# I'll be back? The Deconstruction of the 1980s and the 1990s Hard Body Movies

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**Abstract**

The following essay discusses the cultural factors that inspired the "hard body" movies of the 1980s and the 1990s, but it also describes the changes that occurred, later on, that contributed to the deconstruction of those movies. The hard body movies were characterized by having a reoccurring set of actors (Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and Van Damme) and themes (facing adversaries in a forceful manner). Some of the factors that influenced this portrayal were the Reagan Revolution and a reevaluation of the Vietnam war. However, a change in political ideology, and a reassessment of America's place in the world, inspired the deconstruction of those movies, and newer movies brought with them a new message, of what could be considered a soft body.
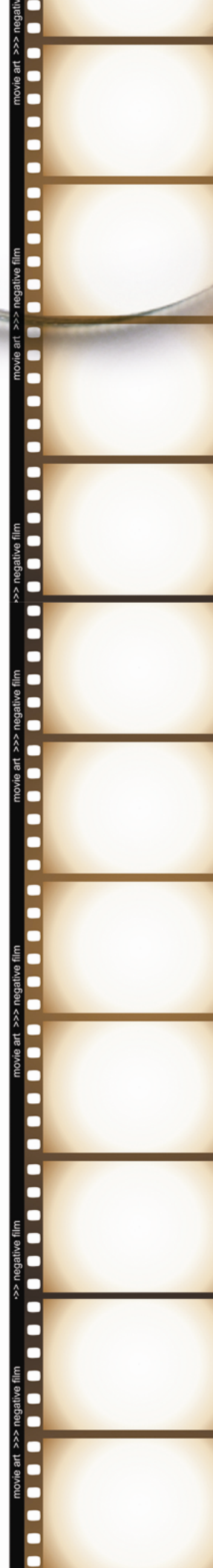
**Keywords:** hard bodies; action heroes; cultural influences; male masquerade; deconstruction

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## Introduction

The actors who portrayed action heroes in the movies of the 1980s and the 1990s have a special place in our cultural consciousness. They are remembered for the masculine and courageous image that they projected on screen; an image that could be defined as a hard body. It would be enough to mention their last names and evoke those images of the hard body: Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Van Damme, Seagal, and Willis (among others). But it seems that more recent movies, of some of those same actors, portray a different image than the one that they portrayed in those 1980s and 1990s hard body movies. In those recent movies, the characters that are portrayed on screen (by those same actors) are not as powerful, and in some cases, they even exhibit weakness (that could be framed as soft bodies). This portrayal could be defined as a deconstruction; using new portrayals that are the opposite of the older depictions that defined the hard body characters in previous decades. Why is that? Why is there a shift from the aspects that characterized those hard bodies in the 1980s and 1990s to the way in which they are characterized in more recent movies? This paper would illustrate that changes in the (same) cultural, political, and social contexts that created those types of characters in the first place, created this deconstruction.

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*Figure 1-2-3:* Stills (clockwise) from *Kickboxer, Commando*, and *First Blood*. Van Damme, Schwarzenegger, and Stallone, three of the biggest action heroes (and hard bodies) of the 1980s and 1990s.

## Theoretical and Critical Framework

This paper would use several theories and critical approaches to construct a framework that would define the characteristics of the hard body movies of the 1980s and 1990s. The first step is looking at a theoretical approach to this issue. According to Holmlund (1993), Lacan believed that even though both males and females on the movie screen are preforming a masquerade, the characteristics of those images are different. While the feminine performance on screen is meant to impatiently display an insubordination to the man, the man masquerade is linked to structures of power, and it illustrates how: "Authority, hierarchy, order, position make the man" (213). And according to Holmlund (1993), it is of significance to examine the male's masquerade as different

than the female's one, because only then, would we be able to understand the feminine surrender to such male masquerade, and we would also be able to better understand both masquerades relations to power.

It is evident that the male masquerade is unique and deserves its own attention and examination. When Mulvey (1989) wrote her impactful article about the female masquerade (that depicted female characters who were submissive and powerless on screen) the male masquerade was absent from the discussion. But it is important to discuss that masquerade as well, because, as evident from the writings of Holmlund (1993), it is a masquerade that is different than the female ones. In addition, since both females and males are portrayed on screen, and one can't think of one masquerade without the other, it is worthwhile to examine both. And if we view the female masquerade as there to be controlled, then what do we make of the male's masquerade? What is its purpose? As was illustrated, male images on screen exhibit the opposite of female images; the male images are in control, they are dominant, and they respond to threats with strength, as opposed to the female masquerade, that is usually reacting to situations with fear and uncertainty. There are additional scholars who also believe that the male masquerade is related to the male being all powerful and exhibiting this power in a physical manner (though they might use different terms to describe this spectacle). One of those scholars is Susan Jeffords, who in her book *Hard Bodies* (1994), comments that the objective of the masculine ego (as she quotes Easthope) is:

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To master every threat… the castle of the ego is defined by its premier and the line drawn between what is inside and what is outside. To maintain its identity, it must not only repel external attack but also suppress treason within (p. 27).

