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## Mature masculinity and the ageing action hero

The ageing male action hero is a figure many are familiar with through the character of Bruce Willis in the *Die Hard* series. However, physical strength, speeds and agility are usually not associated with old age. Whether age makes a difference in the action hero genre is a question Rebecca Feasey deals with in this article.

### Introduction

Much work within the field of film and gender studies has attempted to theorise, unmask and deconstruct the representation of the male action hero, paying particular attention to the spectacular body and the herculean physical performances of characters such as John McClane/Bruce Willis, Martin Riggs/Mel Gibson and Indiana Jones/Harrison Ford. And yet, at a time when these stars are returning to the action roles that made them famous, in some cases, several decades later, scholars continue to ignore and overlook the fundamental notion of age in their discussions of the hard bodied, hegemonic hero. After all, hegemonic masculinity has associations with physical prowess, sexual virility, social dominance and aggression, which are potentially at odds with the image of the ageing male. With this in mind, I propose to examine the representation of the ageing action hero in the popular and long running *Die Hard* (1988, 1990, 1995, 2007) franchise, and consider the ways in which the mature masculinity on offer is seen to either be confirming to or challenging the hegemonic ideal.

### Hegemonic masculinity and male hierarchies

Although there are a myriad of masculinities in existence at any one moment, this is not to say that each one is treated equally or granted the same level of social, sexual or economic power. Rather, different models of masculinity can be seen to form a hierarchy of acceptable, unacceptable

and marginalised models for the contemporary male. The hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity ranks and qualifies alternative images of the male, with white, middle-class, heterosexual, competitive, individualist and physically assertive hegemonic males wielding power over the moral, cultural and financial landscape. These men are said to represent the very pinnacle of mannish power, masculine prowess and physical machismo, and as such, this model of hegemonic masculinity stands as the ideal image of male power against which all men are judged, tested and found wanting, so much so in fact that it has 'become the standard in psychological evaluations, sociological research, and self-help and advice literature for teaching young men to become real men'.<sup>1</sup> And, although we understand that most men may not live in a position of hegemonic privilege, this image of the male 'remains a powerful, perhaps the dominant, script against which self and others are evaluated across the life course'.<sup>2</sup> Kenneth MacKinnon makes the point that although few men will ever reach this hegemonic ideal, 'this does not [...] lessen its credibility as a standard of masculinity to which men are supposed to aspire'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the hegemonic hierarchy is said to be of benefit to all men, even those anti-sexist, effeminate or pacifist masculinities who command less political power, wealth or prestige than the dominant male, because in forming, conforming to and becoming complicit in this hierarchy, all masculinities benefit from the institutionalisation of men's dominance over women which is at the heart of hegemonic power.<sup>4</sup> However, it is important to note, particularly in relation to this research, that 'hegemonic masculinity scripts are concluded at middle age',<sup>5</sup> and as such, even those few men who do reach the very pinnacle of the hegemonic hierarchy are challenged, tested and found wanting as they move beyond that life stage.<sup>6</sup>

- 1 Michael Kimmel, 'Masculinity as homophobia: fear, shame, and silence in the construction of gender identity' in: Peter Murphy ed., *Feminism and Masculinities* (Oxford 2004) 182–199, there 184.
- 2 Gabriela Spector-Mersel, 'Never-aging stories: western hegemonic masculinity scripts', *Journal of Gender Studies* 15:1 (2006) 67–82, there 78.
- 3 Kenneth MacKinnon, *Representing men: maleness and masculinity in the media* (London 2003) 115.
- 4 Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee, 'Toward a new sociology of masculinity' *Theory and society* 14:5 (1985) 551–604, there 592.
- 5 Spector-Mersel, 'Never-aging stories' *Journal of Gender Studies* 15, 67–82, there 68.
- 6 Middle age is a rather loose label for a period that takes us beyond young adulthood but stops short of old age, terms, which are themselves problematic. And although various attempts have been made to define this age, differences occurs between such efforts, indeed, even dictionary definitions cannot agree on the appropriate age range. While Kathleen Woodward tells us that 'ageing occurs when [...] we are around fifty, a date that coincides with the biological marker of menopause' (Woodward 1999: xiii), the recent American Census lists middle age as including both the age categories 35 to 44 and 45 to 54. What is clear here then is the fact that markers of ageing are nothing if not culturally monitored, and that like 'other markers of social difference, age is, in large part, socially constructed' (Woodward 1999: x).

