

Article

Men Refusing to Be Marginalised

Aged Tough Guys in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*

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Abstract Old age is in western cultures under current neoliberal ideology increasingly linked to notions of decline, frailty and dependence as it is often equated with being unproductive and a burden to society. This case study is grounded in the belief that to change socio-cultural patterns one must first understand them. Consequently, this article aims to analyse the socio-cultural (re)production of narratives of ageing in general and of narratives of male ageing in particular – a topic often neglected in academic debates of ageing. Mass media today hold an enormous influence on the development and maintenance of socio-cultural standards. As such, their products need to be taken seriously even if their content might seem superficial and frivolous. A critical analysis of commercially highly successful Hollywood action films *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* will shed light on the cultural narratives of male ageing revealed in the two films and subsequently support a better understanding of the strategies used to transform narratives of decline commonly linked to ageing into stories of success and progress.

Keywords neoliberalism, cultural narratives, ageism, hegemonic masculinity, action films, marginalisation

Masculinity and Ageing in a Neoliberal Society

Ageing Tough Guys in Action Films

The hyper-muscular bodies, exaggerated armament and almost super-human powers of the predominantly older, male cast in *The Expendables* (Stallone 2010) and *The Expendables 2* (West 2012) are impressive but, given the fact that they are in between mid-forties and late sixties, also slightly obscene. The films seem to prove that only the roughness and toughness of the allegedly outdated and aged action heroes can save the world and as such they do not only tell the conventional story of the good fighting the evil but also one of older men battling their decline and disproving their perceived ‘expendability’ for neoliberal society. However, the contextualisation of the ageing action heroes in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is not without ambiguity. This, for instance, becomes clear when Barney Ross (Sylvester Stallone) after the violent death of the youngest member of the team says: ‘Why is it that the one of us who wants to live the most, deserves to live the most, dies. And the ones that deserve to die, ... keep on living? What is the message in that?’ (West 2012, 40:19). Some 45 minutes later, he remarks upon the sight of his ‘new’ water plane: ‘That thing belongs in a museum’ which provokes Trench (Arnold Schwarzenegger) to respond: ‘We all do’ (West 2012, 87:01). Although a reaction to specific situations in the films, on a subtler level these remarks hint at a theme intertwined with the main narrative of the films, namely the value of aged men in a neoliberal society.



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Figure 1: Aged Tough Guys, Source: (IMDb 2014).

Neoliberalism has become the dominant political and economic system of western countries (Žižek 2009). It is based on the understanding that free markets liberated from political and social interferences are essential for a healthy and stable economy and the prerequisite for the freedom and well-being of people (Chomsky 1999, Harvey 2007). However, if countries are ruled by a system which is based on the belief that all activity can and needs to be assessed by its market value then ‘it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market’ (Harvey 2007, 3). It is therefore no surprise that in a neoliberal society youth is worshipped beyond comparison as it is seen as the principal time of independence, production and consumption. On the other hand, the physical and mental transformations caused by ageing are viewed negatively (Cruikshank 2013, Harvey 2007, Žižek 2009). Older age is viewed as limiting one’s ability to produce and consume and, hence, often linked to notions of decline, frailty and dependence (Cruikshank 2013, Gullette 2004). Remaining a valuable member of neoliberal society in older age is possible but only when accepting and executing the individual responsibility (Laceulle and Baars 2014) of staying active and youthful as long as possible and by all purchasable means (Cruikshank 2013). These views of successful and unsuccessful ageing are reflected in the hegemonic cultural narratives of the West and, among others, communicated through mass media in general and particularly through U.S. American films (Woodward 2006).

The media depiction of older men and related cultural narratives have been, when compared to analyses of the media portrayal of older women, much less in the focus of academic discussion (Spector-Mersel 2006, Feasey 2011). However, I believe that linking the process of ageing either to cultural narratives of decline, frailty and dependence or presenting it as successful when one has grown old but does neither look nor behave old, offer neither men nor women sufficiently differentiated cultural frames in which the construction of an older self in personal ‘progress’ narratives is possible (Gullette 2004, Spector-Mersel 2006).

In my view and along with other scholars (Connell 2005, Cruikshank 2013, Hills 1999) gender roles are a socio-cultural construction influenced by historical conditions and

acquired and continuously renegotiated throughout the life-course. Media are a crucial agent in defining and maintaining dominant cultural standards of masculinity and femininity (Chivers 2011, Gullette 2004). The genre of action films has received much attention within the context of filmic representation of masculinities and its influence on our cultural understanding of masculinity (Tasker 2015). However, discussions of older male characters in action films are underrepresented when compared to the analyses of the filmic representation of young and middle aged males (Spector-Mersel 2006, Feasey 2011). Additionally, little attention has been paid to the fact that age might, similarly to sexual orientation, class and mental and physical handicaps, contribute to the marginalisation of men (Coston and Kimmel 2012, Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003, Connell 2014, Connell 2005).