One way in which the male maintains this masquerade, is through his ability to sustain pain and overcome it. Jeffords (1994) brings examples from the *Rambo* movies of the 1980s, in which the character of John Rambo experiences abuses by both domestic and foreign enemies, and his justified reaction to that inflicted pain, is to fight back and destroy those enemies. Also, it is worth mentioning that in the *Rambo* movies, we also see pain that is inflicted on the hero by his own actions. For example, in the first *Rambo* movie, John Rambo preforms a "surgery on himself" after being injured in his ribs, because he wants to avoid the local authorities.

Jeffords (1993) also writes, in another book (*Spectacular Bodies*), that the male body of the 1980s was a body that could be defined as a body that displayed: "musculature, beauty, physical feats, and gritty toughness". According to Jeffords, it was a body that was also an outward spectacle, in the form of: "weaponry, explosions, infernos, crashes, high speed chases, ostentatious luxuries". It is important to note that other scholars (Ayers, 2008), while agreeing with some of Jeffords assumptions (the hard body as a form of male masquerade) also sought to illustrate how those movies were more than just an attempt to reinforce the male as an all-powerful figure, rather,

they had a consistent structure (such as "fetishization of weapons and vehicles", and individuality), and attempted to present a clear narrative, of the hero's story.

Another scholar (Tasker, 1993) claims that this new image (in the 1980s) of the male body, was the image of a male that is victorious in his pursuits and that solves crises. However, she also claims that it is an image that grieves the vanished manlike supremacy. She concludes that the image is probably both a celebration and a grieving at the same time. Also, according to Kellner (1991), some of the 1980s action movies represented a shift for the Vietnam veterans, from what could be described as injured and disorientated to "super warriors" (Purse, 2011). All those movies show America and American veterans as triumphal and unbale to accept defeat. Additionally, they act as a symbol that compensates for the losses amounted on the battlefield and the damaged image of America around the world because of the war.

If we relate those writings to the male masquerade, it seems that the male masquerade, as opposed to the female's masquerade, brings triumph to the situation by using its hard body, and restores the natural order of things, in which the male figure sees victory. This masquerade is accomplished by the physical characteristics of the male figure on screen, and by what it does with its body.

Also, according to Linda Williams, in her essay: Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess (1991), different films depict the body (her essay discusses the female body, but this could also

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apply to the male's body) in different ways, and those movies could be grouped into specific categories. For example, what characterizes the horror genre of film bodies is: an excess of violence (illustrated by blood) in which the male fantasy that is accomplished on screen for its viewers (adolescents boys) is: castration (in this case it is the female body that goes through this process) and a perversion that is fixated on sadomasochism (seeing the female body suffering). Another genre of films that she mentions (Williams, 1991) is the Melodrama genre, in which there is an excess of emotions in the form of tears, and the fantasy of the viewers (girls and women) is the origin fantasy (the female as a nurturing character) with a perversion that is fixated on masochism.

The hard body movies of the 1980s and 1990s could also be considered as their own genre, because they have specific characteristics that depict the male body in a specific manner and preforming specific actions. According to Lichtenfeld (2007), the trend toward the action movies that were created in the 1980s, started in the 1970s. In that decade, the vigilante films, such as Death wish and Dirty Harry, were released to the theaters (and those movies were different than the movies of the 1960s). This is because those movies put the emphasis on the individual that fights, because the system refuses to fight. And at times, according to Tasker (1993), it was even more than taking the place of the system, rather, it was seeing the system itself (usually the

government) as the enemy. But the 1970s didn't bring to the screen the hard body (Charles Bronson and Clint Eastwood, the main actors that portray those vigilante characters, didn't have the hard body that the 80s action heroes had). Also, according to Tasker (1993), the American action movies of the 1980s had the elements of martial arts scenes that appeared in the Hong Kong action movies, but they differ from those movies in their representation of the male body. The Hollywood movies had, for action heroes, men with muscular bodies, accordingly, some of the big action stars of the 1980s were in fact former body builders, and those who were not body builders, but sought to act in action movies, started to build their own masculine bodies to fit with the new image of the action hero.

Another approach is that of masculine homogeneity, formulated in the 1980s, that suggests that there is a "Pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.832). The hard body movies of the 1980s fall under this definition, since those movies exhibited the male as dominant over the female. In those movies, the protagonist was male and when either he or society were threatened, the hard body hero was able to overcome the enemies and restore order. According to Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) there is a need to better understand the context from which this masculine homogeneity operates. For example, as it comes to the media, there is a need to look beyond the acts of violence performed by the male character, and  pay attention to

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what is the type of message that those acts convey (for example, how do adolescence boys interpret those actions).