## **Action cinema and the hard bodied hegemonic hero**

I have suggested elsewhere that the hegemonic ideal is both impossible to create and implausible to maintain for the contemporary male, and as such, this figure of powerful masculinity 'may only ever be embodied by mythical figures, legendary heroes and a very small number of men in society'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is interesting to examine the ways in which the most masculine of Hollywood genres presents the male hero in relation to the hegemonic ideal. After all, the male driven action film is understood to be the most visually explosive and macho of Hollywood genres due to the spectacular sight of the hard male body. Indeed, extant research from within the field of feminist film theory makes it clear that it is the body of the hero that sets the tone for the action narrative. We are told that action heroes are 'constructed almost exclusively through their physicality, and the display of the body forms a key part of the visual excess that is offered in the muscular action cinema'.<sup>8</sup> It has even been suggested that 'American action movies work hard, and often at the expense of narrative development, to contrive situations for the display of the hero's body'.<sup>9</sup>

Feminist theory has traditionally suggested that women are held up for visual pleasure and erotic display, and as such, one might want to question the ways in which these hard bodied heroes are being presented as objects for contemplation and spectacle. However, the fact that women tend to be simultaneously objectified and subjugated whilst these hard bodied heroes are simultaneously eroticised and active, severs any link between the hard bodied hero and the 'feminised' position here. Therefore, instead of looking at the masculine hero as a passive object for the structuring gaze, the male body is seen to be active, authoritative and motivating the narrative.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the fact that the male body is put on display in the action cinema more so than in any other Hollywood genre is telling, after all, it is 'the emphasis on *action* in these films which both legitimates, through the affirmation of an active understanding of masculinity, and provides a narrative justification for such physical display'.<sup>11</sup> That said, although these

7 Rebecca Feasey, *Masculinity and popular television* (Edinburgh 2008) 3.

8 Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular bodies: gender, genre and the action cinema* (London 1995) 35.

9 Tasker, *Spectacular bodies*, 79.

10 Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle' in: Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark eds., *Screening the male: exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema* (London 1993) 9-20.

11 Tasker, *Spectacular bodies*, 2.

hard bodied heroes are anything but passive, the action cinema routinely presents a drama in which that power and omnipotence are tested and qualified.<sup>12</sup> While 'the action hero is repeatedly subject to suffering within the narrative of which he is the centre, it is his triumph over this suffering that has been critically emphasised'.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, although the lacerated, bleeding and penetrated body of the action cinema indicates 'that the hard body *can* be wounded, that it isn't invulnerable or invincible [...] the ability to endure severe pain underscores how truly hard these bodies are'.<sup>14</sup> In short, these men are seen to prove their very masculinity and as such, earn their place at the summit of the hegemonic hierarchy.

Theorists such as Barbara Creed have suggested that the male body that dominates the action genre speaks less of authority, control and mastery and more of crisis, weakness and a loss of social power. We are told that there 'is an increasing focus on masculinity as troubled and unsure of itself - never more unsure than when it is shouting its self-confidence via exaggeratedly muscular heroes toting modern weaponry'.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Richard Dyer notes that the 'values of masculine physicality are harder to maintain straightforwardly and unproblematically' than in earlier patriarchal periods.<sup>16</sup> However, even though one might hope to question the moral, cultural and financial power of the action hero and thus the power of the hegemonic male as a role model for contemporary masculinity in lived society, the fact that these films remain popular with a broad male audience and these images of the male are presented as the ideal image of contemporary masculinity suggests that while a small number of feminist theorists are questioning the very power of hegemonic masculinity in general and the authority of the action hero in particular, the audience continue to read these hard bodies as authoritative, assertive and inspirational.

## The ageing action hero

Extant literature on both the action hero and the hegemonic male routinely refer to issues such as class, race, sexuality, nationality and the body.

12 Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle', 9-20.

