

# *Confronting the impossibility of impossible bodies: Tom Cruise and the ageing male action hero movie*

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## 8. Confronting the impossibility of impossible bodies: Tom Cruise and the ageing male action hero movie

Lisa Purse

Since the mid-2000s, there has been a marked proliferation of veteran heroes in the action genre, exemplified by the success of franchises like *The Expendables* (2010, 2012, 2014, with a fourth in development) and *Taken* (2008, 2012, 2014), producing a growing collection of films to which *Vanity Fair* magazine was moved to apply the moniker ‘Dadcore’ (Taylor 2014).<sup>1</sup> This chapter will examine the factors that have contributed to this proliferation, but also the ways in which contemporary ageing action stars’ bodies produce meaning in relation to their immediate narrative contexts, and to wider cultural narratives of ageing. The now well-established methodological emphasis on paying close attention to the details of performance (see, for example, Affron 1977, King 1991 [1985], Naremore 1988 and Klevan 2005) has historically tended to neglect the stars of action cinema. In the few studies of ageing male action stars that exist, the physical appearance of figures such as Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone is analysed to highly productive ends, but the texture of their ageing star bodies’ performance-in-motion is generalised rather than parsed in detail.<sup>2</sup> This may be because physical stature and the static postures of mastery that express it are such an important component of the male action hero’s construction and the paratextual marketing of his action body that there is less perceived imperative to consider movement closely; or perhaps the force of normative presumptions of ageing as an inevitable slowing or stiffening of movement unwittingly situates movement as a lesser object of study (and I will return to questions of stature, slowing and stiffening in due course). Either way, there remains a need to extend existing scholarship in this area by analysing the ageing action star body not just as ‘a sign of meaning’ but as ‘a body in action’, as Paul McDonald puts it (1998: 182). This chapter will therefore use close analysis of physical performance to understand the epistemic and phenomenological consequences of real-world ageing – visible or simply known – on the construction of the ageing action star in recent action cinema. Considering the performance-in-motion of a range of ageing male action stars, and ending with an examination of the extent to which the allegedly ‘ever-young’ Tom Cruise might represent a productive anomaly in this context, this chapter reveals similarities and differences across star bodies, roles and narratives that suggest that this cycle of films represents a site of intense cultural negotiation over the lived experience of the ageing male body.

### Looking back

The figure of the ageing hero has always had a place in action cinema’s many iterations: the veteran nearing the end of his career or pressed back into active ‘service’ to solve a developing crisis, whose life experience and strategic expertise is crucial to the overcoming of steep odds or key to the pathos of failing at that attempt. Across the twentieth century, various male stars have achieved longevity with such roles, such as John Wayne, Burt Lancaster, Clint Eastwood and Harrison Ford.<sup>3</sup> As these stars aged, the markers of ageing visible on the body – from facial lines to changes in posture, musculature, fat distribution and motility – and extra-textual knowledge of the fact of the star’s ageing, drove narratives which ‘take the aging of these stars as their narrative focus’, as Chris Holmlund has pointed out (2002: 143). The ageing star body provides a heightened embodiment of competing qualities – the strength and tenacity implied by ‘still being here’ as an active, influential protagonist, co-present with the observable diminutions of the aged body – that is narratively and thematically productive.<sup>4</sup> And while the exploration of the vicissitudes of power (physical and metaphorical) and the relationship to the past that the ageing process can engender provided rich material for character and action in, for example, Wayne’s films *El Dorado* (Howard Hawks, 1966), *Rio Lobo* (John Ford, 1970) and *The Shootist* (Don Siegel, 1976), the body of the ageing action star could also resonate beyond the narrative, speaking to wider social or cultural concerns. Garry Wills suggests, for example, that in Wayne’s final films, ‘there was a *social* dimension to his aging, a

sense that a period in *history* was slipping away, not just one man's natural powers' (1997: 281, original emphasis). We might say the same for the deployment of the ageing Wayne and the ageing Burt Lancaster in *The Green Berets* (Ray Kellogg, John Wayne, Mervyn LeRoy, 1968) and *Go Tell The Spartans* (Ted Post, 1978) respectively. While serving different ideological agendas, in both these Vietnam-set films the ageing action star's slowed motility functions to emblemise the passing of an older era of combat and the difficulty of understanding how to be effective in a new and unfamiliar theatre of war. The affective shock of seeing Burt Lancaster's aged body lying naked, exposed, inert in a field of dead bodies after a failed defensive mission at the end of *Go Tell The Spartans* dramatically reinforces the film's anti-war message. These examples suggest Richard Dyer's conceptualisation of stars' function, to 'enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production' (1987: 17) not just, in these cases, in allowing a making sense of the process of ageing, but in deploying the ageing star body to think through a particular socio-cultural issue or context. These examples also illustrate the extent to which nostalgia seems integral to the ageing star body's connotative power and affective impact: as Ginette Vincendeau points out, 'ageing stars carry the memory of their younger glory' (2000: 181) in narratively and thematically highly productive ways, and we should note that this memory is not just of the detail of narrative action and characteristics in previous roles, but of the phenomenological force of the star body's past performances in comparison to their present iteration (see Sternagel 2012). To what extent do these characteristics still apply in the contemporary ageing action hero film? How does the phenomenology of the action star body resonate in this new context?