Based on the different approaches that were presented, the framework that would be used in this paper is that the male masquerade is different than the female masquerade, and the male masquerade as it exhibited itself in the 1980s and 1990s hard body movies could be characterized according to several principles. The hard bodies exhibited power and dominance through the manner in which they looked (masculine), the actions that they performed (fighting), the pain that they were able to overcome (attack by other characters in those movies or physical tests that they put upon themselves) and the end result (triumph against their enemies). But they also have a consistent structure that manifests itself in the types of weapons the hero uses and the independence of their actions.

## Van Damme, Schwarzenegger, and Stallone as Hard Bodies

In this section, three movies (each including one of those actors) would be discussed to illustrate how each of those actors preformed the masquerade of a hard body on screen. The movies that were chosen are: *Bloodsport* (a movie from 1988 featuring Van Damme), *Total Recall* (a movie from 1990 featuring Schwarzenegger) and *Rocky IV* (a movie from 1985 featuring Stallone).

Those movies were chosen because they serve as a representation of the type of movies that portrayed hard bodies, and in which all of those actors were featured.

## Bloodsport

In *Bloodsport*, Van Damme portrays U.S. Army Captain Frank Dux, who had trained in the ninjutsu martial art, from a young age. He enters the Kumite, which is an underground martial arts tournament being held in Hong Kong, against other fierce rivals who are trained in different forms of martial arts. Several scenes in the movie illustrate the hard body of the 1980s/90s films**.** In one scene, that depicts the first fight in the tournament, Dux seems to have won the fight, and he turns around to face the audience. However, his competitor gets up after the count and tries to attack Dux behind his back, Dux reacts quickly, and with two blows puts his competitor down on the floor, this time for good. In another scene, that of the final fight, Dux's competitor spreads powder in his eyes, which prevents Dux from seeing clearly. This puts his hard body in a vulnerable position, and he receives blows to his body, repeatedly, by his opponent, until he starts to bleed. It is evident that he is in extreme pain, however, he is able to find the focus to win the fight with impressive blows to his opponent. His opponent finally says the word surrender (in the local dialect), and he seems helpless, while Dux is holding his opponent's head in his hands. In another scene, where Dux is training, we see him experiencing significant pain, which is inflected by his trainer. At times he is being beaten by sticks, at other times he is being beaten while his

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eyes are covered, and toward the end of the scene he is facing a difficult test of pulling ropes and

his tremendous effort of doing so, is evident on his face. During that sequence, his trainer is

observing him with a look of approval after he masters those tests. All of those scenes illustrate

the elements of the hard body (as were established in the framework presented in this paper): Van

Damme is shown on screen with his muscular body, he is using that body to fight, he is also

experiencing pain inflicted by his rivals, and also self -inflicted pain, and he achieves victory at

the end.



Figure 4: Still from *Bloodsport*. Van Damme uses his hard body to inflict pain on his adversary.

Total Recall

In *Total Recall*, Schwarzenegger portrays Douglas Quaid, who uses the services of Rekall, a

business that delivers memory implants of vacations, however, something goes wrong, and when

he wakes up, it seems, that instead of implementing a new memory in his head, the procedure done

by Rekall evoked memories that were repressed. In this movie there are also several scenes, that illustrate the hard masquerade in action.

In one scene, when Douglas enters his house, he is facing an assailant (his own wife), who is trying to kill him with a gun. She also starts to punch him in different areas in his body, one of those is the groin area, and she causes him great pain, which is evident on his face.  Then she stubs him with a knife and causes him to bleed. But Douglas is able, by using his strength, to overcome her, and starts to choke her while having a gun pointed at her head. Eventually, he ends up knocking her out by punching her in the face. In another scene in the movie, Douglas exits a taxi and finds himself being attacked by four people, one of them is carrying a gun. They are about to kill him, but he is able to overcome all four by kicking and headbutting them. Another scene occurs at the subway. In that scene, Douglas is chased by people who are trying to kill him. During the chase, he grabs his own gun and kills them, while protecting himself with the body of another man (he holds the man's body in front of his own body).

Much like with Van Damm's *Bloodsport* movie, here Schwarzenegger is showing his masculine body, he his fighting enemies, he experiences pain, and he triumphs in those scenes against his enemies. But those scenes have additional aspects to them that amplify the superiority of the hard body. It seems for a moment, in the first scene that was described, that the relations of power between the male and female masquerade, are being turned upside down; when Douglas's

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wife has the upper hand, but by using physical force and exhibiting a hard body, Douglas is able

to overcome his wife, and her threat of physical power, by having more physical power than she

does. In the second scene that was described, there is another threat on the main hero in the movie,

but he is able to master that threat, by using his hard body, and overcome not just one assailant but

four of them (with one of them carrying a gun). And in the third scene, the hard body is able to

defeat his enemies while using a soft body as collateral damage.



Figure 3: Still from *Total Recall*. Schwarzenegger uses a soft body to shield himself.