13 Tasker, *Spectacular bodies*, 116.

14 Susan Jeffords, *Hard bodies: Hollywood masculinity in the Reagan era* (New Jersey 1994) 50.

15 Kenneth MacKinnon, *Representing men, maleness and masculinity in the media* (London 2003) 63.

16 Richard Dyer, *Heavenly bodies: film stars and society* (London 1987) 12.

However, little research to date focuses on the notion of age and ageing as a sign of difference to be studied in relation to the hegemonic male, on or beyond the big screen.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, seminal research on men's studies routinely overlooks the role of ageing and age theory in its discussion of masculinity, machismo and the male role.<sup>18</sup> One might suggest that a lack of research on the ageing action hero is unsurprising given the predominance of the thirty-something hard body to the genre in question, a genre that focuses on the physical prowess of the male body for the viewing pleasures of a youthful male audience.

That said, the presentation of the ageing action hero is not unheard of in Hollywood, after all, Sean Connery returned to the role of James Bond in *Never Say Never Again* (1983) aged 52, while Roger Moore kept performing in that role until *A View to a Kill* (1985), aged 57. Likewise, previous action stars such as John Wayne, Burt Lancaster, Steve McQueen and Clint Eastwood have all performed middle aged or more mature heroic roles. Virginia Wexman makes the point that the careers of many western stars 'blossomed as their youthful allure faded'<sup>19</sup> and 'a number of classic westerns made in the late 1950s to mid-1970s take the aging of these stars as their narrative focus.'<sup>20</sup>

However, although these ageing stars were performing images of the tough male hero, they were not having to present their bodies as a hard, potent spectacle. Indeed, it is only recently that we have seen the trend for older actors reprising earlier heroic and hard bodied action roles, be it Bruce Willis (52) in *Die Hard 4.0* (2007), Dolph Lundgren (53) in *The Expendables* (2010), Arnold Schwarzenegger (55) in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), Sylvester Stallone (60) in *Rocky Balboa* (2006) and (62) *Rambo* (2008) and Harrison Ford (66) in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008). And there are currently rumours surrounding not only a new *Die Hard* movie starring Bruce Willis, but also further *Indiana Jones* instalments with its original star in that role. Likewise, we are told that 'lower down the Hollywood ladder, Jackie Chan and Steven Seagal also doggedly carry on making action movies, like punch-drunk boxers who

17 Kathleen Woodward, 'Introduction' in: Kathleen Woodward ed., *Figuring age: women, bodies, generations* (Bloomington 1999) ix-xxix, there x.

18 Spector-Mersel, 'Never-aging stories', 67-82, there 78.

19 Virginia Wexman, *Creating the couple: love, marriage and hollywood performance* (Princeton 1993) 69.

20 Chris Holmlund, *Impossible bodies: femininity and masculinity at the movies* (London 2002) 143.

know nothing else'.<sup>21</sup>

Although little work exists on notions of ageing in film stardom, the work that does exist tends to focus on the negative reception of the ageing female film star, paying particular attention to the ways in which youthful, eroticised performers have either struggled to find work as older actresses in Hollywood or who have been derided for trying to reprise an older vision of female sexuality on the big screen.<sup>22</sup> Such work is clearly picking up on the unconscious weight of a culture that equates female sexuality with youth. After all, ageism and sexism work in combination to provide 'a double standard of ageing' because 'women are required to match up to the adolescent ideal throughout their lives'.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, a number of cultural commentators have proposed a link between what is said to be the grotesque image of the ageing female pin up and the monstrous figure of the ageing action star due to the fact that both figures rely on bodily spectacle and physical perfection for their appeal. That said, these theorists are making the link between the youthful allure of the woman as erotic object and the 'hyperbolic' bodies of the body builder rather than offering a link between the objectified female and the hard bodied musculature and hegemonic power of *Die Hard* fame.<sup>24</sup>

### **Die Hard: be it harder, with a vengeance or in the computer age**

The *Die Hard* quadrilogy is the popular and long-running action franchise that has spanned four films over three decades with *Die Hard*, *Die Hard 2*, *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* and the more recent *Die Hard 4.0*. And although there are clear differences between the films in terms of locations, narrative drives, supporting characters and the technologies available, the

21 Nick Hasted, 'The Hollywood heros who refuse to act their age', available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/the-hollywood-heros-who-refuse-to-act-their-age-792569.html> (2008).