## A new era

We must begin by asking why recent action cinema has become such a fertile ground for performers, not just for established action stars like Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger attempting to extend their careers, but also for those who have made (or are making) forays into the action film later in their careers, such as Liam Neeson (*The Grey* (2011), *Non-Stop* (2014), *A Walk Among the Tombstones* (2014), *Run All Night* (2015)), Nicolas Cage (*Drive Angry* (2011), *Seeking Justice* (2011), *Stolen* (2012), *Rage* (2014)) and Denzel Washington (*The Book of Eli* (2010), *Safe House* (2012), *2 Guns* (2013), *The Equalizer* (2014)). In part, this has been made possible by actors in both camps becoming actor-producers to help fund their own vehicles. Like Eastwood, Lancaster, Ford, Wayne and others before them, Cage, Clooney, Cruise, Washington, Stallone, Schwarzenegger and latterly Bruce Willis and Dolph Lundgren have stepped into producer roles in this way.<sup>5</sup> A further factor was the emergence in the 2000s of a new archetype, the uncertain teenaged male action hero, in films like the *Transformers* franchise (2007, 2009), *Jumper* (2008), *Eagle Eye* (2008), *Zombieland* (2009) and *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* (2010). Counter-intuitively, these teenage action hero films often consolidated older male heroes' persistence onscreen because, in their bid to maximise demographic appeal, they frequently co-opted an ageing action hero into the role of 'buddy' or mentor for the teenaged protagonist, such as Schwarzenegger in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), Kevin Costner in *The Guardian* (2006), or Willis in *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007) and (with his twenty-something onscreen son) in *A Good Day to Die Hard* (2013) (Purse 2011: 106–9).

However, the central factor is the extent to which a growing cultural nostalgia for the 1980s has taken hold in the last ten years or so, and the extent to which one action star in particular broadened the field of opportunity through his own attempts to capitalise on this trend. Since the early 2000s, the 1980s have become a persistent nostalgic reference point for everything from vintage band T-shirts to electronic music (for example, Chromatics, Daft Punk) to video games like *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* (Ubisoft, 2013). This has prompted Hollywood to stage a number of different returns to the period, narratively or stylistically (*Be Kind Rewind* (2008), *Hot Tub Time Machine* (2010), *Drive* (2011), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013)), or through reboots and sequels of cult '80s movies and TV shows, like *The A-Team* (2010), *TRON: Legacy*

(2010), *Fright Night* (2011) and *Evil Dead* (2013). Sylvester Stallone's action stardom is indelibly linked to the 1980s: he shot to fame with his turn as small-time boxer Rocky Balboa in *Rocky* (1976), but it was his muscled incarnation as Vietnam vet John Rambo in *First Blood* (1982) and its sequels (1985, 1988), along with the *Rocky* sequels (1979, 1982, 1985, 1990), that cemented his reputation as a key 'hard-body' action star of that decade (Jeffords 1994: 24). In an era of 1980s revivals, Stallone struck early, writing and directing his own iconic characters' returns in the well-received *Rocky Balboa* (2006) and *Rambo* (2008) respectively. In doing so, Stallone achieved a significant career revival, consolidated with the ensemble piece *The Expendables*, which he wrote, directed and produced, and which teamed a roster of ageing action stars such as Stallone, Lundgren, Jet Li, Willis and Schwarzenegger with 2000s action star Jason Statham, and famous former sportsmen like NFL stars-turned-actors Terry Crews and Jim Brown and ex-wrestler Randy Couture. The film's self-ironising celebration of the former action stardom of people like Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Willis and Lundgren, combined with the casting of celebrity athletes like Crews and Couture, proved popular with cinema-goers, thus paving the way, alongside Stallone's earlier efforts, for a range of other films to be green-lit that featured older actors in ensembles, single-hero movies or buddy pairings.<sup>6</sup>

### Narratives of ageing

The ageing-past-youth of Sylvester Stallone's character in comparison to his younger colleague is registered explicitly in the dialogue of the very first action sequence of *The Expendables*. African pirates have demanded a ransom for a ship's crew they are holding, and the 'Expendables' team of mercenaries infiltrate the ship covertly and attempt to prevent the pirates from killing the hostages. Negotiations fail, prompting an initial flurry of gunfire that kills most but not all of the pirates. The remaining few force a stand-off by threatening to kill the hostages nearest to them, prompting Expendables team chief Barney Ross (Sylvester Stallone) and his right-hand man Lee Christmas (Jason Statham) to discuss their strategy for taking out all the pirates simultaneously:

Lee: I'll take the four on the left.