The aim of this article is, thus, to examine current cultural narratives determining the representations of older males in Hollywood mainstream action films, in general and the cultural narratives revealed in the portrayal of older men in the films *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*, in particular. The analysis focuses on the strategies used in these films to transform narratives of the decline commonly linked to ageing into stories of success and progress with a strong market value.

The Expendables & The Expendables 2

The revival of tough guy action films in the 21st century can be seen as a reaction to changes in the social construction of masculinity provoked by socio-historical events such as fear and insecurity after the 9/11 attacks on the WTC and the crisis of white collar male employees after the financial collapse in 2008 (Boyle and Brayton 2012, Lennard 2014, Donnar 2016b). On the surface, none of these films are a surprise at all. Hyper-muscular men with no, mysterious or problematic family ties, fight injustice in a disadvantaged position. They face a massively superior opponent and are armed with male camaraderie, true loyalty, authentic values and most importantly, inhumane physical strength and agility and, of course, they are, in the end, victorious.

The main cast in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is between forty-four and seventy-two years old. The main character Barney Ross (Sylvester Stallone) is sixty-four in the first film and sixty-six years old in the second. The remaining crew is considerably younger. Mr. Christmas (Jason Stratham), Hale Caesar (Terry Crews), Toll Road (Randy Couture) and Yin Yang (Jet Li) are all between mid- and end-forties and Gunner Jensen (Dolph Lundgren) is in his mid-fifties. Supporting roles, including the opponents, are predominantly filled by older men of the likes of Mickey Rourke (58), Eric Roberts (54) or Bruce Willis (55) in *The Expendables* or Chuck Norris (72), Jean-Claude Van Damme (52) and Arnold Schwarzenegger (stars in both films) (65) in *The Expendables 2*.

The chronological age of the majority of the cast is in stark contrast to the current ideal of masculinity, one of heterosexual, white-collar, young to middle aged, affluent, middle- and upper-class managers (Coston and Kimmel 2012, Connell 2005). To cast actors who do not conform to this ideal of masculinity in lead roles in an action film is not only atypical for the genre (Tasker 2004) but also unusual for an industry which is still characterised by an obsession with youthfulness and a reluctance to portray the ills of ageing (Chivers 2011, Addison 2006). The high commercial success of the films in the

U.S. and abroad (Mojo Box Office 2010, 2012) suggests that the films present male characters which are, despite being marginalized by their age (and social status), accepted and indeed embraced by audiences. Hence, the examination of representations of masculinity in older age in the selected films will allow for particularly interesting insights into a neoliberal society characterised by patriarchal dominance and will enable a better understanding of 'the context within which contemporary older men struggle to build acceptable identities' (Spector-Mersel 2006, 68).

Narratives of Successful Ageing

Physical & Mental Fitness

In *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* the faces of many of the main characters particularly Barney (Sylvester Stallone), Tool (Mickey Rourke), Gunnar (Dolph Lundgren) and Trench (Arnold Schwarzenegger) show clear signs of ageing and are proof of a life in its last third. It is also striking that compared to the earlier performances of the actors their bodies are often covered by clothes. Rarely do we see more than the overly muscular arms of the actors while the armoury they use and the destruction they cause seems to have increased with the age of the actors (Donnar 2016a).



Figure 2. Ageing faces. Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

The films' narratives hasten to assure audiences that age has not in any way altered the capabilities of their heroes. 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. Commonly associated characteristics of older age such as slowness, bad hearing, forgetfulness or

worsening eyesight are sparingly and jokingly mentioned and set in stark contrast to the hyper-muscular bodies of the protagonists (even if often veiled in clothes) and counteracted by spectacular shoot outs, marshal art fights and car chases, to name but a few. The slightest reference to age-related weakness is immediately disproven by scenes in which the team are portrayed as fully capable of defeating any overwhelmingly superior power, clearly fully in command of a perfectly working body and mind.