Rocky IV

In *Rocky IV*, Stallone portrays the boxer Rocky Balboa, who travels to Russia to face the man who killed his friend Apollo Creed in the ring, for a boxing match. There are several scenes in the movie that illustrate the hard body in action.

One of those is the scene in which he trains for his fight against the Russian boxer (Ivan Drago). In this training sequence, we see Rocky in the snow, chopping wood, we also see him pulling ropes and carrying a person who sits on a cart by using his muscles. And later on we see him lifting three people who are sitting on the cart. In another scene, we see the final fight in the movie, in which Rocky is being hit repeatedly and we also see him bleeding (it is worth mentioning that Rocky causes the same type of physical pain to his opponent). It seems that Rocky is going to get beaten, but with a sudden rush of energy, he is able to defeat his opponent, by knocking him to the floor. In yet another scene, there is a montage in which Rocky is reminiscing about his past, and in that montage there are images of him punching opponents in the ring, and winning fights after exercising great physical effort.

All three of those scenes illustrate the hard body: it is exhibiting its psychical features, it is fighting against its enemies, it experiences pain, and it comes out victorious. But there are additional factors that magnify the dominance of the hard body in those scenes. The first one is that the hard body is also triumphal against the forces of nature and extreme physical tests. The second is that Rocky is able to avenge the death of his friend who also had a hard body (but not

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hard enough, because he died in the ring) and does so, by beating another hard body that seems to be stronger than himself. He also exbibits that the hard body is not only the stronger looking body, but also the more determined one. And the montage scene illustrates that the work of Rocky is tied directly to his physical feats, and having a hard body is what he remembers most and probably what he values the most.



Figure 4: Still from *Rocky IV*, Rocky (Stallone) and Drago (Lundgren) display each superpower's strength through their bodies.

## The 1980s and the 1990s Action Movies and their Cultural and Social Context

One might ask why this specific portrayal of the male masquerade, as a hard body, was so predominant in the 1980s and part of the 1990s? The beginning of the 1980s saw the election of a new president: Ronald Reagan, who brought his own style of rhetoric to the White House (and a new philosophy about policy and governance). In his book about the Reagan rhetoric, Bates (2006) writes that the *Rambo* movies (about a veteran of the Vietnam War) reflected the Reagan rhetoric

about the war. For example, he mentions that the script for the first movie (which was based on a book written by David Morrell) was different than the book. This was done to better reflect the Reagan rhetoric about the war and the perception of those who fought in the war. From a psychotic character in the book, the movie character became much more sympathetic. Another change was that in the book, the Rambo character is a callous killer, however, in the first movie, Rambo doesn't kill anyone intentionally, and he only hurts people while trying to defend himself. Bates (2006) believes that the changes from the Morrell book to what ended up being shown on screen, were made because both the director and producer of the movie, wanted to fit the movie with what was the mood of the general population, as it came to the Vietnam war. The mood was a new understanding that the people who fought in the war, were not horrible human beings who murdered others, rather, they did what they felt they were sent to do, and that was to win a war. In addition, according to LeSueur and Rehenberger (1989), Stallone even said, about the *Rambo* movies: "This country has really needed to flex its muscles again …people took kindness for weakness, and America has lost its esteem. Right now, it just flexing". Also, according to LeSueur and Rehenberger (1988), the *Rambo* and *Rocky* movies were successful because they fit an American frame of mind that put the emphasis on the action hero acting independently from the system and acting in a manner that is violent, to achieve a resolution that is positive.

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Jeffords (1994) also writes about how the *Rambo* movies of the 1980s illustrated that the Reagan rhetoric transferred to the movie screen. The emphasis on hard bodies (in Reagan's rhetoric), was a view of a national identity, that reflected Reagan's view of America. And this view of America stood in opposition to Reagan's view of the America of the 1970s, and especially the Carter years of that decade. Those years, could be judged as years of weakness, and if they are portrayed as a male body, those years could be considered as years in which the male body was weak and could not protect itself, and the country, against outside threats. Those themes play themselves in the *Rambo* movies of the time. For example, Rambo always ends up being stronger than those who confront him (for instance, the deputies and the state troopers that are sent to hunt him down). And Rambo is also powerful when going abroad (in *Rambo: First Blood Part Two)* to locate and release American prisoners of war. Another franchise (Sutton and Winn, 2001) that deals with a similar theme, is the Chuck Norris series of movies: *Missing in Action*. In those movies, Norris is portraying James Braddock, an ex-Vietnam war veteran who is taking action to locate and save American prisoners of war. He is doing so, by himself, because the characters of the governmental officials that are portrayed in the movies, are too incompetent to do so; they are good at talking but not in taking action. Only Braddock is doing something practical to save those prisoners of war, which is the job of the action hero.