Barney: Why don't you take the two on the right and leave the rest alone?

Lee: You should take the two on the right, you're not that fast anymore.

Barney: The only thing faster is light.

Lee: We'll see.

Barney: Bullets go faster than blades.

Here the film acknowledges the age differential between Lee and Barney, and frames it in terms of capacity for speed. Barney's more advanced age, it is implied, means he will be slower than he used to be, less able to be the most effective team member. This kind of open acknowledgement of ageing in dialogue is a common feature of ageing male action hero films, a feature that seems to perpetuate the 'ideology of midlife decline' that critical gerontologist Margaret Gullette suggests is dominant in North American culture, and which is defined by notions of loss – of youthfulness, vitality, health and social status (1998: 5). Gullette argues that the prevalence of this idea produces a 'life-course opposition of progress and decline [that] constrains narrative options in our culture' (2004: 19), and the explicit suggestion that ageing heroes are likely to be slower than their younger colleagues bears this out. The athletic competencies – physical strength, speed, agility, stamina – that are demanded of the action hero and the actor that plays him/her would seem to tie the character and the actor more tightly to the midlife decline narrative, since, as Cassandra Phoenix and Andrew Sparkes point out, ageing athletic bodies are normatively understood in terms of an even more sharply defined 'trajectory of progress, peak and decline' (2008: 219). One of the questions I want to explore in this essay, is to what extent this culturally entrenched 'midlife

decline' narrative might be perpetuated or problematised by the ageing action hero film, and the ways in which the phenomenology of real-world ageing maps onto the construction of the ageing action body.

In her seminal essay, 'Youthfulness as Masquerade', Kathleen Woodward reminds us that cultural representations of the ageing body 'are constructed primarily in terms of visual appearance. Other aspects of the body-in-age are seldom explored, including the phenomenology and phantasies of motility, proprioception, and the interior of the body' (1988–9: 121). In visual terms, ageing action stars' younger selves precede them: spectators who are familiar with an actor's earlier performances and his younger action body are, as a result, primed to scrutinise visual appearance and register any changes that have resulted from the ageing process. A crucial element of cultural depictions of ageing is the contrast between present age and past youth: ageing is constructed as an alienation from a supposedly authentic, youthful self, creating an uncanny 'cohabitation of tenses, memories of a familiar past rubbing up against the strange newness of the present', as Amelia DeFalco notes (2010: 9). In action cinema, this cohabitation of tenses necessarily relates not just to visual appearance but to the physical dimensions of lived experience, because the action hero must be capable, or become capable, of overcoming extreme physical demands in order to succeed. Central to action cinema are fantasies of empowerment, trajectories towards spatial and physical mastery enacted by the action body working at the limits of physical resistance, but also central is action stardom, and the pleasures that flow from seeing particular performers displaying their physical skills - agility, stamina, strength - across a number of films. In these generic and historical contexts, the ageing action star is likely to register with the spectator as an uncanny body because it constitutes a familiar, remembered corporeality and a strange new corporeality simultaneously. Remembered and present performances of active physicality compete in the viewing experience, the disjunction between them embodied in the biological markers of real-world added years that cannot be fully elided: not just visual cues such as increased facial lines or cosmetic changes designed to resist biological ageing, but changes in weight distribution, muscle and skin structures, and in physical mobility and expressivity.

This uncanny body can produce strong cultural responses, which seems to cluster particularly intensely around the most prominent 1980s 'hardbodies'. Yvonne Tasker notes the 'caustic media attention' which has greeted the onscreen ageing of these actors, rightly situating it in the broader context of a celebrity culture in which ageing is 'frequently a source of humour, a comedy of the inappropriate' in which trying too hard or not hard enough leads to vilification (2014: 253–4). Sylvester Stallone in particular is, as Tasker reveals, regularly located in the former category, coverage of his appearance and fitness regime dogged by derisive rumours of plastic surgery and performance-enhancing drugs (2014: 254). Arnold Schwarzenegger has avoided some of this treatment because of his stepping back from acting during his tenure as Governor of California (2003–11), but it will be interesting to see if his recent return to acting will begin to generate similar negative celebrity-media scrutiny. Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment point out that ageing actors have generally 'secured their positions as older stars through their acting abilities rather than their physical image' (2000: 83), and this is a difficult route for stars like Stallone and Schwarzenegger to take, not least because the films in which they made their mark prioritised the display of brawn over cerebral scenes, but also because, as a result, their star personas are focused around their bodies rather than their acting skill. It is testament to the force of normative narratives of ageing and dominant conceptions of masculinity as an embodiment of phallic power that the ageing onscreen action body can call up a lost younger, more vigorous physicality across *both* the ageing 1980s action stars *and* those ageing male actors who have come late to action cinema and were not 'hardbody stars' in their youth. In the following section, I want to explore the spectacles of action these ageing action bodies generate, and the ideas they mobilise about what an ageing action body can be and do.