Figure 3: Muscles & Action, Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

As a result of the strong dominance of bodies and minds working to perfection when facing very bad opponents, overwhelming armoury and grave danger, older age is presented as something which can be managed by keeping physically fit. Sylvester Stallone and the rest of his cast prove that it is possible to remain in control of your body and mind later in life. By doing so, men can, as the narrative of the two films show, retain a position which allows them to enjoy patriarchal privileges throughout the life-course even if aided by an arsenal of high-tech weapons (Chivers 2011). The portrayal of older men in *The Expendables* and *The Expendable 2* is therefore, by and large, based on the socio-cultural understanding that to age successfully one has to stay fit, in control and above all, young. Both films are thus a manifestation of the dominant cultural narrative of successful ageing (Cruikshank 2013) and ‘transform the older male figure from a man whose masculinity is perceived to be fading to a man whose masculinity is exaggerated and compensatory’ (Chivers 2011, 99).

Productivity

The narrative of successful ageing is further supported by staging the members of the team as gaining identification and meaning largely in and through their work. In a neoliberal society, being a productive member of society is essential in determining the individual's value for society (Cruikshank 2013, van Dyk 2014). Negative views of ageing are frequently based on the perception that physical and mental decline hinder older people's active participation in society. In other words, retirement reduces pensioners to being consumers, provided they are affluent enough (Featherstone and Wernick 1995). If physically, mentally or financially limited, older people are marginalized and viewed as a burden to society since they do not produce or consume an adequate amount of goods (Heron 2008). It is therefore no surprise that living a meaningful and productive life in later life is largely linked to keeping busy (Cruikshank 2013, Stannard 1976).

Particularly for men, employment, related status and efficiency are main means of identification and of rightfully demanding male privileges in society (Chivers 2011, Baur and Luedtke 2008). Hence, portraying the 'Expendables' as earning a living by saving the world from evil – undoubtedly a meaningful and important job - enforces not only their masculinity but also their use- and youthfulness - the western ideal against which everyone is judged (Gergen and Gergen 2000). The faces of the actors might have aged but there can be no doubt that they have not lost any of their abilities. In fact, it seems as if being older has made them stronger, more efficient, more agile and generally more productive.

All in all, the dominant line of narration in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* clearly follows the cult of youth celebrated in western cultures (Woodward 2006, Addison 2010) and often disseminated in commercial feature films produced in Hollywood (Addison 2010, Cruikshank 2013). The older age of main and supporting actors in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*, is not entirely ignored but rather overwritten by communicating that the older age of the protagonists does neither reduce their effectiveness nor their usefulness. Indeed, the storyline of both films communicates that as long as you are active and keep fit, you can reach anything you have set your mind to. Therefore, age has become something which is not a matter of biological decline, something we all have to face sooner or later, but something which can be defeated provided one tries hard enough (Laceulle and Baars 2014). Keeping young is the frame of mind which allows one to age successfully and productively while simultaneously being the prerequisite for successful or productive ageing (van Dyk 2014). The cultural narrative communicated in the two films therefore draws on the dominant Western and particularly US American narratives of the 'American Dream' or 'You are as old as you feel' (or look), or 'You can reach anything if you try hard enough' (Gullette 2004). By utilizing these cultural narratives to inform the storyline of *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* narratives of ageing usually linked to decline are transformed into stories of success and progress. And, what better place to do so than in an action film, a genre inherently defined through physical activity, speed and muscle work (Tasker 2014).

Understanding ageing not as something to be feared but as something to be fought could be seen as supporting a positive attitude towards older age, but is it really? Can the physical and mental changes coming with age really be defeated in the long run? And what about the surely predominant group of elderly people who are not physically and mentally as fit as they used to be? The cultural narrative of successful or productive ageing contributes to the marginalisation and discrimination of anybody who does not adhere to these standards and puts enormous pressure on those trying to fulfil them (Chivers 2011, Gullette 2004, van Dyk 2014). However, a closer look at *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* reveals that despite following the cultural narrative of successful ageing in its main storyline, other narratives are developed alongside this narrative.

Narratives of Decline

Seniority

In *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*, the myth of successful ageing is intertwined with other dominant western narratives which link ageing to attributes such as wisdom and providing service to society but also to physical and mental decline (Cruikshank 2013). Particularly Tool, Barney Ross and Toll Road are presented as men who can be self-critical, have depth and can do more than just fight. Wearing glasses in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is staged less as a sign of ageing and more as a signifier for intellectual capacity. The image of Barney, Tool and Toll Road as wise and mellow men particularly when compared to the other, often younger and more ill-tempered members of the team is supported by showing them smoking a cigar or pipe which in western cultures is often presented as an indication of wisdom and seniority (Gilman 2004).