Considering the different sources that were presented, in previous paragraphs, it would be fair

to assume that the hard bodies of the 1980s were a response to the loss of power and control of the

male figure (at times manifested as a nation) in previous decades and on the world stage. And that

the manner in which the world of film sought to bring back this power, was through the male

masquerade of the 1980s hard body movies; a male masquerade that was influenced by the rhetoric

of Ronald Reagan, a rhetoric that penetrated the cultural consciousness of the American public.

Not all of those hard body movies dealt directly with Vietnam or with military affairs, but all of

them had in the center of the plot the hard body that is facing enemies, usually by himself, and

bringing victory, also by himself (at times personal victory and at times collective victory, for

example in *Rocky IV* it was Rocky against Drago but also the US against the USSR).



*Figure 5:* From the cover of the book The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980s America. Reagan
associates Rambo with his political philosophy.

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Deconstruction

Three movies would be presented that illustrate the deconstruction of the 1980s and 1990s masquerade of the hard body; *The Last Action Hero* (a movie from 1993 starring Arnold Schwarzenegger), *JCVD* (a movie from 2008, starring Jean-Claude Van Damme), and *Creed* (a movie from 2015, starring Sylvester Stallone). It is worth mentioning that there were other movies that sought to deconstruct those hard body characters, for example, Stallone (Gates, 2010) tried to move to different types of movies, such as Oscar, and Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot (both movies are from the beginning of the 1990s: 1991 and 1992, respectively). That effort ended up not being successful, and Stallone returned to his usual type of action movies (such as Cliffhanger and Judge Dredd). One of the reasons for this is that, according to Gates (2010), audiences were not ready for this change (both Oscar and Stop! Or My Mon Will Shoot, were failures at the box office). And according to film reviewer Don Irvine: "You don't ask batman to run a soup kitchen and you don't ask Sly to operate a laptop computer and furrow his brow… when he moves outside the icon, he vanishes; he's not fun to watch anymore" (Gates, 2010).

But the movies that were chosen for this paper (to illustrate the deconstruction element) are different than what Stallone, Schwarzenegger, and Van Damme might have tried to do in their previous movies (of portraying a different character than the hard body one) and this is because in

those movies, they seem to confront their portrayal of the hard body directly. In *The Last Action Hero,* Schwarzenegger is portraying an action hero that is not aware that he is a fictional action hero. And in the movie, he also has a second role, portraying himself as an actor who acts in action movies. In *JCVD,* Van Damme is portraying himself; an aging action hero (the movie includes several biographical elements from Van Damm's life). And in *Creed*, even though Stallone is not portraying himself, the Rocky character is perhaps the most associated with him. In a sense, it is semi-biographical; Stallone wrote the script for the first *Rocky* movie, based on some of his experiences of being a struggling actor trying to break through, much like Rocky Balboa was a struggling boxer, trying to break through. Accordingly, watching Rocky on screen is in some manner watching Sylvester Stallone on screen. In the movie, he even has a photo of his biological son appearing behind him on a shelf. Stallone's biological son, Sage, did appear in the fifth *Rocky* movie as Rocky's son, but he didn't reprise his role in the sixth movie, the part was portrayed by another actor.

## The Last Action Hero

In the *Last Action Hero,* Arnold Schwarzenegger portrayers Jack Slater, an action hero, in the fictional world of movies. However, he is not aware of this, and insists that the world that he inhabits is the real world, even though the character of a kid, named Danny Madigan, that joins his

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adventures (and comes from the real world to the fictional world) continues to try and prove to

him that he is a movie character and not a real person.

There are several instances in the movie that illustrate the deconstruction. For example, in

one scene, there is an exchange between Danny and Jack Slater, in which Danny says to Jack:

"You think you are funny, don't you? To which Slater answers: "I know I am. I am the famous

comedian Arnold Braunchweig". Danny replies by correcting him and saying: "Schwarzenegger",

to which Slater replies: "Gesundhiet". Another scene in the movie shows what happens to Slater

"in the real world" when the antagonist shoots him, and he starts to lose blood, and the only way

for him to stay alive is to go back to the fictional "movie world". In yet another scene, a plot to

kill Schwarzenegger is prevented by Slater, who takes a bullet intended for Schwarzenegger (as

mentioned, Schwarzenegger also portrays a version of himself in the movie).

All of those scenes present a deconstruction of the hard body because they all present

elements of the hard body in action; fighting, overcoming pain, and eventual victory, but they do

so in a manner that mocks the hard body or shows it as vulnerable or unreal. The first example

shows Schwarzenegger directly mocking himself and his hard body image. The name

Schwarzenegger stands for a masculine and all-powerful hero, but here it is ridiculed, even being

defined as a comedian. The second scene illustrates how Schwarzenegger, in contrast to his

previous hard body roles, is flesh and blood; he can be injured, and he is dependent on his survival

on a kid that seems to be wiser than he is. In this movie (*The Last Action Hero*), the

Schwarzenegger character is the one being saved, instead of the one doing the saving. Here, he is

less triumphal, and he can only exist if he goes back to the world of movies. And the third scene

illustrates how Schwarzenegger (portraying a version of himself) is, after all, flesh and blood and

not the action hero that he plays in his movies; he even needs a fictional character to save him.



i Still from *The Last Action Hero*. Schwarzenegger's character is having a hard time grasping that he is a fictional
charter.