## **The ageing body in action**

If the ageing action body is an uncanny body for the spectator (and for the celebrity press), it is also uncanny for the character that this body fleshes out. Like the ageing hero narratives of the past, most contemporary ageing action hero movies stage the protagonist's own encounter with, to use DeFalco's words, 'memories of a familiar past rubbing up against the strange newness of the present'. This can be an emotional past, or the unsettling blunting of familiar physical capacities. Like the retired cop or war veteran, the ageing action hero suffers because he carries the weight of difficult memories of personal and professional loss. About halfway through *The Expendables*, as Barney Ross tries to decide whether to rescue the woman he has left on a South American island, 'Vilena', who is being terrorised by a local dictator, his friend, Tool (Mickey Rourke), volunteers a painful memory. While a mercenary in Bosnia, after a firefight with Serb forces that he wasn't sure he would survive, Tool spots a woman about to commit suicide, but does nothing. 'If I'd saved that woman I might have saved what was left of my soul', he says, voice catching. The opening of *Non-Stop* (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2014) shows air marshal Bill Marks (Neeson) in his rain-drenched car in the midst of an alcoholic pre-work ritual, the sloshing of whisky into his morning coffee cup visually juxtaposed with a thumbed photograph from his past – of a daughter now lost. In both examples, the ageing action hero's elongated personal history is shown to provoke traumatic memories and destructive habits that have their own corporeal effects: pulling down the shoulders, slowing movements, altering bodily reactions. Most frequently, however, it is the distance between past and present physical capacities that is explicitly registered in dialogue, by either the protagonist or those around him, and, as the *Expendables* example attests, such moments can be useful indicators of the way the character is oriented towards his own ageing (resistant, accepting, and so on). There is, then, a productive pathos to this uncanny body, nostalgia for what is lost combining with the recognition of the increased labour of action that might be experienced by a physically depleted hero. And this pathos has a rather overdetermined quality, since it attaches both to the fictional protagonist's aged state and the performer's: both actor and character are witnessed in the moment of their negotiation of the present in relation to the past, and more specifically both must complete some version of the same stretching physical feats. As older performers act out those tasks that the spectator remembers being performed by their younger selves, and as characters exert themselves in the awareness that they used to be more physically able than they are now, the phenomenology of the ageing action body is front and centre, but to what ends?

Cultural narratives of ageing that focus on decline and loss would seem to have a particular valence in action cinema, where any action hero must suffer before they succeed. Peter Lehman has suggested that all visual representations of masculinity are poised between the assertion of phallic power and its corresponding collapse (1993: 31), and the action film reflects this in its archetypal construction of the male action hero as, to use Yvonne Tasker's phrase, both 'powerful and suffering' (1993: 127). In a recent essay, Tasker usefully sets out the ways in which suffering is narratively productive in this context:

Physical vulnerability and themes of struggle serve at least two purposes in terms of hard-boiled action's narrative logic. First, they allow a delay to the ultimate resolution, much as obstacles are placed between the lovers in tales of romance. Second, they enhance motivation such that the hero acts to secure revenge; his violence is thus retributive and effectively justified. (2014: 248–9)

The increased labour – which these films suggest arises from the age-related physical diminution of the character – serves as another way in which the hero can struggle and suffer, and another way in which the certainty of the final outcome can be delayed to produce suspense. The comparative motility and proprioception of the ageing action performer's physically stretched body here works to intensify the affective force of spectacles of physical action and their impression of bodily risk, labour and success, as an example sequence from *The Expendables* will illustrate. Barney's reconnaissance trip to Vilena ends with him and Lee being chased off the island by the dictator's army. Lee has run ahead to the seaplane that is their escape vehicle, and fired up the engines;

Barney must run along the jetty to catch the plane, which is about to take flight (see Figure 8.1). After a couple of brief shots which show him making his way towards the pier, and a shot of Lee leaning out of the plane shouting ‘Come on!’, we see Barney break into a run in a medium long shot. In a slightly longer but more frontal shot, Barney makes the three-foot jump down from a concrete pier to the wooden jetty and runs towards the camera (and the plane). As Lee starts to push the plane into forward motion, the camera frames Barney/Stallone running at full tilt in closer views from the side, the front and from behind, before Barney throws himself at the plane door, securing his escape in a hail of enemy bullets as the plane, too, lifts into the air.