Figure 4: Wise, Old Men, Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

The theme of wisdom is further developed, particularly with regards to Barney Ross, when showing him interacting with younger men (and on one occasion a woman). His calm and controlled manner is often staged in contrast to the impulsive and sometimes over-aggressive behaviour of his companions and opponents. Frequently, he gives advice to Christmas on his relationship and tries to de-escalate confrontations although rarely successful, for example when he intends to keep Gunnar from hanging a pirate who, however, can only be stopped by physical force in *The Expendables* or when he attempts to save Billy the Kid's life in *The Expendables 2* by following all demands made by Villain who then kills him anyway. In the relationship with the two young members of his crew, Billy the Kid and Maggie in *The Expendables 2*, Barney takes the role of a mentor, something which is typically associated with older age and seniority (Cruikshank 2013). However, there is also some sexual undercurrent in the interaction with Maggie who is at the time of filming more than thirty years younger than Sylvester Stallone in his role of Barney Ross, which matches the ambiguities found in the characterisation of Barney Ross (see below).



Figure 5: Young and Old, Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

Staging Barney and the rest of his crew alongside two significantly younger actors, *The Expendables 2* pronounces and draws on the age differences explicitly. Older age as linked to experience, wisdom and serenity is portrayed in contrast to younger age depicted as being highly efficient and knowledgeable while continuously having to defeat being perceived as inexperienced by the older generation (Gullette 2004). Notwithstanding this, in general, the film shows that cooperation between young and old is possible and indeed a fruitful experience for both even if in the two films it is short-lived since Billy the Kid is killed and Maggie is sent away by Barney to protect her from the consequences of his destructive life-style.

Decline

Although the portrayal of old versus young in the two films is predominantly positively charged, it follows common western cultural narratives of ageing linking it to decline while relating youth to progress (Gullette 2004). In accordance with these dominant

cultural narratives (Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003, Featherstone and Wernick 1995), the films communicate that the downside of wisdom and serenity is disillusionment, cynicism, resignation and loneliness.

Except for Christmas and Hale Caesar, the team do not seem to have partners, families or, in fact, any friendships apart from the homosocial relationship to the other team members (Boyle and Brayton 2012). Hale Caesar's family ties are not elaborated while Christmas' rocky relationship is all the more a topic of discussion between Barney and Christmas. Barney's comments show clearly, and in line with genre customs (Tasker 1993a) that he believes women and particularly Christmas' girlfriend are not to be trusted. In his view, 'the man who gets along best with women is the man who gets along without them' (Stallone 2010, 34:24). Christmas is staged as a more naïve and less cynical and resigned younger counter pole to Barney and their relationship somehow seems to resemble a father-son bond. And just like a pubertal son, Christmas disagrees with Barney's view on his heterosexual relationship. He continues believing in the possibility of romantic love at his age and in his profession and clearly does not want to end up like his fatherly friend who, besides owning 'a seaplane and a truck' (Stallone 2010, 37:26-39:21), is alone.

However, Hale Caesar and Christmas are the exception to the rule and indeed Booker's (Chuck Norris) nickname 'Lone Wolfe' in *The Expendables 2* could easily be used to describe most of the team, many of the supporting characters, their opponents and perhaps even their employer in the two films, even if in times of crisis 'it is sometimes fun to run with the pack'(West 2012, 86:16). Although the social seclusion and loneliness of many of the characters in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* could be seen as simply complying with genre conventions (Tasker 1993a, 2015), it is also something which is commonly viewed and discussed as characterising older age and particularly older male age (Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003, Kudo, Mutisya, and Nagao 2015).

Especially in *The Expendables*, a relatively high amount of time is dedicated to establishing Barney and to a certain degree Tool, as men who have due to their traumatising past experiences lost all belief in humankind and in good winning over evil. What is left are disillusionment, resignation and cynicism and a kind of pity felt for younger men who have not yet discovered how bad the world really is.

Christmas: 'This new job sounds bad.'

Barney: 'Yeah, but it'll pay good.'

Christmas: 'Yeah well, money aside, what happened to your code?'

Barney: 'What code is that?'

Christmas: 'The target has to deserve it.'

Barney: 'Oh, that was cancelled due to lack of interest.'

Christmas: 'You're dark, dark and cold.'

Barney: 'You noticed!?'

Christmas: 'And I ain't buying into it, by the way.'

Barney: 'You will.' (Christmas leaves)

'Stick around young man, you will.' (Stallone 2010, 24:54-25:15)

The unfolding story in both films clearly contradicts Barney's characterisation as coldblooded and heartless killer only interested in money. In fact, in *The Expendables* he seems to have regained some of his compassion and kindness by the irrational and highly dangerous decision to go back and save Sandra who they left behind. Nevertheless, the theme of 'having a black heart' recurs several times in *The Expendables 2* and is supported by numerous references to Barney's belief that it is dangerous to be around him. This is also emphasized by linking the motive of 'black' explicitly to death:

Tool: '... Kinda feelin' like... dead too, ya know? My heads all very, very black place. Didn't believe in shit. Just goddamn Dracula black...'
(Stallone 2010, 57:55)

Maggie: 'Do you think about the young man who died?'

