

Western Narratives of Male Ageing:
The Expendables and *The Expendables 2*

Lisa-Nike Bühring

The West: Concept, Narrative and Politics
December 8–9, 2016, University of Jyväskylä

Cultural master narratives shape and maintain the cultural frames which determine the values, norms and attitudes of a particular culture.¹ A crucial agent in the communication and preservation of hegemonic cultural narratives of the west are the media.² Thus, gaining a better understanding of western hegemonic cultural narratives transmitted in the media is crucial when aiming to approximate the concept of the West³.

The West is increasingly dominated by socio-economic system of financial neo-liberalism⁴ and its core values of materialism, consumerism and individualism⁵. Since youth is believed to be the principal time of independence, production and consumption it is held in the highest esteem and celebrated while older age is predominantly linked to notions of decline, frailty and dependence.⁶ This perception of chronological life stages is reflected in the media.⁷

The analysis of cultural narratives of male ageing will allow for particularly interesting insights of a society which is characterised by a socio-political system essentially supporting patriarchal dominance.⁸ I selected the Hollywood mainstream action films *The Expendables*⁹ and *The Expendables 2*¹⁰ to analyse the filmic portrayal of male ageing since they were produced for the commercial mass movie market and hence rely strongly on formulaic narration and

¹ Cassandra Phoenix and Andrew C Sparkes, "Young Athletic Bodies and Narrative Maps of Aging," *Journal of Aging Studies* 20, no. 2 (2006); Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

² Sally Chivers, *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

³ ,The West' is throughout the paper understood as a culture characterised by "a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning" Daniel G. Bates and Fred Plog, "Cultural Anthropology " (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 6.

⁴ Richard Eckersley, "Is Modern Western Culture a Health Hazard?," *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35, no. 2 (2006).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cruikshank.

⁷ Phoenix and Sparkes.

⁸ Robert William Connell, *Masculinities*, 2 ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

⁹ "The Expendables (Director's Cut)." DVD. Directed by Sylvester Stallone,(U.S.: Lionsgate, 2010.).

¹⁰ "The Expendables 2 (Director's Cut)." DVD. Directed by Simon West,(U.S.: Lionsgate, 2012.).

characterisation.¹¹ The majority of protagonists in both films are not only male but also between mid-forties and mid-sixties and it can therefore be assumed that their portrayal reflects dominant cultural narratives associated with older men. In addition, the high domestic and particularly foreign gross earnings of the selected films,¹² justifies the belief that the two films successfully capture contemporary cultural narratives.

In *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* Sylvester Stallone, in his role of Barney Ross, and the rest of his crew are living proof for the assumption that it is possible to remain in control of your body and mind in later life. Signs of ageing are counteracted by hypermuscularity and exaggerated actions scenes which show the physical but also the mental strength of the protagonists. This not only allows the main characters to continue working regardless of their age but also enables them to perform tasks very few people, regardless of their age, could fulfil.

In a neoliberal society being productive members of society is essential in determining the individual's value¹³. Particularly for men, employment, related status and efficiency are main means of identification and of rightfully demanding male privileges in a patriarchal society.¹⁴ Portraying the 'Expendables' as mercenaries performing their jobs to the highest standards possible despite their age enforces not only their masculinity but also their usefulness and youthfulness. Narratives of decline in *The Expendable* and *The Expendables 2* are resultantly transformed into stories of success and progress.¹⁵

¹¹ Yvonne Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film* (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹² Mojo Box Office, "*The Expendables*," <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=expendables.htm>; "*The Expendable 2*," <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=expendables2.htm>.

¹³ Marty Martinson and Jodi Halpern, "Ethical Implications of the Promotion of Elder Volunteerism: A Critical Perspective," *Journal of Aging Studies* 25, no. 4 (2011).

¹⁴ Nina Baur and Jens Luedtke, *Die Soziale Konstruktion Von Männlichkeit: Hegemoniale Und Marginalisierte Männlichkeiten in Deutschland* [The Social Construction of Masculinity: Hegemonic and Marginalised Masculinities in Germany] (Barbara Budrich, 2008); Chivers.

¹⁵ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Although the cultural narrative of successful or productive ageing seems to support a positive view of ageing, it actually contributes to the marginalisation and discrimination of anyone who does not adhere to the standards of everlasting youth and puts enormous pressure on those trying to fulfil them.¹⁶

In both films the myth of successful ageing is intertwined with narratives of decline. In accordance with genre customs Barney is portrayed as an ambiguous and flawed character.¹⁷ His depiction of being wise and mellow while at the same time being cynical, disillusioned and resigned are, however, also typical attributes assigned to old age.¹⁸ So is the characterisation of the majority of the cast as 'lone wolves'¹⁹ who have nevertheless taken it on them to save the world despite or perhaps because of their age since they are more expendable than younger men and women.