**Figure 8.1: Stallone-as-Barney runs down the jetty in *The Expendables* (2010).**

In his 1980s iterations as John Rambo, Stallone’s running movement was nimble and fluid despite his heavily muscular frame: he ran with his head up, body directed forwards, his movement spare and efficient. Here, Stallone’s motion has a different quality and phenomenological force. He seems to bear the weight of his physical structure less stably, moving forwards with a slightly rolling running gait and an attenuated stride length that creates a staccato, rather than smooth, stride rhythm. He swings his arms in wide arcs and thrusts the neck forwards and down, gestures that are likely motivated by the need to take extra measures to ensure forward momentum and stability are maintained at pace, but which in their form refer us to the opposite: falling forwards, swinging out of control. And this despite the fragmented nature of the physical feat’s editing, showing the running in snatched, fairly brief shots which signal the production reality that the actor was able to take breaks between performances of physical exertion. Stallone’s ageing-past-youth emerges particularly sharply in the fleeting hesitations that Stallone-as-Barney momentarily betrays at two points in this sequence: just before the jump, and in the transition from landing the jump to breaking back into a run. Both are physically impactful transition points where balance is crucial but challenging, and at both points Stallone-as-Barney seems to need to steel himself physically, altering his posture and adjusting muscular tension to make the transitions less challenging and destabilising. In this scene we are confronted by the contingency of Stallone’s physical capacities as well as the character’s, but this neatly serves to intensify the dramatic tension of the scene, with its trope of will-he-won’t-he make it. Musculature and heft, the very ingredients of the 1980s hardbody, here signal instability, the possibility of losing control. The work of the body, which the memory of the younger Stallone’s motility resituates as additional work, drives an intensified release of tension as Stallone-as-Barney manages to reach the plane just in time, hangs on to the door frame, and finally manages to drag the bulk of his own body into the cabin. In this way, *The Expendables* and other similar films make the most of the dramatic potential inherent in the ageing action body’s physical contingency.

The basis of this physical contingency – rigid musculature and significant corporeal heft – can, however, produce other connotative possibilities, feeding into a different reading of the ageing body’s capacities and the significance of its ageing-past-youth. The action hero’s suffering is often figured as a monolithic stoicism, a toleration of extremes, and the capacity, eventually, to endure. In relation to this genre commonplace, the heft of the ageing action hero can productively connote a stoicism not just of the mind, but of the body. In the opening scenes of *The Last Stand* (Jee-woon Kim, 2013), Arnold Schwarzenegger walks around Sommerton, the border town that his sheriff character Ray Owens polices, as most of the town loads into school buses to head to an American Football away game for their local team. As Schwarzenegger-as-Owens exits his vehicle, he shuts the door behind him with a push-back of the arm, giving the opportunity to view shoulder and arm motions which clearly lack a full range of movement – that is, the motion appears stiff and awkward. There is a carnival spirit in the town but despite a cheery demeanour Owens walks slowly, his gait lumbering, his weight shifting significantly from side to side, indicating an age-related tightening of the hip or knee flexors, all of which produces a phenomenologically dense contrast with the supple and efficient running and walking styles of the younger ‘Arnie’ in films like *Commando* (Mark L. Lester, 1985), *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987) and *The Running Man*



(Paul Michael Glaser, 1987). *Sans* speed and agility, Owens' successful overcoming of the drug cartel is, in part, rooted in the tactical insight that an extended policing and combat career can gift, and his willingness to collaborate (points I will return to later), but he finally prevails because of the same musculature and heft that seems to weigh him down when he moves. The film culminates in a face-off between Owens and the escaped drug cartel boss, Gabriel Cortez (Eduardo Noriega, thirty-eight at the time of filming), who is trying to cross the border into Mexico. It begins with Cortez launching into the air to deliver a flying punch, but Owens blocks the punch with his entire body, which simply absorbs the impact without moving, allowing Owens to slam Cortez's body into the floor. The confrontation proceeds as an extended endgame of brutal punches, kicks and bodily struggle, Cortez placing Owens in various wrestling locks and holds to subject his body to huge strain. While Cortez requires extended breaks to recover from each debilitating body slam, even losing consciousness at one point, Owens seems able to absorb each impact without pause. Here stoicism is made flesh in the rigid body of the ageing action hero, and muscular stiffness, which contributes to a decline narrative in other moments, in these moments counters that narrative, by contributing to the visual impression of an immovable, monolithic presence that is more, rather than less, capable, and less, rather than more, vulnerable.

### Contingency and adaptability

The phenomenological force of the age-slowed but resilient body can also mislead other characters about the ageing hero's capabilities, permitting the multiplication of tactical advantage while taking advantage of others' propensity for underestimation. Underestimation is a recurrent pattern in the ageing action hero narrative, from the condescension directed towards Sheriff Owens by the drugs cartel in *The Last Stand*, to the Russian gangsters who misrecognise former assassin Robert McCall (Denzel Washington) as a naive John when he tries to buy a young prostitute her freedom in *The Equalizer* (Antoine Fuqua, 2014), jokingly asking him whether he can 'still get it up, *dedushka* [grandfather]'. Underestimation of this kind redoubles the spectator's attentiveness to the risks and narrative stakes of the scene by reminding him/her of the physical contingency of the ageing body, and also sets the scene for the ageing action hero to pleurably transcend limits – both the physical limits designated as credible by the ageing hero's opponents within the fictional world, and the physical limits that elsewhere the movie has suggested constrain ageing bodies in the real world. If the ageing male action hero cannot sustain heightened agility and speed over extended durations, he can deploy it in short bursts, and his experience means he knows when to unleash this power, and in what ways. *The Equalizer* takes this principle to an extreme, the Russian gangsters' bemusement turning to horror, then silence, as McCall proceeds to kill all six armed men in 28 seconds (slower than his 16-second prediction, but still fast).