## JCVD

The plot of *JCVD* shows a Jean Claude Van Damme (playing himself) that is living a difficult

life; he is acting in movies that he doesn't want to act in, he loses custody of his daughter, and

when he goes to the bank to pay his lawyer's fee, he finds himself in a hostage situation, in which

he is also taken as a hostage (but due to a misunderstanding, the police and the press believe that

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he is the one who tried to rob the bank). There are several scenes in *JCVD* that illustrate the deconstruction of the 1980s and 1990s character of Van Damme as the hard body.

One of those scenes comes at the beginning of the movie. It features an impressive fight scene by Van Damme, however, at the end of it he tells the director: I am a 47 year old man, and I can't do those things in the same way that I did in the past. In essence, he is saying: I am not the action hero of the 1980s and the 1990s, I am a regular human being, and I can't do the same type of action scenes that I used to do during my glory days. Another scene that shows this deconstruction, occurs toward the end of the movie. One of the kidnappers has his gun pointed at Van Damme's head, and he threatens to kill him, while the police surround him and Van Damme. At that point, Van Damme goes into action and preforms impressive martial arts moves and overcomes the kidnaper to the applause of the people that gathered around the bank, to watch the standoff between the police and the kidnappers. However, we soon learn that the action sequence is something that Van Damme imagines, and didn't really occur, instead, we see Van Damme give a weak elbow to the kidnapper's chest, and then the police take control of the situation. But the most radical deconstruction occurs when Van Damme breaks the fourth wall, in one of the scenes toward the middle of the movie, when his character rises to an upper floor at the bank, and we can see recording equipment in the background. Here it is Van Damme who is giving a monologue,

directly to us the audience, that is watching the movie, while Van Damme is looking directly at the camera.

This movie is for me. There we are, you and me. Why did you do that? Or why did I do that?... So... America, poverty, stealing to eat... stalking producers, actors, 'movie stars', going to clubs hoping to see a star, with my pictures, karate magazines. It's all I had. I didn't speak English. But I did 20 years of karate. 'Cause before I wasn't like that…the "Bloodsport" man got hooked. I was wasted mentally and physically. To the point that I got out of it. I got out of it. But... it's all there. It's all there. It was really tough (Mechri, 2008).

All those scenes challenge the hard body concept and also reveal the personal sacrifice to become a hard body. In the first scene, we are shown how the hard body is vulnerable and becomes weak with the passage of time; this is very different than the 1980s and 1990s Van Damme movies, in which what made him famous were his physique and martial arts abilities. The second scene illustrates how Van Damme is pretty much useless by himself, he needs the help of an entire police squad, and his personal victory exists only in his own imagination, but not in reality (the reality that is a part of the plot of the movie). And in the monologue scene, it seems as though Van Damme is removing the mask from the hard body and he shows us the un - glamourize side of it, and the personal price that he paid to become that hard body star. It is as though he is saying: the hard

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body star, is not who I am, I am simply an actor that wanted to become famous and did what he believed would make him well-known.



*Figure 7:* Still from JCVD. "When you're 13, you believe in your dream. Well, it came true for me. But I still ask myself today what I've done on this earth. Nothing! I've done nothing!"

## Creed

In *Creed,* Adonis Creed (portrayed by Michael B. Jordan), who is the son of Rocky's rival and then friend, Apollo Creed, turns to Rocky (Sylvester Stallone) so he would train him. The Rocky Balboa that we meet in this movie is very different than the Rocky of all of the previous *Rocky* movies, especially those that were made during the 1980s (*Rocky I* through IV). This Rocky is a Rocky that has a weak body; he no longer fights, and he has health issues; towards the end of the movie the illness that he suffers from is discovered to be cancer. There are several scenes in the movie that directly challenge the Rocky myth of the hard body and deconstruct it.

In one scene we see Rocky discuss the diagnosis of his disease with Adonis, and he tells him that he is not going to undergo treatment because he feels that all of the people that he loved are

gone, so there is no need for him to stay alive, and in addition, his personal accomplishments are

a thing of the past, not be revisited or serve as something that would help him in wanting to

continue to live. In another scene, we also see that Rocky doesn't seem to like the life of a boxer

anymore and he tries to convince Adonis not to choose that profession, as one interaction between

the two illustrates.

Adonis Johnson: I want you to train me. I need somebody solid and who else better to go

to? You at least owe me that. Rocky Balboa: I can tell the way you talk, you been to school, so I

figure you got some brains. Why would you want to pick a fighter's life when you don't have to?