Barney: 'All the time.'

Maggie: 'You don't talk about him much.'

Barney: 'No, that's how we deal with death. Can't change what it is, so we keep it light until it's time to get dark. And then we get pitch black, understand?'

(West 2012, 51:26-51:42)

Barney as the main character and one of the oldest characters is consistently shown as a character drawn between resignation, disillusionment and cynicism and care and compassion for the younger people around him. This portrayal draws heavily on the cultural myths of being increasingly pessimistic and embittered in later life (one reason also for progressive loneliness in older age) (Chivers 2011, Rodwell et al. 1992) while feeling the need to protect and serve the younger generation (Cruikshank 2013). After Billy the Kid is killed by the very bad Villain in *The Expendables 2* Barney's plan is: 'Track them, find them, kill them.' This is neither a sign of wisdom nor serenity but motivated by the desire for revenge typical for the genre of action films and their male heroes (Tasker 2015). However, it also complies with the cultural understanding that killing the young is particularly condemnable. Taking the life of people who still have their life ahead of them is generally considered one of the worst crimes imaginable. Notwithstanding this, it also reveals a cultural view which assigns different values to life at different stages. In a culture that values youth significantly more than older age, it is no surprise that it also ascribes a higher value of life to the young than to the old 'who have already lived their life'. In fact, it is a common cultural view that the older generation should make room for the younger, something which is impressively illustrated by the 'generation war' created in the media (Gullette 2004).

The older men, and especially the main character Barney, in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* are linked to the predominant cultural narrative of decline and portrayed in a fashion that in many ways hints at their 'expendability' (as the title suggests). Nevertheless, in the films their existence is justified since they are depicted as fulfilling a useful service to society by doing the dirty work others are unwilling or unable to do. According to Margaret Cruikshank 'to serve others' (Cruikshank 2013, 43) is a typical and socially acceptable role assigned to the older generation who otherwise suffers from a role-less role in our society (Cruikshank 2013).

The Expendables and *The Expendables 2* play on and partly with the full range of dominant cultural narratives of ageing. In accordance with the genre customs, Barney is portrayed as an ambiguous and flawed character (Bordwell 1985, Tasker 1993a). However, his depiction of being wise and mellow while at the same time being cynical, disillusioned and resigned are typical attributes assigned to old age (Cruikshank 2013). So is the characterisation of many of the characters as 'lone wolves' who, however, have taken it onto them to do no less than save the world despite or perhaps because of their age since they are more expendable than younger men and women. Simultaneously, the main narrative relies on disseminating that older age is acceptable and indeed successful as long as one is productive, active and no burden to society (Gullette 2004, Woodward 2006). *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* therefore fits well into the long list of films that seem to signal a greater social concern about old people but 'in fact the films reflect an ongoing pathologization of changes associated with age' (Chivers 2011, 148). Both films thus contribute to the social segregation and marginalisation of older people. Nevertheless, in my view, there is another subtler and more subversive side to the two films.

Narratives of Marginalisation

Social Class and Ageing

The protagonists as well as the antagonists of the two films are paid killers. They are killing machines and are hired by men such as Church, who resembles the currently dominant masculine ideal of being white, affluent, heterosexual and powerful, to do jobs that are unpleasant and highly dangerous. Undoubtedly and despite the fact that the different nationalities and races and the high educational level of some of the characters deviate from the typical definition of working class men, they are representatives of a masculinity codex strongly linked to working class men. Over and over again the main characters are staged as an embodiment of "'real" men whose loyalty to one another endures beyond their physical bodies' (Boyle and Brayton 2012, 475). However, this masculinity ideal is long outdated and anachronistic. This contextualisation is further underlined by surrounding the cast of the two films with black-and-white photos, classic motorbikes and cars, a battered water plane and in one scene even placing them in an old army base resembling the US in the 50's.

Although these props are in stark contrast to the high-tech armoury and technology used and the bikes and cars must also be seen as genre specific means linked to the tough-guy image of men (Balkmar 2012, Quinn and Forsyth 2007), the outdatedness of many of the requisites is striking. In my view they are used intentionally to highlight that the 'Expendables' have become dinosaurs in a modern world ruled by younger men (Hearn 1995) who represent the current ideal of masculinity.