The scene is also a good example of multiplying tactical advantage through adaptability: McCall uses a corkscrew and drinks glasses to enhance the force of his own punches, and times his counter-attacks and blocks to put opponents off balance or use their own momentum against them. Similarly, in *Taken 2* (Olivier Megaton, 2012), when hero Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson) gets cornered by several thugs in a small Istanbul courtyard, he uses abrupt blocking movements (immovable heft as a weapon, unexpected speed and careful timing) to divest one of the attackers of his metal baton, and then uses the baton to multiply the force of his own attacks in order to incapacitate the younger assailants. This is why Barney and Lee's discussion about whether Barney is slower than he used to be is also a discussion about the relative merits of guns and knives as weapons (Barney justifies his claim that he is 'faster than light' by pointing out that bullets 'go faster than blades'); the ageing action hero models ways in which the physical diminutions of the ageing process can be strategically compensated for by the right choice of weapon or tactic. One of the 'weapons' ageing action heroes often draw upon is other people: while the loner heroes of films like *The Equalizer* and the George Clooney-starring *The American* (Anton Corbijn, 2010) depict adaptability as a 'go-it-alone' brand of tactical ingenuity, others demonstrate an appetite for collaboration. Mills in *Taken 2* uses a mobile phone to remotely enlist his daughter to help him rescue himself and his wife from

captivity, *The Last Stand* gives us a sheriff who brings together a whole team of locals to help him fight the drugs cartel, and *Escape Plan* (Mikael Håfström, 2013) focuses on the collaboration between a whole network of prisoners, who combine their different skill sets to escape from a brutal ship prison. In this context, the ensemble casts of *The Expendables* franchise make sense not just in terms of nostalgia or creative collaboration between ageing action stars, but in terms of the positive strategies the ageing action hero develops to compensate for any age-related weaknesses.

Attending to the phenomenology of the ageing action body reveals that the relationships between dominant cultural conceptions of ageing and the ageing action hero movie are complex. The possibility of age-related vulnerability actually fits well the generic framework in which any hero must physically struggle and ingeniously problem-solve in order to succeed, but the phenomenological force of such labour and the bodies that undertake it can generate competing connotations. Ageing action films are challenging the assumptions that flow from the decline narrative – that is, that ageing bodies are perpetually weaker, slower and less agile than younger bodies, and that as a result they will be less potent – because the ageing male action hero persistently demonstrates that the physical depletions of age do not need to deplete his effectiveness. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these films challenge the decline narrative itself. The ageing action star's visible facial lines and constrained motility in comparison to his younger self, combined with self-aware dialogue and other narrative references about the limits and losses associated with age, replay familiar cultural associations of ageing with physiological decline. It is precisely because ageing is being figured in these terms that the hero's recourse to collaboration, surprise and other tactical strategies is positioned as necessary, rather than optional. The extra-textual narratives that circulate around these ageing action stars similarly confirm the decline narrative: media commentators routinely speculate on the reasons why these films succeed despite their stars' advanced ages,<sup>7</sup> while celebrity journalism perpetuates the decline narrative through the prurient examination of film stars' attempts to sustain their youthful appearance, clustering particularly fiercely around the cosmetic and fitness regimes of established action stars like Stallone, whose 1980s hardbody offers a highly specific visual comparator (see Tasker 2014).

### Tom Cruise

One action star who appears anomalous in this context is Tom Cruise. Although he achieved stardom in the 1980s, he did so with a mixed portfolio of genre films, and did not share the pumped-up musculature of stars like Schwarzenegger and Stallone. He made his first physically demanding action film in 1996 with *Mission: Impossible* (Brian De Palma), and the proportion of action films he has taken on has increased gradually over his career, particularly since the mid-2000s. What really marks him out from the recent-to-action and established action stars discussed above is his relationship to cultural narratives of youth and ageing. Cruise has historically fascinated the popular press due to his apparent ability not to age, frequently starring in films which do not overtly acknowledge his lived age (for example, *Oblivion* (2013), *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014)). Such fascination has reached new levels of intensity as he has entered his fifth decade, his recent public appearances occasioning increasingly lively and often elaborately illustrated analyses of his alleged endless youth in print and online media, such as the *Daily Mail*'s splash feature 'Tom Cruise: 25 years on – and not a day older', accompanied by no fewer than twenty-six photographs of his face at different points between 1986 and 2011 (Boshoff and Cisotti 2011), and the *Huffington Post*'s variation on the theme, 'Tom Cruise Turns 52 Years Old But He Hasn't Aged A Day', featuring a twenty-one-image online photo slideshow (2014). Just as Woodward described, evidence of age is sought through the scrutiny of visual appearance alone, and based on this criteria Cruise seems to exemplify a cultural conception of 'successful ageing' which is the contemporary corollary of the decline narrative.