Notwithstanding the before mentioned, in my view, there is another much more subtle and subversive side to the two films. In *The Expendables* neo-liberal financial capitalism is portrayed extremely critically. In *The Expendables* the island of Vilena suffers majorly by neo-liberal exploitation and needs to be liberated from this by the Expendables. The explicit ideology criticism in *The Expendables* could be seen as complying with the genre convention of staging the protagonist as acting outside or even in opposition to the state or the bureaucracy linked to the state.²⁰ However, in my view, the ideology criticism is too blunt and explicit to be simply

¹⁶ Toni Calasanti and Neal King, "Firming the Floppy Penis: Age, Class, and Gender Relations in the Lives of Old Men," *Men and Masculinities* 8, no. 1 (2005); Gullette; Silke van Dyk, "The Appraisal of Difference: Critical Gerontology and the Active-Ageing-Paradigm," *Journal of Aging Studies* 31 (2014).

¹⁷ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2012); Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁸ Cruikshank; Kathleen Woodward, "Against Wisdom: The Social Politics of Anger and Aging," *Journal of Aging Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003).

¹⁹ Sara Arber, Kate Davidson, and Jay Ginn, *Gender and Ageing: Changing Roles and Relationships* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education 2003); Shogo Kudo, Emmanuel Mutisya, and Masafumi Nagao, "Population Aging: An Emerging Research Agenda for Sustainable Development," *Social Sciences* 4, no. 4 (2015).

²⁰ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*.

attributed to genre conventions. This is supported by the fact that the story would have worked as well without lashing out on neo-liberal financial capitalism.

In the *Expendables 2* the pronounced ideology criticism is replaced by an extreme exaggeration of action, speed, violence and brutality as well as by clearly humorous elements such as staging key scenes as an imitation of classic westerns of the 50ies. This can, in my view, be read as a mockery of the cultural narratives the film is based although the style is lighter, easier tolerable and perhaps more commercially usable than in the first part of *The Expendables*. If both films are seen as a critical comment on neo-liberal financial capitalism, then the films criticise the very system the apparently obvious portrayal of macho masculinity and successful ageing in both films is based on.

Regardless of the ambiguities found, my analysis of the films *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is hoped to have created an awareness for the hegemonic socio-cultural narratives the portrayal of older males in western media is based on. This should contribute to a better understanding of the concept of the West and support a more informed and less negatively connoted and fear-laden view of older age in the West.

Words: 898

References

- Arber, Sara, Kate Davidson, and Jay Ginn. *Gender and Ageing: Changing Roles and Relationships*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education 2003.
- Baur, Nina, and Jens Luedtke. *Die Soziale Konstruktion Von Männlichkeit: Hegemoniale Und Marginalisierte Männlichkeiten in Deutschland* [The Social Construction of Masculinity: Hegemonic and Marginalised Masculinities in Germany]. Barbara Budrich, 2008.
- Bordwell, David. *Poetics of Cinema*. New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2012.
- Calasanti, Toni, and Neal King. "Firming the Floppy Penis: Age, Class, and Gender Relations in the Lives of Old Men." *Men and Masculinities* 8, no. 1 (2005): 3-23.
- Chivers, Sally. *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2011.
- Connell, Robert William. *Masculinities*. 2 ed. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.
- Cruikshank, Margaret. *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.
- Daniel G. Bates, and Fred Plog. "Cultural Anthropology". New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.
- Eckersley, Richard. "Is Modern Western Culture a Health Hazard?". *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35, no. 2 (2006): 252-58.
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Aged by Culture*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Kudo, Shogo, Emmanuel Mutisya, and Masafumi Nagao. "Population Aging: An Emerging Research Agenda for Sustainable Development." *Social Sciences* 4, no. 4 (2015): 940-66.
- Martinson, Marty, and Jodi Halpern. "Ethical Implications of the Promotion of Elder Volunteerism: A Critical Perspective." *Journal of Aging Studies* 25, no. 4 (2011): 427-35.
- Mojo Box Office. "The Expendable 2." <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=expendables2.htm>.
 ———. "The Expendables." <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=expendables.htm>.
- Phoenix, Cassandra, and Andrew C Sparkes. "Young Athletic Bodies and Narrative Maps of Aging." *Journal of Aging Studies* 20, no. 2 (2006): 107-21.
- "The Expendables (Director's Cut)." Directed by Stallone, Sylvester, 103 min. U.S.: Lionsgate, 2010. DVD.
- Tasker, Yvonne. *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*. London: Routledge, 2015.
- . *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- van Dyk, Silke. "The Appraisal of Difference: Critical Gerontology and the Active-Ageing-Paradigm." *Journal of Aging Studies* 31 (2014): 93-103.
- "The Expendables 2 (Director's Cut)." Directed by West, Simon, 102 minutes. U.S.: Lionsgate, 2012. DVD.
- Woodward, Kathleen. "Against Wisdom: The Social Politics of Anger and Aging." *Journal of Aging Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 55-67.