapping resurfaces in both films and forges both dependence and resolution through the imminent threat to the daughters’ wellbeing.

In *3 Days*, for example, the hero father finds out that his daughter is not at home studying with a friend, but at a Parisian night club with a bunch of boys. Within the generic verisimilitude of the action film this evidently means trouble and the father goes on an expedition through seedy tattoo studios and dark back alleys to bring his daughter back, breaking bones and cracking skulls along the way. Similar to the first installment of the *Taken*-franchise, the setting of Paris here serves as an extrapolation of the hero patriarch’s worst fears. The nightly streets of Paris are a safe haven for international criminals and are littered with signs of moral decay such as elderly men dating young girls. Old age here functions as a masculine signifier of wisdom and righteousness, allowing the father’s gaze to pierce through the absurdities and debaucheries of millennial life. While Renner’s sense of concern feels unnatural and exaggerated even by normative standards of parenting, the film eventually confirms his suspicions by contriving a situation in which his daughter is sexually assaulted in the nightclub bathroom by a gang of Parisian boys. Renner stops the boys in the act by brutally eliminating them in front of his daughter, before carrying her out of the night club in his arms – clearly evoking Costner’s iconic role from *The Bodyguard*. In contrast to the display of soft fatherhood, such as buying presents and spending time together, it is this reiteration of violent masculinity that functions as a tipping point in their relationship and helps restore his position as the cherished father. To further emphasize this moment of success for vengeful violence, this sequence is followed with Renner finally having the moment of authentic parenting he wanted by teaching his daughter how to ride a bike – something he never did because of his years of absence. Here violence has finally loosened the strain of unsuccessful fatherhood and establishes Renner as the patriarch who can set his family straight after all.

**Never send a boy to do a man’s job**

A final form of pressure that is placed on the aged hero, urging him to reestablish his role as an authoritative figure of action, is symbolic exertion. I use this term to refer to the effort the hero displays by proving his relevance in a new era. Age is not only emphasized in action sequences and character relations, for films also thematize old age to be part of their central dramatic conflict. Conform to the genre’s convention of successful outsiders, the aged hero is a man out of place. Lost in the speed, chaos and loose morals of the modern world, he struggles to prove his continuing relevance. Donnar already pointed out that themes of professional redundancy feature heavily in the genre and double as a metaphor for the bodywork aging action stars have to endure. What is, however, not included in his analysis, is that these narratives of obsoleteness also help place these characters in an affect-laden position of victimhood. *Last Stand*, *Taken* 3, and 3 *Days* all present a decaying society as a stage to reiterate regressively masculine discourses. *3 Days* depicts its hero as an obsolete object from the past, currently more a hazard to society than an actual asset. Nobody seems to remember the heroics Renner has performed, nor appreciates his presence. He has seemingly lost all relevance in an effeminized and overly complex society. In *Last Stand*, Owens is subjected to humiliation by the town major, who uses him as his personal valet and asks him to park his sports car. The same goes for *Taken* 3, in which Miller’s ex-wife has found a new husband in the shape of a slick and slimy businessman who jealously forbids Miller to ever see her again. When his ex-wife is murdered and the FBI suspects Miller as the culprit, the hero becomes the target of a national manhunt. One of the reasons they suspect Miller is because his special forces past makes him a liability in the eyes of contemporary violence-sensitive society. It is clear that, as an action hero of a different generation, Miller has outlived his welcome and has become a figure of ridicule and persecution.

Eagle points out that by reframing themselves as marginalized identities or dissident outliers, hegemonic forces often attempt to deny or naturalize the power relations they are a part of. In a similar fashion, *Taken 3* succeeds in framing its white male hero by way of unmitigated victimhood. What further aids the ideological work necessary to cement these aged heroes as misunderstood rebels, is the film’s efforts to problematize the social environment the hero lives in. As stated above, *3 Days* uses the imaginaries of European debauchery to contrastingly accentuate Renner’s old-fashioned cowboy masculinity. Similarly, *Taken* 3 presents a vision of America as overrun by Russian gangsters, plagued by an ineffective justice system and a waning respect for core American values. Furthermore, Miller’s masculinity is emphasized by surrounding him with lesser men. His archaic aged masculinity is pitted against the more effeminate, smooth-talking, rich new husband of his wife. Financial status here functions as an additional component to victimize Miller as a blue-collar inferior to his high-finance romantic rival – a binary not uncommon for the genre (Bruzzi *Men’s Cinema*). Such gendered and class-related formations make Miller a victim and the solution to the malaises of modern society. His hands-on approach, disrespect for authority, stoic masculinity, and capacity to withstand suffering, make him an outcast in today’s world. Yet it is precisely this set of characteristics that render him capable of saving the day. He is the bitter medicine society needs to swallow and the blunt instrument that cuts through all the unnecessary nonsense in order to turn attention to what is important. But most of all, he is framed as a force of authenticity, because the action hero does not rely on the idle talk of reason, but on the affective force of his instincts. When the new husband turns out to be the one behind the death of Miller’s ex-wife, energies of masculine retribution and socio-moral disgust get their cathartic release by Miller’s enacted vengeance (first by waterboarding then by gunfire).