If Apollo was around, he would tell you that, too (Coogler, 2015).

Another scene features Stallone sitting on a chair in a cemetery, with his reading glasses,

talking to the graves of his loved ones. In this scene, he seems old and tired with life.

All of those scenes stand in contrast to Stallone's hard body movies of the 1980s and specifically

to the *Rocky* movies of that decade. The Rocky of the 1980s was all about winning and not giving

up until he wins, and mostly doing so by training hard (lifting weights and running). However,

here, Rocky submits to the fact that his body is weak and there is not much hope for him. This is

an image of an elderly man that seems defeated, and it is removed from the exuberant Rocky

images of winning fights in the ring. His fight here is not against another opponent, rather, it is

against time and physical deterioration because of age and illness. The conversation between

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himself and Adonis about training, would never have taken place in previous movies. The young

Rocky never would have said such things, for him boxing was life itself, it allowed him to feel that

he is indeed somebody. This is exhibited in a conversation between Stallone and his coach Micky,

in the first *Rocky* movie.

Nobody's ever gone the distance with Creed, and if I can go that distance, you see, and that

bell rings and I'm still standin', I'm gonna know for the first time in my life, see, that I weren't just

another bum from the neighborhood (Avildsen,1976).

In *Creed,* Stallone portrays someone with a weak body; this is not the masculine body of

his 1980s and 1990s hard body roles, this is somebody with a broken body and a broken spirit that

feels incomplete without his loved ones.



*Figure 8:* Still from *Creed*. The ailing Rocky in his most vulnerable state.

Reasons for the Deconstruction

The question that should be asked is why the change in the male masquerade? Why were the actors who portrayed, almost exclusively, hard bodies in the 1980s and 1990s movies portraying characters that seem to deconstruct their hard bodies and show themselves in roles in which they exhibit what could be defined as soft bodies? Much as the portrayal of hard bodies in the 80s and 90s could be said to be affected by the social, cultural, and political events and philosophies of those decades, this new portrayal (in more recent movies) might also be affected by social, cultural, and political events and philosophies that are more recent.

The first one is the idea that America after the "Reagan Revolution" didn't view itself as the same as before the revolution. Before the revolution, America saw it itself as being held hostage by others, for example the Iranian government that held American hostages for more than 4000 days. After the Reagan revolution it was viewed as a much stronger nation, that was a sole superpower with the collapse of the soviet empire (Ridder,2004). And it was also a nation that invested billions of dollars in its military, building it to be all powerful (Bowmna, 2019). Accordingly, there was no need for a commanding portrayal of hard bodies (and by an extension a sturdier view of America). America has reestablished itself as a military power in reality, and there was no longer a necessity to overcome fictional enemies on screen, since the real enemies were defeated in reality.

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The second issue was a reevaluation of the Reagan years. According to Gil Troy, in his book

*The Reagan Revolution* (2009), during the beginning of the 1990s Reagan's standing in the eyes

of the nation took a hit.  He was remembered more for his mistakes than for his successes. For

example, the Iran-contra scandal and the budget deficit. When Bill Clinton started his campaign

for president, he emphasized how Reagan, and by extension the George Bush presidency, invested

more attention to what was happening outside of the US, than what was happening inside the

country. For example, in the vice-presidential debate between Al Gore and Dan Quail (101, 2018),

when the latter was talking proudly about the foreign affairs experience of the Bush administration,

Gore replied by saying that this experience meant that the Bush presidency neglected the citizens

that were living in the US. If what we see on the screen is a reflection of society, then moving

away from the ideas of the Reagan revolution, also meant moving away from the ideas that inspired

the hard bodies, on screen, to a different type of portrayal of males on screen. A portrayal that

would have qualities that might be the opposite of what was predominate in the 1980s and 1990s

hard body movies.

This reevaluation of the Reagan years, also included the Clinton years, that had their own

cultural and social characteristics, and according to Malin (2005), one of those was the "crisis of

masculinity". This was a time in which men started to rethink their traditional beliefs about the

role of the male and they also started to search for new male characteristics. Much as Reagan, with

his rhetoric, influenced the movies of the 1980s (and promoted the idea of the hard body), Bill

Clinton, also with his rhetoric, influenced the manner in which the movies of the latter half of the

1990s portrayed a conflicted male. Clinton talked about a "broken spirit and a broken heart" in his

speeches, as opposed to Reagan who talked more on being resolute. And this rhetoric of Clinton,

exhibited itself in popular culture in the form of movies. One of the movies that is mentioned

(Malin, 2005) is Titanic, in which the hero of the movie (portrayed by Leonardo Di Caprio) is a

sensitive and romanticized working-class hero, which is quite different than the military hero of

the 1980's, and the first half of the 1990s, a hero that spoke very little and mostly used strength to

achieve his objectives.

The third reason would be the self-reflection that the actors who portrayed the hard bodies in

the 1980s and 1990s had, regarding their previous roles (and those reflections could be attributed

to the cultural and social changes that were described, and probably promoted such reflections).

