

Geriaction Cinema: Introduction

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To say that *Da 5 Bloods* (Spike Lee, 2020) is self-conscious in its engagement with cinematic precedents would be an understatement. The Vietnam veterans at the heart of the narrative directly criticize *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985) and *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito, 1984) as manifestations of Hollywood “trying to go back and win the Vietnam War”, even as they themselves return to Ho Chi Minh City decades after the conflict on a quest to address unfinished business. The riverboat trip that takes them back into the jungle where they will confront their demons is accompanied by Richard Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries”, adding *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) to a long list of overt film references.

Even amongst such programmatically knowing intertextuality, one element of *Da 5 Bloods* stands out as jarringly non-naturalistic. The numerous flashbacks to the war focus on the four main characters and their fallen comrade Stormin’ Norman. For the purposes of narrative verisimilitude, all five men should be in their late teens or twenties, yet Paul, David, Otis and Eddie remain in their sixties, still played by the actors who portray them in their present-day manifestations. No attempt is made to de-age these actors, either through make-up or digital manipulation, resulting in an incongruous spectacle that unavoidably draws our attention to the artifice of the filmmaking process. We might argue that the effect is to place the audience on a cognitive level with the four main characters whose flashbacks we are witnessing, as they look back on their youth through the prism of age and bitter experience. This reading is supported by the film’s official press release, which declares that the lack of de-ageing is supposed to illustrate how “current dilemmas and even ailments color recollections of [the characters’] former selves” (Ugwu). Accordingly, references to the historical continuity of racism are unmissable throughout the film, as the legacies of colonialism in Vietnam merge seamlessly with memories of the War and the Civil Rights movement, and feed directly into discussions around the escalation of racial tensions during the Trump Administration and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Lee's refusal to compromise with the demands of seamless narrative flow should however also be considered in a broader industrial context: one in which processes of de-ageing actors have become conspicuously *de rigueur* in genres that are commonly associated with masculinity and its crises. The director's claim (contradicting his producer's) that the lack of any such process was purely down to budgetary constraints seems to be more a mischievous reference to Netflix's highly-publicized financing of CGI de-ageing in *The Irishman* (Martin Scorsese, 2019) than a genuine explanation (if narrative cohesion was Lee's main priority, it would surely have been affordable to cast four young actors to believably portray the flashback-era characters). The decision to eschew de-ageing of any sort should therefore be seen as a performative, playful violation of the fourth wall. This perspective is borne out by the film's modes of address, such as when Paul (Delroy Lindo) performs his departing soliloquy by looking straight into the camera, or when each flashback is announced by an overt change of aspect ratio and a shift to grainy film stock, thus foregrounding the signifiers of mediation. Finally, in the closing moments of the film, the main characters are at last de-aged in a digitally-manipulated still photograph. This segues into archive footage of a 1967 speech from Martin Luther King Jr about the legacy of slavery, which is then followed by a caption about Dr King's assassination. The "photograph" is therefore framed as part of a closing epilogue showing the real-life historical events behind the story, by implication positioning the rest of the film as a self-conscious re-enactment.

It is revealing that the ageing process is the primary means through which *Da 5 Bloods*' playfulness occurs. Issues of ageing have become so prevalent in action-related genres in recent years – from the digital rendering of youth in *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019) and *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019) to the return of familiar, now retirement-age heroes in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (J.J. Abrams, 2015), *Blade Runner: 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017), *Terminator: Dark Fate* (Tim Miller, 2019) and

Rambo: Last Blood (Adrian Grunberg, 2019) – that Lee’s conspicuous denial of de-ageing trickery is simultaneously a frustration of audience expectation. If Rick Altman’s notion of a “generically trained audience ... sufficiently familiar with genre plots to exhibit generic expectations” holds true, then representations of ageing have surely now become part-and-parcel of that generic contract where the “action film” is concerned (Altman 279).

Certainly, such shifts have not gone unnoticed in film scholarship. Action cinema has long been analyzed for its investment in spectacle and hyperbolic masculinity, its significance for film marketing and its ideological implications across various conflicts and contexts (see especially Tasker; Jeffords; Pfeil). Its stars have also been extensively studied in their cultural-political surroundings (see Holmlund, “Masculinity as Multiple Masquerade”; Geraghty; Saunders; Morrison, among many others). In recent years, a growing trend within this field has analyzed the emergence of a “geri-action” (or “geri-action”) sub-genre, in which ageing (mostly male) action stars reprise famed personae and self-consciously engage with their diminished physical prowess. As the action-adventure format’s blockbuster-era manifestation has reached old age, and the personae of Cold-War era action stars have adapted to incorporate themes of ageing, so too have scholarly discussions around seniority in the genre’s marquee personnel come to the fore.