However, the members of the 'Expendables' are not only working class men but also in a life stage well beyond the masculinity ideal of youthfulness. Consequently, they do not match the current socio-cultural standards of masculinity and belong, if they want to or not, to a marginalised group of men (Coston and Kimmel 2012, Connell 2005). Within this context, the 'Expendables' and their macho-masculinity must be seen as representatives of a dying out species in the imaginary world of the films as well as in



Figure 6: Props, Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

current cultural standards (Boyle and Brayton 2012, Chivers 2011). Having somehow exceeded their expiry date, these musclemen now perform and employ their masculinity, ‘interpassively’, in the service of and in place of (Pfaller 2003) the hegemonic group of men such as Church in the two films or film producers in the real world (Connell 2009, Pyke 1996). Although out of fashion, their roughness and toughness, physical power and aggression aid the hegemonic group of men in maintaining their patriarchal dominance. Their extraordinary strength and muscularity in combination with their actions and behaviour seem to prove and legitimate the dominance of heterosexual men – a belief which is still one of the cornerstones of a neoliberal ideology presented as a seemingly natural order which benefits all (Chomsky 1999). Simultaneously, their aggression, violent behaviour and blunt machismo justify the right to rule. They look down on such archaic behaviour and attitudes and pride themselves with a more sophisticated and civilized understanding of masculinity which includes a supposed belief in the equality of men and women (Connell 2005, Pyke 1996, Kimmel 2012).

Strategies of Resistance

According to Coston and Kimmel (2012) one way of handling marginalisation is militant chauvinism – a strategy in which differences to the ruling ideal are stressed and used to establish the superiority of the marginalised group. *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* can therefore also be read as a manifest and outcry of older, working class men not willing to accept their dismissal. The films are a proclamation of their superiority over the competing masculinity ideal of heterosexual, effete, white, powerful and young managers. They clearly communicate that to save the world from everything

going wrong it needs men like the ‘Expendables’ – not unlike Jesse Ventura in real life. The films, hence, criticise nothing less than the socio-economic system of neoliberal financial capitalism which has produced the current dominant masculinity ideal (Kotz 2002, Griffin 2005, Pyke 1996). Barney voices his criticism of the currently trending idea of masculinity openly in *The Expendables 2*:

‘You know Church, you’re the kind of guy that pulls the strings, and everyone else does your dirty work. Because you never had the guts to do it yourself’ (West 2012, 41:54).

The name ‘Church’ and the selection of a church for the first meeting of Barney and Church supports the interpretation that ‘Church’ acts in the name of and as secular assistant to the new godlike idol of neoliberalism, namely money and power. ‘The Expendables’ are his crusaders whose job is to protect and preserve neoliberalism, the economic and political system which supposedly has proven to be without alternative (Chomsky 1999). Within this context, Church’s behaviour could be read in terms of ‘interpassivity’ (Pfaller 2003). Or else, Church delegates the necessary but less valued and extremely dangerous aspects of manliness to Barney and his crew who in his place execute what needs to be done (Kuldova 2016). By doing so, he satisfies still widely accepted standards and rituals of masculinity (Pyke 1996) but without risking his own privileged life (Kuldova 2016). Presenting Church as a bureaucratic weakling, who does not do much more than paper pushing but also stands representative for dominant masculinity, is used to further underline the true manliness of Barney and his team (Pyke 1996). More importantly, however, when Church, provoked and purged by Barney’s remark, later in the narrative reclaims his maleness by joining into the battle, his behaviours marks a victory of marginalised masculinity over the new effete ideal and a defeat of neoliberal ideology.

This criticism of the neoliberal understanding of masculinity is also transparent in *The Expendables*, when Vilena is portrayed as an island which has been infected by the evils of neoliberalism and is close to complete destruction by exploitation. It therefore does not surprise when General Garza says: ‘We will kill this American disease!’ (Stallone 2010, 87:39) but it is also a clear and explicit declaration of war against neoliberalism in a U.S. American action film. In *The Expendables 2*, ideology criticism is less pronounced and largely replaced by elements of humour and satire discussed above. However, the antagonist Villain is once again like Monroe motivated solely by greed for money and power and characterised as bare of any morals or human traits. He is therefore an embodiment of a socio-economic system that values profit and productivity above everything else (Featherstone and Wernick 1995, Chomsky 1999, Harvey 2007).

The ideology criticism in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* could be viewed as a variation on the genre typical staging of the protagonist against the state or the bureaucracy linked to the state which underlines his image of being a true man (Tasker 1993a). However, in my view, the ideology criticism of *The Expendables* is too blunt and explicit to be simply attributed to genre conventions. In fact, the story would have worked as well without lashing out on neoliberal financial capitalism. I believe that the all than positive depiction of the perversions of a neoliberal system in *The Expendables* is carried over to *The Expendables 2*, even though the socio-political criticism is here characterised by a lighter, easier tolerable and perhaps more commercially usable style.