The action film naturalizes the masculine hero’s enactment of heroic violence through affects of injustice and restoration. Performing age on the level of physical, social, and symbolic exertion are what define him as an unjust victim of modern times and simultaneously cement his position as a symbol of robust masculine might. The economy of exertion provides the hero with different supply streams of masculine/heroic capital. By starting from the underdog position of the old man, disrespected father, and redundant soldier, the aged action hero has access to a series of opportunities that help him display and reassert his manhood. Through the affectively framed victimhood of the hero as a figure of romanticized resistance this masculine capital is converted in his agency to act. The genre thus mobilizes affects of sympathy and frustration to render heroic violence as something both natural and desirable. Violence is often presented as a logical outcome after other more effeminized practices of kindness and patience have failed to prevail. But most of all, it is understood as a twinned effect of exhaustion. The hero’s killing often results from the collective frustration about the many offenses he had to endure. By being brought to the brink of total exhaustion the hero can kill with impunity, because violence has graduated into an absolute necessity. The strain placed on the hero tightens the cords of an affective catapult. The more tension is placed on the cords of the catapult, the stronger the release, and the larger the damage. Similarly, the economy of exertion ensures that the hero is put under a sufficient amount of pressure, so as to successfully place him in the position of hero-victim and warrant his action as a legitimate and authentic expression. The instant before the hero triumphs and victimhood is transformed into heroic vengeance is precisely when the affective economies reach their surplus. It is at this intersection of vulnerability, exhaustion and masculine renewal that the power of the aged action hero resides.

**Conclusion**

There is a scene in *Last Stand* in which Sheriff Owens tries to vacate a local diner before an incoming ambush by a drug cartel. To his surprise the elderly men waiting for their breakfast refuse to comply, one of them even voicing his dissatisfaction by stating: “you’re talking to a 72-year-old man with high cholesterol eating a bacon and cheddar omelet with extra cheddar. Do I look like I’m afraid of death?”. As this quip jokingly illustrates, within the action film men do not just ripen with old age, they toughen. While commonly assumed that hegemonic masculinity deteriorates with aspects of old age, this article offered an oppositional approach in which the emphasis on age is precisely what serves such masculine agendas. By elucidating action cinema’s roots in sensational melodrama and the affective logics that lay at its core, old age can be defined as the ideal set of preconditions to place its heroes in a position of empowering victimhood. Not only do such victimizing practices play into discourses of strenuous life, they also place heroes in the position of besieged underdog, allowing for an affective framing of heroic violence as righteous and pleasurable.

Because there is masculine and heroic capital to be found in affects of compassion and aggression, action films make its hero perform age and its symptoms. The action hero is imbued with a set of signifiers and conditions that frame him as an object of the past, under continuous pressure of society, his surroundings and his physical condition. By approaching the tripartite of age, masculinity, and genre, it becomes possible to add an additional layer of nuance to understanding how masculine imaginaries are mercurial entities that take many shapes, and how heroic violence is legitimized within the framework of the action film. The constant effort exerted by aged action hero bodies operates in an economical manner by collecting affects of suffering and anger, and then redistributing them into vengeful acts of violence. In this manner, components of age should not be considered an aberration within the action film, but rather something that can be easily accommodated in the genres narrative structure of trauma and triumph. The aged action hero here becomes repurposed as a solid bastion of hegemonic masculinity and as an underdog with nothing left to lose. While these heroes might be over-the-hill age-wise, the action film allows them to step out of retirement, fists clenched and guns akimbo, always ready for one last fight.

**References**

Ahmed, Sara. *The cultural politics of emotion*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Bruzzi, Stella. *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Postwar Hollywood*. London: British Film Institute, 2006.

Bruzzi, Stella. *Men's Cinema: Masculinity and Mise-en-scène in Hollywood*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Bühring, Lisa-Nike. "Declining to Decline: Aged Tough Guys in 'The Expendables' and 'The Expendables 2'." *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* 1.3. (2017): 41-60.

Calasanti, Toni, and Neal King. "Firming the floppy penis: Age, class, and gender relations in the lives of old men." *Men and masculinities* 8.1 (2005): 3-23.

Chivers, Sally. *The silvering screen: Old age and disability in cinema*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2011.

Cruikshank, Margaret. *Learning to be old: Gender, culture, and aging*. Lanham, MY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013

Donnar, Glen. "Narratives of cultural and professional redundancy: Ageing action stardom and the'geri-action'film." *Communication, Politics & Culture* 49.1 (2016): 1.

Eagle, Jonna. *Imperial Affects: Sensational Melodrama and the Attractions of American Cinema*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017.

Gallagher, Mark. *Action figures: Men, action films, and contemporary adventure narratives*. Berlin: Springer, 2006.

Holmlund, Christine. *Impossible bodies: femininity and masculinity at the movies*. London: Routledge, 2013.

King, Neal. "Old cops: Occupational aging in a film genre." *Staging Age*. Ed. Leni Marshall and Valerie Lipscomb. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 57-81.

Lyne, Charlie. "Geriaction heroes and the age of aged movie stars". *The Guardian*.

Mar 30, 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/mar/30/geriaction-heroes-age-of-aged-stars>

Mitchell, Lee Clark. *Westerns: Making the man in fiction and film*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Moore, Robert L., and Douglas Gillette. *King, warrior, magician, lover*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1991.

Neale, Steve. "Masculinity as spectacle." *Screen* 24.6 (1983): 2-17.

O'Brien, Harvey. *Action movies: The cinema of striking back*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Purse, Lisa. *Contemporary action cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

Rader, Benjamin G. "The Quest for Self-Sufficiency and the New Strenuosity: Reflections on the Strenuous Life of the 1970s and the 1980s." *Journal of sport history* 18.2 (1991): 255-266.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter nation: The myth of the frontier in twentieth-century America*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.

Sontag, Susan. "The double standard of aging." *The Other Within Us*. Ed. London: Routledge, 1997. 19-24.

Tasker, Yvonne. *Spectacular bodies: Gender, genre and the action cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Tompkins, Jane. *West of everything: The inner life of westerns*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Williams, Linda. *Playing the race card: Melodramas of black and white from Uncle Tom to OJ Simpson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.