After ground-breaking work by Chris Holmlund on the ageing star body of Clint Eastwood (Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies* 141-56), *The Expendables* (Sylvester Stallone, 2010) and its sequels have emerged as emblematic case-studies for how themes of redundancy, expendability and dependency that are associated with old age in neoliberal Western cultures have been articulated through action cinema in the past decade (Boyle and Brayton; Tasker; Donnar, “Narratives of Cultural and Professional Redundancy”; Bühring; Holmlund, “Presenting Stallone”). This franchise’s reprisals of 1980s / 1990s action film personae played by Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Dolph Lundgren, Bruce Willis, Chuck Norris,

Jean-Claude Van Damme, Mel Gibson, Wesley Snipes and Harrison Ford have provided ample material for the identification of this broader trend, which merges self-referential nostalgia for “tough guy” masculinity and a preoccupation with the ageing male body. Stallone in particular has been analyzed as the ageing action star *par excellence*, due to his consistently self-referential engagement with his own star personae (Gates; Holmlund, “Presenting Stallone”; Donnar, “Redundancy and Ageing”). Donnar argues that notions of redundancy and ageing have always been integral to Stallone’s star image, “generically as an action star performer and narratively via culturally and professionally redundant and aged characters” (247). For Donnar, Rocky and Rambo both register the superfluousness of hyperbolic masculinity and the expendability of a victimized working class (250). The physical ageing of that same persona therefore renders literal these ever-present themes.

While it is noticeable – and has been noted here – that the genre of action (and geriaction) has largely been centered on the crises, validations and affirmations around masculinity, it has never been exclusively male. Chris Holmlund’s 2019 Leverhulme Public Lecture at the University of Reading, “Mother-F*ers of Invention: Women in Geriaction”, points out that the origins of the term “Geriaction” lie in addressing how to keep elderly patients in care homes active – and the patients in question were largely female. The adoption of the term in relation to ageing action stars shifted the gender emphasis and this shift is evident in the articles in this collection: they all address masculine geriaction. This was not a deliberate choice, but the absence does raise many questions around the position of women in action as a whole. We cannot point to a lack of women in either Western or global cinema (arguably, the female action star is much more prevalent in cinema from South East Asia – Chen Pei Pei and Michelle Yeoh are possibly the most recognized in the West), while Indian actor Priyanka Chopra has made a mark as an action star in both America and Bollywood. Hollywood has produced a number of female performers whose action credentials are continuing into their 40s

(Charlize Theron, Angelina Jolie, Michelle Rodriguez), much like Sigourney Weaver before them, while Linda Hamilton made a welcome return to the iconic role of Sarah Connor in *Terminator: Dark Fate* (Tim Miller, 2019). Holmlund's 2019 lecture posits that knowledge and ability are foregrounded as important in situating the ageing female action body – a point that resonates with Kelvin Ke's article "Rehabilitating Hegemonic Masculinity With the Bodies of Aging Action Heroes". Ke argues that the wisdom gained with maturity replaces an egocentric toxic masculinity which in turn allows for the exploration and validation of different forms of heroism.

These varied forms, and the dynamic status of the geriaction arena, were in evidence in the papers delivered at the symposium "Geriation Cinema: A Symposium on the Ageing Action Star" that we hosted at Bournemouth University in 2018. While small in scale, the symposium showcased papers looking at geriation from gendered, global and industrial perspectives. The keynote address by Rajinder Dudrah (which forms the nucleus of the article contained in this collection), examined the evolving later-life career of Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan in "The Geri-Actions of the Ageing Amitabh Bachchan". The global perspective continued with MaoHui Deng and Fraser Elliott's examination of Sammo Hung in "Fighting with Dementia: *The Bodyguard* and Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema". This paper interrogated how themes of dementia and "not-remembering" act as analogies for contemporary trends in Chinese-language cinema, as the past of both stars and Hong Kong cinema itself become appropriated into a unified "Chinese cinema" by an increasingly influential mainland. The symposium also explored the female face of geriation, with Lisa-Nike Bühring's "Retired, Extremely Dangerous and Female: Helen Mirren Kicking Ass in *R.E.D.*" This paper argued that while Mirren's portrayal in the film is counter to the dominant representation of aged femininity as fragile, the narrative as a whole supports neoliberal discourses around ageing and consumerism.