22 E. Ann. Kaplan, 'Trauma and Aging: Marlene Dietrich, Melanie Klein, and Marguerite Duras', in Woodward ed., *Figuring age*, 171-194, there 175 and Rebecca Feasey 'The Ageing Femme Fatale: Sex, Stardom, and Sharon Stone' *Aging Studies in Europe: Celebrity, Performance, and Aging*, 2, (forthcoming).

23 Susan Sontag cited in Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick 'Introduction', in Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick eds., *Images of ageing: cultural representations of later life* (London 1995) 1-18, there 8.

24 Nick Hasted, 'The Hollywood heroes who refuse to act their age'.

films play to a clear format. The films focus on the leading male protagonist played by Bruce Willis, John McClane, in his role as a cynical, sarcastic yet principled police detective turned articulate and accidental hero, or what one commentator refers to as a 'one-man apocalypse'.<sup>25</sup> McClane is offered little in the way of official help, and as such, he tends to find himself acting either unofficially or against the orders of his authorities. Perhaps predictable in the 'buddy cop' tradition, our hero is always granted an originally unwilling partner who comes to offer emotional as well as practical support in the fast-paced narrative. Misrecognition and the double bluff are central to the franchise because the films are driven by a sinister criminal mastermind in what appears to be a terrorist plot, but which is later discovered to be larceny. These films have improbably large body counts and some of the most explosive spectacular action sequences seen in the genre.

Theorists have on occasion referred to the character of McClane as a loquacious 'smart-ass' rather than a hard bodied hero, due in part to his wise-cracking commentaries under fire and in part to the broader vocal persona of Bruce Willis. We are told that 'whilst *Die-Hard* gives us Bruce Willis as action hero pin-up, his persona is very much defined through the voice, more wise-guy than tough-guy'.<sup>26</sup> However, one cannot mistake McClane's occasional one-liner or his nervous self-commentaries as evidence of a voice taking precedence over the tough body in these films. Indeed, the 'pleasures of action cinema are primarily those of spectacle rather than dialogue' and the *Die Hard* franchise is no exception here.<sup>27</sup> Susan Jeffords makes the point when she says that McClane 'is defined and determined by a focus on [...] the heroic body [which] turns out to be [...] superior to those of his enemies, his companions, and the audience'.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, 'the camera is not ambivalent about and needs no narrative justification to display his physical prowess'.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, I am not trying to underplay the appeal of McClane's comic banter, but rather, I am making the point that such dialogue does not detract from the importance of the body in question. After all, McClane's quick-witted quips do not motivate the narrative nor do they offer a heroic

25 Burhan Wazir, 'Hollywood's ageing warrior heroes pack another punch', available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/feb/02/usa.film#history-link-box> (2003).

26 Yvonne Tasker, 'Dumb Movies for Dumb People' in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark eds., *Screening the male: exploring masculinities in hollywood cinema* (London 1993) 230-244, there 239.

27 Tasker, *Spectacular bodies*, 6.

28 Jeffords, *Hard bodies*, 53.

29 Jeffords, *Hard bodies*, 34.

resolution, indeed, he often berates himself and his decision making skills during these verbal outbursts. Rather, it is the body that takes on the active, authoritative role here. McClane may well be a wise guy, but he remains throughout the franchise a hard bodied tough guy. What is interesting here of course is the fact that although the comic banter may not be affected by the ageing process, the hard body is, has been, and must be.

That said, the quadrilogy has remained commercially successful throughout its three-decade history, with the latest instalment being the most successful film of the franchise to date. *Die Hard* earned \$83 million domestically and \$140.7 million worldwide; *Die Hard 2* earned \$117.5 million domestically and \$239.5 million worldwide; *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* made \$100,012,499 domestically and \$361,212,499 worldwide while the most recent *Die Hard 4.0* made \$134.5 million domestically and \$383.5 million worldwide. The *Die Hard* franchise has grossed over \$1 billion, and the commercial success of the franchise has not waned as the character of McClane, and the actor playing that role has aged from the 35 year old officer in the first movie to the 55-year-old detective in the latest installment. Indeed, the success of this latest movie has led to talk of two further *Die Hard* movies with Willis returning to the character of McClane. Moreover, while the franchise has continued to appeal to its original audience,<sup>30</sup> it has also managed to attract a younger twenty-something demographic.<sup>31</sup> With this in mind, it is interesting to consider the ways in which *Die Hard 4.0* presented a popular and appealing version of ageing masculinity to both the young and ageing adult male. In short, this film 'offers a key opportunity to reflect upon how the [action] genre presents ageing'<sup>32</sup> for the hegemonic male.