If both films are seen as a critical comment on neoliberal financial capitalism, then the films criticise the very system the apparent obvious portrayal of macho masculinity and successful ageing in both films is based on. Consequently, both films are characterised by the ambiguity of, on the one hand, enforcing and communicating powerful cultural narratives of ageing and masculinity while on the other hand, questioning and critically reflecting on the socio-economic structure these hegemonic cultural narratives are informed by.

Exaggeration and Humour

Both films, *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*, present audiences with an extreme exaggeration of action, speed, violence and brutality. Some scholars explain this phenomenon by suggesting that in screen culture masculinity and its dominance and privilege can only be maintained into old age by showing older men to brutally subordinate everyone and everything around them and by placing them amidst very bad people (Chivers 2011, Peterson 2011, Thompson 2006). I believe that it is precisely this exaggeration that simultaneously mocks and questions the very genre and socio-cultural customs it reflects.

The sheer amount and size of muscles, motorbikes, corpses and general destruction in both films but particularly in *The Expendables 2* is so much over the top that one cannot help but be amused. While *The Expendables* is still characterised by a more serious

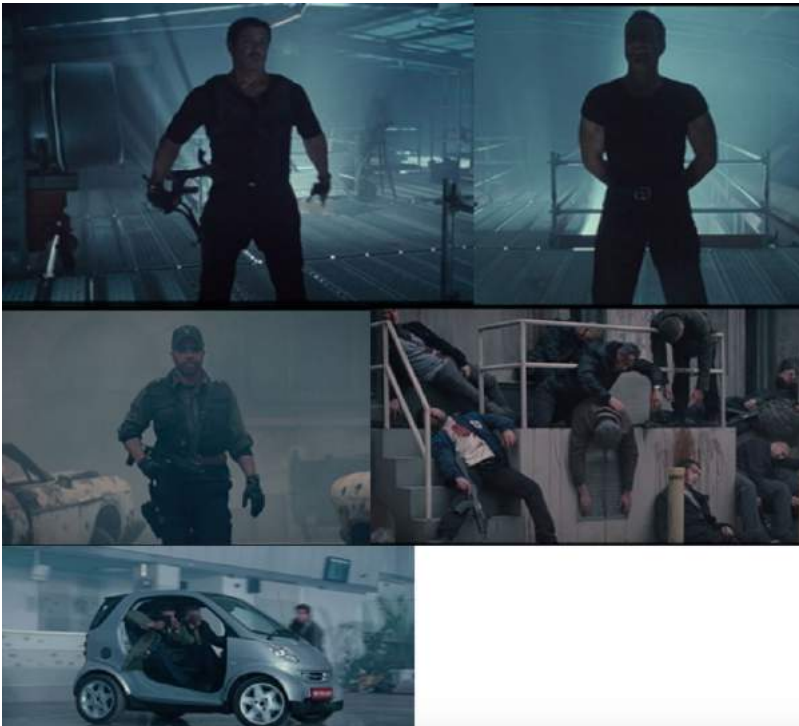


Figure 7: A man has got to do what a man has got to do ... Source: (West 2012).

undertone which includes elements of film noir; *The Expendables 2* is clearly in parts veering towards an action comedy. Humorous scenes are not just established by reference to the earlier performances of Trench (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in the *Terminator* series but particularly by playing on the hyper-masculine and hyper-muscular image of the actors. Two of the most brutal scenes in *The Expendables 2*, the slaughter of Villains assassins in the old army base and the killing of Villain, are both staged to mimic the classical western scenes of the 50s which is funny but also highlights the outdatedness of these men. Similarly amusing is watching Trench and Mr Church use a SMART, a modern but very small car, which is clearly not made for their body frame, to chase the bad guys.

These humorous elements as well as the excess of brutality, destruction and violence in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* can be interpreted as highlighting the need for reinstating the very type of archaic masculinity showcased in a world where not many things are going right (Jeffords 1994). However, they also allow for alternative readings of the hegemonic masculinity model communicated in both films.