Two papers, which together highlighted the neoliberal fetishism of “useful” youthfulness and the attendant redundancy of old-age, took different approaches to Sylvester Stallone. Jorge Pérez Iglesias’s paper “The Decline of the Muscle Cinema in *Last Action Hero* and *Demolition Man*” outlined how the self-reflexive outputs of Stallone’s 1990s work reflect the changing political climate in America at that time. Mark McKenna considered Stallone’s economic capital and the ways in which he has adapted his star persona to extend his global celebrity image in “Sylvester Stallone and the Economics of the Ageing Film Star”. Christa van Raalte further added to this focus on the ageing male action star, with her paper “21st Century Cowboy? Deconstructing The Hero in Late Clint Eastwood Movies”, which focused on how Eastwood’s later films actively deconstruct and reference his earlier work and persona (and an expansion of van Raalte’s paper is also included in this collection).

Christopher Holliday took an industrial perspective and looked at the mediation of youth and age by digital technologies in “Next Generation Hollywood: Digital De-Aging and the Virtual Recreation of Youth”. By tying the ontology of the digital image to notions of ageing as a socio-cultural construct, Holliday compellingly explored how the “youthing” of aged stars via their digital likenesses represent a possible future for computer-mediated acting. The genre of geriaction was further opened up by two papers focused on the world of espionage. Alexander Sergeant’s examination of James Bond in “007’s ‘Nasty Habit of Surviving’: ‘Working-Through’ Temporality and Ageing in the James Bond Franchise” argued that the cyclical nature of the franchise provides a repetitive repression of ageing alongside an imperialist fantasy of national identity. Laura Crossley’s paper “Palmer, Smiley ... and Powers: Old Spies in a Young Man’s Game” examined the dichotomy of the mentor/mentee relationship evident across a number of spy texts, with a particular focus on the star persona of Michael Caine.

Apart from the adapted papers contained in this collection as already indicated, other presentations from this symposium have since found publication outlets, notably “Sylvester Stallone and the Economics of the Ageing Film Actor” (McKenna) and “Retroframing the Future: Digital De-Aging Technologies in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema” (Holliday). This special edition of the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* is therefore a timely intervention, both arising from our event and participating in this growth area of scholarship.

The global nature of geriation is something also noteworthy: as the examples of female stars from South East Asia and the Indian subcontinent, as well as the papers from the symposium indicate, “geriation” is certainly not an exclusively US phenomenon. This crucial point is foregrounded in the first of this collection’s articles. In “The Geri-Actions of the Ageing Amitabh Bachchan”, Rajinder Dudrah examines the ways in which the concept of geriation fluctuates according to its cultural contexts, taking Bachchan’s career as a case study to aid the understanding of a polyentric global cinematic landscape. Dudrah interrogates scholarly approaches to world cinema, stardom and pastiche, to develop fresh insights into Bachchan’s star appeal, his glocal significance, and the nuanced impacts of his ageing on these diverse factors. In turn, this article offers an alternative perspective on notions of “action” in an Indian cinematic context, going beyond fighting and stunts, to invoke a broader range of “doing, excitement and spectacle” including emotions, song and dance routines, dialogue, and the nurturing of an online star persona.

In “Reflections on Mortality: The Imagery of Mirrors in Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*”, Christa van Raalte offers a close reading of Eastwood's ageing action hero persona in *Gran Torino* (Clint Eastwood, 2008), providing a detailed account of how this figure has morphed by adapting the elegiac tropes of the Western genre. Through notions of an inverted Lacanian “mirror stage” of old age, in which the subject fails to identify with a decrepit self-image, van Raalte charts how Eastwood’s film rearticulates the various stages of the star’s

recognizable persona through the repeated use of mirrors. These are shown to reflect and dwell upon the ageing body of the erstwhile action star, self-reflexively framing him in relation to his past roles.