For example, in 1993, Stallone (Jordan, 2003) said

I ended up becoming very defensive. Remember when Reagan bombed Quaddafi? He said, 'after

seeing Rambo, I know what to do'. And then Saddam used it in his bunker. He said, 'this is not

Rambo'. Can you imagine? It became synonymous with a mindset. I became a... symbol. I was

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always worried when I traveled abroad. There were always a lot of threats. When I went to Cannes they said I'd be dead. When I would go to third world countries, it was not so pretty (pg.1).

It seems that Van Damme also became more self-aware of his previous hard body movies and viewed them differently. The monologue by Van Damme that was mentioned earlier illustrates that Van Damme feels that he paid a price for his career, and he is not celebrating it, rather, he feels regret. It is also of interest that he says: "You made my dream come true. I asked for it. I promised you something in return and I haven't delivered yet". This sentence implies that Van Damme might feel that his movies didn't really deliver, and they weren't what the audience wanted. He also says: "Van-Damme, the beast, the tiger in a cage, the "Bloodsport" man got hooked. I was wasted mentally and physically". Those words don't portray him in a favorable light or celebrate his career of a hard body, rather, he describes himself as someone who is locked in a cage, someone that is there for a spectacle, for the purpose of amusing others without much input.

## Conclusion

This essay sought to examine the reasons for the deconstruction of the 1980s and 1990s hard body movies such as *Bloodsport*, *Total Recall*, and *Rocky IV,* by using more recent movies (with the same actors that portrayed hard bodies) such as: *The Last Action Hero*, *JCVD*, and *Creed.* A

theory of film viewing was presented, together with several critical approaches, and this was used

to create a frame of reference, in which hard body movies could be described as movies that exhibit

a physically strong male that is fighting against adversaries, experiences and overcomes pain, and

ends up being victorious by using his physical powers. Next, the paper presented ideas on how this

portrayal was shaped in the 1980s and 1990s according to the Reagan revolution; how the rhetoric

of the Reagan years was reflected on screen in the form of the hard bodies. But as illustrated, there

was a change in the characters that those same actors (that portrayed the hard body) were

portraying later on (such as in the movies *The Last Action Hero*, *JCVD,* and *Creed*). Another

section was dedicated to suggesting why this change occurred. It might have been driven by social,

political, and cultural changes. It is important for us (the audience) to be aware of this hard body

male masquerade because it represents our view of males and females, and what is expected from

them; what defines our society when it comes to the positions and roles of males and females. But

the deconstruction that occurred to this masquerade might also imply that a change in the

masquerade is possible, when there are social, cultural, and political changes in society.

And the investigation into this topic should continue, since the hard body movies haven't

completely disappeared, but they did change in the manner in which they are presented. For

example, in the *Taken* series , the character of Liam Nissen is an action hero that is fighting against

adversaries, and is inflicting physical pain on others, but in most scenes his body is not as exposed

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, and in addition, those are filmed in a quick manner, in which the action occurs in a fast fashion, as opposed to the hard body movies that were described in this paper, in which the emphasis was more on the exposed male body of its heroes. Another franchise of action movies is that of Jon Wick, a character that is portrayed by Keanu Reeves. While he also illustrates elements of the hard body, this hard body at times appears dressed in a suite, including in some of the actions scenes, a spectacle that is different from the more primal look of the Stallone, Schwarzenegger, and Van Damme movies. Also, the emergence of movies such as *Atomic Blond*, illustrates a hard body is portrayed by a female (Charlize Theron), that inflicts pain, and overcomes adversaries, but doing so while she's fully clothed, and with fast camera work. It is of interest to examine the cultural and political settings, that might have contributed to this new portrayal of hard bodies in those action movies.

It is also of interest to mention the possible return of the 1980s and 1990s hard body action hero. The most recent movie in the Rambo franchise (*Rambo: Last Blood*), came out in 2019, and it features Stallone coming back to the role of John Rambo. But this movie could have been easily confused as a movie that was filmed in the 1980s or the 1990s. In it Stallone overcomes, without outside help, an entire Mexican cartel, who's members are decades younger than him. In the movie he exhibits all of the characteristics of the hard body that he exhibited in the 1980s Rambo movies,

after being inflicted with pain, he himself inflicts pain, and does so while some of the muscles in

his body are exposed to the camera to follow. It is of interest to examine the production process of

the movie, and how it relates to recent political and cultural changes. For example, the presidency

of Donald Trump saw a return to a more confrontational tone, as it came to America's standing in

the world (rhetoric, that as was illustrated in this paper, also defined the Reagan years). In addition,

the last couple of years has seen a wave of nostalgia toward the 1980s, that brought with them

cultural products that are based on that decade (for example the *Cobra Kai* and *Stranger Things*

series and movies such as *Wonder Woman: 1984*).

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