Old Men & Young Women

Alternative readings of the films are also supported by the portrayal of women in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*. Hollywood action films typically portray men as active while women are staged as passive subjects who need male protection and rescue (Tasker 2002, 1993b). Although both films are typical examples of the tough-guy action films of the 80s (Boyle and Brayton 2012) and female characters are therefore a rare phenomenon, archetypically much younger than most male protagonists and very attractive (Lauzen 2015, Tasker 2012), when they appear they are predominantly neither passive nor weak. They follow in the footsteps of Ripley in *Alien*, Lara Croft or Sarah Connor in *Terminator* and are staged as resourceful, active and physically as well as mentally strong heroines whose muscularity and behaviour match and sometimes outperform their male counterparts' (Tasker 2002, 1993b). The muscular, physically and mentally strong and aggressive action heroines could be viewed as gender transvestites or, in other words, as men in a female body (Clover 1993, Johnson 1994, Creed 1996). Given the fact that most scriptwriters, directors, producers etc. in Hollywood were and still are men, there is surely some truth in this perception of the female action hero (Follows 2014).

However, if gender is understood as a social construction, assigning attributes such as muscularity, aggression, mental and physical strength to men is simply a convention, yet another cultural narrative (Butler 2011). Action heroines can therefore be seen as transgressing the conventional binary of weak, passive and objectified women and strong, dominant and active men (Hills 1999). In my view, the contextualisation of these modern heroines reflects a changing cultural narrative of femininity. It is my argument that the portrayal of women in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is largely informed by neoliberal ideology – an ideology in which the value of the individual is determined by his or her productivity and consumption power (Gergen and Gergen 2000, Chomsky 1999). As such, the conventional binary of active men versus passive women is overwritten by a storyline transmitting that gender, age, social class or race are insignificant if one is productive and useful to neoliberal society (Cruikshank 2013, Gergen and Gergen 2000). Although the partly genre untypical depiction of women

might also owe to targeting women audiences, I believe that it hints at cracks in the portrayal of the seemingly straightforward tough guy masculinity which needs submissive women to continuously reinstate male dominance (Chivers 2011).

Conclusion

Neoliberalism, the socio-economic system dominating the western world today, is based on three main pillars: a free markets, productivity and consumerism (Kotz 2002). As a result, neoliberalism worships productivity, speed and efficiency. Within this setting it follows that our cultural understanding of older age and related potential physical and mental decline leading to unproductiveness and less efficient performance is negatively connoted and that youth is paid the highest tribute since it enables production and consumption at the same time. Although men are, without a doubt, judged less on the basis of their appearance and it might therefore be easier for them to avoid social exclusion, in my view and contrary to some scholars (Cruikshank 2013, Addison 2010), ageing is not a gender specific phenomenon (Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003, Featherstone and Wernick 1995, Hearn 1995). Neoliberal society is mainly controlled by young and effective men who represent, maintain and reproduce the current hegemonic masculinity ideal of patriarchal dominance (Griffin 2005). Male ageing and resultant physical and psychological changes often lead to a severe reduction of the privileged male status (Chivers 2011). This is particularly true for men whose employment is largely dependent on physical strengths which naturally diminishes which age. Consequently they often 'become dependent on the state and on the younger men who control it' (Spector-Mersel 2006, 77). Thus, the hegemonic cultural narratives of ageing not only lead to social marginalisation and segregation of women but also of men.

Within this context, *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* are by far no rebellious piece of filmic work which calls old and young to arms to fight against neoliberal views of ageing and masculinity. There can be no doubt that both films are by and large commercial products aimed at making the highest possible profit. They are a result of being produced in Hollywood for the mass market and thus follow conventional, easily understandable and sellable cultural narratives. Both films consequently support a view of ageing and masculinity which is deeply rooted in the western socio-cultural and political system of neoliberalism and which can be summarised as follows: as long as one is productive one is valuable to society. Successful ageing in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is resultantly defined as an individual and controllable fight against ageing aimed at staying fit, self-reliant, productive and, above all, youthful as long as possible.

Successful ageing is in both films skilfully interwoven and contrasted with hegemonic narratives linking ageing to decline since the older age of the main cast cannot be ignored entirely but more importantly since their victorious fight against ageing then becomes even more pronounced and admirable. Notwithstanding this, *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* also allow for alternative readings by explicitly portraying neoliberal financial capitalism as inhumane and unjust in *The Expendables* and by mocking the cultural narratives of ageing and masculinity the depiction of the characters is based on in *The Expendables 2*. This socio-cultural criticism might be a result of the films being directed and written by men in the last third of their lives who surely are not only aware of the challenges involved in ageing but also have realised that being

old has an effect on one's social status and treatment often leading to marginalisation. However, it could also very well be based on trying to 'pimp up' the quite conventional pattern of action films so as to appeal to younger audiences. It is therefore hard to tell if and to what extent *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* really aim at challenging dominant narratives of ageing and masculinity and thereby facilitate a more differentiated and realistic understanding of the process of male ageing.

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