## The reception of an ageing action hero

Putting a fifty-something actor and character in the role of the pre-supposedly young adult action hero will of course lead to some negative commentary and ageist criticisms, and a wide range of news, magazine and review media were fast to challenge the appeal of an ageing action

30 Rob Nelson, 'Analog hero for the digital age', available at: <http://www.villagevoice.com/2007-06-19/film/analog-hero-for-the-digital-age/> (2007).

31 Anon, 'Live Free or Die Hard', available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Live\\_Free\\_or\\_Die\\_Hard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Live_Free_or_Die_Hard) (2011).

32 Chris Holmlund 'Celebrity, ageing and Jackie Chan: middle aged Asian in transnational action' *Celebrity Studies* 1:1 (2010) 96-112, there 98.



hero. Reviewers quipped that the latest instalment of the quadrilogy should read '*Die Hard*: with a bus pass'<sup>33</sup> or '*Die Hard* with a Hernia'<sup>34</sup>, telling us that the character is 'looking forward to his pension'<sup>35</sup> and 'using a Zimmer frame'<sup>36</sup> after having already 'given up the fight with his hairline'.<sup>37</sup> Commentators talked about John McClane 'squeezing back into his sweaty vest and wheezing out a few more catchphrases'.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, we are told that Bruce Willis is 'so old that *Die Hard 5* will have to feature a plot that largely revolves around a Werther's Original theft in a haemorrhoid cushion factory'.<sup>39</sup> However, perhaps surprisingly, the commentary on the ageing action hero was overwhelmingly positive, and the small number of negative commentaries as seen here were more mocking than outright hostile to the presentation of the mature maverick cop.

Indeed, both popular and professional review literature seemed to form a consensus in their praise of the ageing action hero in the latest *Die Hard* instalment. For example, we are told that 'age catches up to Bruce Willis' everyman hero, and it makes him all the more appealing'<sup>40</sup> and that while the character of McClane 'may be older and balder [...] he's none the worse for the wear'.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, we are informed that although 'Bruce may be aging fast [...] he still looks the part and plays John McClane so convincingly you reckon he could go on for ever'.<sup>42</sup> In this same way it was said that at the age of 52 'Willis still reeks of hero; still ranks as someone who gives bruises as good as he takes 'em; still rocks when he's in the wrong place at

33 Nick Curtis, 'Die Hard: with a bus pass', Available at: <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/film/review-23401451-die-hard-with-a-bus-pass.do> (2007).

34 Anon, 'New Die Hard up against Transformers', available at: <http://www.empireonline.com/news/story.asp?NID=19264&page=1> (2006).

35 Curtis, 'Die Hard: With a bus pass'.

36 Anon, 'New Die Hard up against Transformers'.

37 Curtis, 'Die Hard: With a bus pass'.

38 Mark Hopper, 'Catch of the day: ageing action stars', available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2008/jan/02/catchofthedayageingaction> (2007).

39 Stuart Heritage, 'Why Bruce Willis should devote the rest of his career to *Die Hard* Sequels', available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2010/feb/25/bruce-willis-die-hard-5#start-of-comments> (2010).

40 Stephanie Zacharek, 'Live free or Die Hard', available at: [http://www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/review/2007/06/27/live\\_free/index.html?CP=IMD&DN=110](http://www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/review/2007/06/27/live_free/index.html?CP=IMD&DN=110) (2007).

41 Zacharek, 'Live free or Die Hard'.

42 Anon, 'Die Hard 4.0', available at: [http://dvd.easycinema.com/visitor/product\\_detail.html?product\\_id=86161](http://dvd.easycinema.com/visitor/product_detail.html?product_id=86161) (2007).

the wrong time'.<sup>43</sup> In this way, it has been suggested that 'the aging body can work as an asset, just another challenge that our battered hero has to overcome'<sup>44</sup> rather than an unreliable or failing image of problematic or powerless masculinity.