The notion of 'successful ageing' emerged in the last thirty years in the context of ageing populations and the socio-economic consequences for governmental, health and social

infrastructures. In ‘successful ageing’, the responsibility for resisting ‘midlife decline’ and retaining independence in later life is emphatically individualised (Martinson and Minkler 2006: 322–3), and individuals are encouraged to attempt to achieve ‘optimal lifestyles, constant activity, and successful anti-ageing’ through, among other things, consumerism and physical exercise (Katz and Marshall 2003: 5). Judged by his visual appearance, Cruise stands in for these optimal lifestyle choices, his youthful appearance embodying the significant consumption of dentistry, skin care, hair care and cosmetic products and procedures that construct it, in what Woodward has called ‘the proliferation of techniques for disciplining the aging body’ which are ‘used to evade (even while conforming to) the dominant ideology of youth – by joining it or infiltrating it’ (1988–9: 132). Yet the flexible relationship that Tom Cruise seems to have to the biological reality of his own ageing also frequently generates incredulity, derision or anxious attempts to reimpose the ageing-as-decline narrative directly onto his body. For example, with their tweet, ‘Tom Cruise is totally Benjamin Buttoning #Oscars’, and accompanying photograph, online entertainment site *BuzzFeed* framed Cruise’s youthful appearance at the 2012 Oscars as an unnatural reversal of the ageing process. Two years prior, the *Mail Online* published photographs of Tom Cruise naked from the waist up on the set of *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011) with a punning headline that pointed to the middle-aged spread the photographs supposedly revealed: ‘Action man Tom Cruise shows how he stays in shape at 48 (albeit an odd one)’ (*Daily Mail* reporter, 2010, see Figure 8.2). And in reviews of the most recent *Mission: Impossible* outing, *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation* (Christopher McQuarrie, 2015), Cruise’s youthful looks again prompt comment, with not one but two reviewers referencing the fantastical in their labelling of Cruise as the ‘Dorian Gray’ of action cinema (Hornaday 2015, Lane 2015). These reactions suggest the extent of cultural investment in normative conceptions of ageing, in which the decline narrative and the successful ageing narrative have socio-cultural expediency because they allow generational relations to be policed, and aged bodies to be situated and constrained in socio-economic and cultural terms (see Gullette 2004). Tom Cruise, based on these press reactions, is marked as too successful in his attempts to age successfully. But how does this supposedly ‘forever young’ body register outside of the discourse of celebrity takedowns, in the action cinema?

**Figure 8.2: A celebrity press shot of Tom Cruise on the set of *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (2011) © WENN.**

Early Cruise action melodramas like *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) and *Days of Thunder* (Tony Scott, 1990) staged what Gaylyn Studlar has called Cruise’s ‘male exhibitionism’ (2001: 175, 181) as a movement between a vehicular form of highly mobile spatial penetration in which the body itself was mostly obscured, and the display of a fairly static, fetishised Cruise body in the scenes outside the vehicle (the beach volleyball scene in *Top Gun* in comparison to the aerial dogfight sequences, for example). This changed with the first *Mission: Impossible* film, in which Cruise starred as secret agent Ethan Hunt. The film is declarative in its construction of a new Cruise action body, and what would become Cruise’s signature mode of action exhibitionism. There are two key facets of this action exhibitionism: acrobatic physical extension, and running at pace and at length, both forms of spatial extension that are emphatically rooted in the body. In the most famous scene in *Mission: Impossible*, Ethan is lowered into a vault whose security features include alarms which can be triggered by sound, floor pressure, and changes in room temperature. Ethan must access the vault terminal, download data and avoid detection, all while suspended by a cable that is being held in place by his colleague Franz Krieger (Jean Reno) in the ceiling air vent. Lowered in upside down, Ethan silently spins himself 180 degrees in order to set up a temperature gauge, and then flattens his body into a ‘plank’ to operate the vault computer terminal. Even as Cruise’s blood-flushed face and neck signal the effort to sustain these acrobatics, the nimbleness and smoothness of the adjustments in orientation are striking, generating an appreciation for the actor’s, as well as the character’s, ability to retain precise physical control under duress. This appreciation is intensified when Krieger, distracted by a rat, lets go of the cable, plunging Ethan towards the floor until he is only centimetres away from the floor’s pressure sensors. Cruise performs the fictional character’s

desperation to maintain balance without touching the floor by moving his arms around slightly manically, movements that are necessary to the performance of the character's predicament but which risk destabilising the actor's body in the process. This legible commitment to the physical dimensions of action performance is much-publicised in marketing paratexts, but is also phenomenologically tangible and impactful in the viewing experience.