In “Too Old for this Sh*t: Aged Action Heroes, Affect, and ‘the Economy of Exertion’”, Lennart Soberon provides a corrective to scholarly approaches that place ageing as an aberration within the action genre, instead situating the performance of age as a logical extension of that genre's patriarchal pleasures surrounding stoical suffering. Situating the action film in a historical continuum that frames strenuous, victimized masculinity as fundamentally redemptive, Soberon argues that its relationship to both the Western and melodrama provides a framework of resilience that emphasizes and rearticulates masculine agency through an “economy of exertion”. Old age is thus identified as an ideal set of preconditions to disavow the structures of male hegemony, instead placing the “besieged underdog” action hero in a marginalized position of empowering victimhood.

In “Make America Hate Again?: The Politics of Vigilante Geriaction”, Gregory Frame examines how visions of obsolete, ageing masculinity in contemporary vigilante films have become co-opted into a conservative discourse of US national pride, as symptomatic expressions of Trump’s America. Taking the *Death Wish* remake (Eli Roth, 2018) as his key case study, Frame analyses how signifiers of ageing in such films serve a broader purpose of resuscitating authoritarian heroism, speaking for a (white male) nationalist machismo that feels itself to have been rendered outmoded by social, economic and political change. Specifically, the article places geriaction vigilantism within Trump-era anxieties about immigration and urban decay as disruptive forces to white male hegemony, offering an important examination of this latest iteration of a sub-genre, and its relationship to shifting political contexts.

The shift of political contexts was in evidence as this collection was being put together, as the Trump administration gave way (grudgingly) to Joe Biden and the Democrats. While

Trump's jibes of "Sleepy Joe" aimed at his political rival sought to emphasize Biden's age (ironic, considering Trump himself is only four years younger), the more measured persona displayed by Biden seemingly spoke of gravitas and maturity, especially when contrasted with Trump's often infantile showboating. The first week of Biden's presidency was characterized not by "sleepiness" but by the volume of executive orders signed, with fifteen on the first day alone (Levine). For many this was an affirmation of wisdom but was also part of a progressive social project that commentators and observers may more usually associate with youth.

Wider cultural shifts effected by the Covid-19 pandemic have also shone a spotlight on our relationship with ageing. In the UK, older lives have become paramount, with many lockdown restrictions and the later vaccine rollout aimed at protecting the elderly; the standout hero of 2020 was the 99-year-old Captain Sir Tom Moore. Discussions around both the frailties and value of the ageing body have become mainstream, and where older people are often rendered invisible and irrelevant in a youth-focused society the refocus resulting from the pandemic has meant that older lives are not necessarily viewed as redundant.

These themes and concerns are evident throughout geriatric cinema and are manifest in the articles in this collection. The almost defiant refusal of *Da Five Bloods* to hide the age of its protagonists and the situating of them as they are now in their own past embodies our complicated relationship with ageing, with the intersection of past and present made both visible and indivisible. It is arguable that almost all film renders this intersection visible: if we have grown up watching particular actors, we carry very vividly the memory of how they looked even in the moment where we see them as they are now. This is made yet more complicated through processes of digital de-ageing in films such as *Ant-Man* (Peyton Reed, 2015) where the de-aged Michael Douglas is an almost-but-not-quite rendering of his youthful self, immediately followed by Douglas's present appearance. These moments are limited, unlike *The Irishman*, where the extensive scenes with the de-aged Robert De Niro, Al Pacino

and Joe Pesci offer the not particularly tantalizing prospect of extending their careers indefinitely.

Yet there is a poignancy in viewing *The Irishman* that is probably unintended by the filmmakers: the digital effects are impressive but while the faces of the men are digitally re-sculpted their physicality betrays their age: slower, more limited movement, thicker bodies. Their aged selves lie as a pentimento beneath the digital artifice, a constant reminder of the unstoppable reality of ageing. As with Deleuze's crystal-image, the past and present co-exist inextricably. As we have addressed throughout this introduction, these are not issues relevant only to the West and certainly not just to cinema. There is a commercial imperative on the part of the stars discussed here to maintain their careers, just as the industry will capitalize on the current trend for nostalgia that makes films such as *The Expendables* attractive to an audience base who were not even born when the stars first came to prominence. What to do with an ageing action star may not be the most urgent question to answer but the wider themes that these films explore articulate our fears about the tensions between relevance and redundancy. By building on the previous work in this area, this timely collection points towards the varied pathways through and around questions of action and age and we hope that readers will be inspired to pursue these across global cinemas.

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