Indeed, some reviewers made the point that the franchise is based on the physical assaults on the male hard body, or what they term 'the spectacle of its hero's battering'<sup>45</sup> irrespective of the film in question or the age of the actor at that time, and as such, it is the physical toughness of the body rather than its age that is of importance here. McClane remains a tough guy with a hard body that can withstand routine pain, repeated punishments and seemingly habitual brutality, and as such the ageing hero is not only accepted, but applauded, by audiences and critics alike.<sup>46</sup> One might question whether McClane's relationship to patriarchy and the hegemonic hierarchy becomes more ambivalent and more complicated as he is seen to age, after all, the hegemonic male is defined by physical, social, sexual and moral power in the cultural landscape, which are inextricably linked to a younger image of the male. That said, the character and actor in question may be beyond middle age and thus in many senses beyond the power of the hegemonic male, but his physicality acts as a powerful indicator of his masculine power and prowess. The point here of course is that the body on offer remains potent and powerful rather than weak, unreliable or failing, which perhaps represents a rather less than realistic version of the ageing body. Indeed, if we return to Sontag's point about the 'double standard' of ageing in Hollywood we soon discover that career longevity only applies to the male action hero because 'Hollywood action and adventure tends to allow older male stars a fantasy space it denies to women'.<sup>47</sup>

It is of course worth noting here that although the character of John McClane has aged during the life span of the *Die Hard* quadrilogy, he has always been middle aged rather than youthful in the franchise. Bruce Willis was 35 when he made the original *Die Hard*, and thus already beyond a youthful image of masculinity. Moreover, the fact that the character in

43 Jon Dunmore, 'In Bruce we trust', available at: <http://www.poffysmoviemania.com/LiveFreeOrDieHard.html> (2007).

44 Yvonne Tasker, 'Aging and action authenticity', available at: <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2010/08/12/aging-and-action-authenticity> (2010).

45 Rob Nelson, 'Analog hero for the digital age', available at: <http://www.villagevoice.com/2007-06-19/film/analog-hero-for-the-digital-age/> (2007).

46 Nelson, 'Analog hero for the digital age'.

47 Tasker, 'Aging and action authenticity'.

question was already a weary technophobe in the first film means that his continued disillusionment seems less to do with ageing and merely an authentic continuation of character, meaning that he not only defends his position in the hegemonic hierarchy, but further reinforces it. Therefore, there might be a case for considering the ways in which the more mature action body signifies experience rather than failure and adds authenticity rather than weakness to a performance.

The character of McClane seems to have stayed 'on the edge of the chasm dividing youth from old age'<sup>48</sup> and his 'success depends, however, not only on a body which remains identifiably male [...] but also on how he is positioned in relation to others'.<sup>49</sup> The character is often surrounded by older, less muscular or incompetent versions of masculinity, and therefore, rather than question the reliability of the ageing hard body on offer, this body continues to be presented as the powerful and indeed 'correct' image of masculinity. And although the various criminals and villains of the franchise tend more often than not to be presented as hard bodied with 'an excessive physical strength',<sup>50</sup> the fact that these men routinely have more elaborate weaponry, larger arsenals, more advanced technology and bigger guns at their disposal shows them having to compensate for their lack of hegemonic power. Moreover, although other ageing action heroes tend to rely on bigger guns as they age, as a form of 'compensation for decreased powers',<sup>51</sup> McClane is, throughout the franchise, either without weapons or in charge of less powerful, less reliable and less sophisticated hardware, which only goes to further reinforce the very patriarchal power of the man and the physicality of the body in question. McClane starts the quadrilogy under-armed, unprepared, without warning and indeed without appropriate clothing, and yet, even though his body is shot, lacerated and in pain, he still manages to out-manoeuvre the villains, which becomes a recurring trope of the franchise.

The fact that Bruce Willis is currently talking about making a further two *Die Hard* films before retiring from the franchise goes further to quash any suggestions about the deteriorating action body or the loss of hegemonic power for the heroic male. Indeed, in a recent magazine interview, Bruce Willis said:

48 Holmlund, *Impossible bodies*, 148.

49 Holmlund, *Impossible bodies*, 148.

50 Tasker, *Spectacular bodies*, 9.

51 Holmlund, *Impossible bodies*, 146.

'I want to do *Die Hard* 5, then one final *Die Hard* movie [...] before finally hanging that white vest up for good. At the moment, I can run and I can fight on screen. But there will come a time when I no longer want to do that. That's when I'll step away from the *Die Hard* films'.<sup>52</sup>

Willis makes the point that he will not 'want to' continue in the physical action role, rather than suggest that he will not be able to continue to play the hard bodied hero, and the distinction is crucial here. And although Willis was heard joking that 'I used to bounce off the concrete a lot easier than I do now'<sup>53</sup> and the character of McClane laments that 'I'm too old to jump out of cars' (*Die Hard* 4.0), the fact that the star and character continue to do so speaks volumes about the tough body in question. Not only is Willis suggesting that he will make two more *Die Hard* instalments, but the actor even showed an interest in appearing in the *Die Hard* prequel, making it clear that it is the ravages of time on his face and hair-line rather than his hard body or physicality that may prevent this from becoming a reality.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the star says it best when he says: 'I will kick anybody's ass who tries to tell me that I'm not a man because my hair's thinning'.<sup>55</sup>

Hegemonic masculinity is said to be synonymous with notions of physical power, social control and sexual prowess, which are themselves inextricably linked with young adulthood rather than late middle age. We are told that 'youthful energy and physicality are essential to the dominant [...] masculinity construct'<sup>56</sup> and that as a result 'the central image of older men stands in opposition to the dominant constructions of men and masculinities'.<sup>57</sup> What is interesting here however, is the fact that the middle-aged action hero maintains his hegemonic status, based in part on his authority in the social and sexual landscape, and in part on the physical power and prowess of the hard body. Therefore, at a time when the ageing

52 Germaine Lussier, 'Bruce Willis wants to make two more "Die Hard" films, then Step away', available at: <http://www.slashfilm.com/bruce-willis-wants-make-two-more-die-hard-films-then-step-away/> (2010).

53 Anon, 'Bruce Willis - Die Hard 4.0 premieres in UK', available at: [http://www.contactmusic.com/news.nsf/story/die-hard-40-premieres-in-uk\\_1034853](http://www.contactmusic.com/news.nsf/story/die-hard-40-premieres-in-uk_1034853) (2007).

54 Anon, 'Bruce Willis talks Die Hard 5', available at: <http://www.worstpreviews.com/headline.php?id=15307> (2009).

55 Anon, 'Bruce Willis: A *Die Hard* with a soft side', available at: <http://www.metro.co.uk/film/844230-a-die-hard-with-a-soft-side> (2010).

56 Spector-Mersel, 'Never-aging stories', 67-82, there 77.

57 Ibidem, 77.

body can be said to 'represent a narcissistic affront to, even an attack on, the adult ego'.<sup>58</sup> The ageing action hero maintains his assertive, authoritative and omnipresent position in Hollywood based on his continued physical dominance.

## **Conclusion**

I have examined the representation of the ageing action hero in the *Die Hard* quadrilogy, suggesting that although the character of John McClane and the actor in question have both been seen to age throughout the history of the franchise, such ageing has in no way diminished the hardness of the body, nor challenged the hegemonic power of the male in question. Indeed, at a time when ageing beyond the middle years is said to challenge male power and weaken patriarchal control, it is the very toughness of the hard body, rather than any moral, cultural or financial power that has allowed the ageing male to remain heroic and hegemonic. This is not to say that I approve of or encourage the hegemonic hierarchy, indeed, elsewhere I argue against both the plausibility and power of this image of the male,<sup>59</sup> however, it is this hegemonic presentation that has dominated and continues to dominate the muscular action genre, and as such it is necessary to understand and unmask the representation of the ageing action hero here.

58 Charlotte Herfray cited in Chris Holmlund, *Impossible bodies*, 145.

59 Rebecca Feasey, *Masculinity and popular television* (Edinburgh 2008) 153-156.