It is the same commitment we see Cruise applying to his running scenes, in which he is often depicted running at pace for significantly extended periods. An emphatic example is the scene in *Mission: Impossible III* (J. J. Abrams, 2006), in which Ethan must sprint across the roofs and walkways of Xitang river town to reach his fiancée (Michelle Monaghan) before she is killed by villain Davian (Philip Seymour Hoffman). Key to the scene is a ten-second extended take which foregrounds in real time the actor's maintenance of an intense rate of physical exertion over duration. In a series of long shots, Cruise sustains a rigidly demarcated upright physical form including contained, efficient arm swings, and an intensity of speed and direction, despite the onward approach of obstacles and changes in running surface and terrain layout. The affective 'punch' of this almost-real-time spectacle of continuous running is further anchored by Cruise's vocal performance as he shouts 'Get out of the way' in Mandarin, his voice wobbling and straining awkwardly. Likely to have been re-recorded in the studio via the Automatic Dialogue Replacement (ADR) process, this performance is a convincing aural depiction of how timbre and vocal phrasing can be distorted by physical exertion. The control of vocal and facial performance is sacrificed, then, in the service of communicating physical control and intensity, a prioritisation that distinguishes Cruise from other action stars, young or old. It is this much-publicised commitment to the physical intensity of his action roles (even if he might look and sound less composed in the process) that generates regular acknowledgement and admiration of Cruise's physical aptitude from film reviewers. It has even spawned an internet meme, 'Tom Cruise Running', which includes various compilations of his running scenes on YouTube and Tumblr.<sup>8</sup> As Taffy Brodesser-Akner enthuses in a recent *New York Times* piece, 'the aspect that sometimes seemed to dog his other acting – that famous Cruise intensity, that overwhelming desire to keep you entertained – actually becomes an asset in an action film. He would be this thing with every fiber [sic] of his being. He would become the action hero' (2013, paragraph 15). But how do these qualities resonate as Cruise ages?

## The ageing Cruise

The *Mission: Impossible* franchise has spanned almost two decades, and therefore inevitably marks out milestones in the ageing of the biological entity Tom Cruise: we know rationally that he is getting older, even if the visual evidence is not always forthcoming. Writing just at the point – in 2001 – that Cruise was attempting the transition from 'All-American boy' roles to more mature protagonists, Studlar was intrigued by the possible consequences of Cruise's future ageing on his status as a film star, ending her essay with the question: 'If the mature body of Tom Cruise becomes "unseen" [that is, no longer offered as an object of the gaze] will we remain interested?' (2001: 172, 182). But this isn't quite what has happened. Rather than covering up, in several of his most recent films, including *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* and *Jack Reacher* (Christopher McQuarry, 2012), Cruise strips to his torso, a tendency rather derided by the celebrity press, and one that has mostly been interpreted as a denial of ageing through an attempted assertion of continued virility (a response that is itself structured by ageist discourse). *Jack Reacher* debunks this motivation from within the fictional world of the film in the scene in which Helen (Rosamund Pike) misreads the motivation for Jack (Cruise) stripping to the waist during a discussion of the case they are working. They are in Jack's motel room, and Jack has taken off his jumper and shirt to wash them ready for the following day (he has limited clothing as he has been on the run), but Helen misunderstands, thinking he is propositioning her, an impression she begins to articulate before realising her mistake. Aside from the rather unnecessary humiliation of Pike's character, the inclusion of the scene in the film, without obvious narrative motivation, suggests that there is something more to

Cruise's bodily display in these recent movies. Studlar assumed that Cruise would want to hide those changes in muscle mass and structure that often occur in midlife ageing, but instead Cruise, in films he also produces and therefore has some control over, insists on displaying those changes, so that a series of movies are now mapping the visibly changing structure of his ageing torso.<sup>9</sup> The effect is to acknowledge and foreground his own ageing process over time, and to acknowledge its dialogic relation over time to the fitness regimes through which he attempts to stay lean and fit and the spectacles they still make possible.

Cruise's evolving visible body is matched by an evolution in this ageing action hero's physical performances and their narrative framing. *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* provides a useful example. It begins with a confident, even cocky, physical performance from Cruise, as Ethan breaks out of a Russian prison, a friend in tow. The sequence showcases his trademarks, as Ethan propels his body over a walkway fence bar and drops silently down onto the walkway level below, in a chain of smoothly executed gymnastic moves, and then proceeds to fight and run with a droll efficiency. Yet the film draws back from this certainty almost immediately, enacting a narrative swing between mission success and mission failure that will structure the entirety of the remaining running time, and which is frequently mapped directly onto the capacities of Cruise's body. When Ethan escapes from a Russian hospital, where he has been taken after being unexpectedly caught up in a bomb attack on the Kremlin for which he is being framed, he flees through a hospital window and out onto a ledge four storeys up. Based on the frequency with which Cruise performs acrobatic feats in the *Mission: Impossible* franchise, and based on the ease with which he executed the move between walkways at the start of the film, the audience might reasonably expect Ethan to make short work of this escape. Yet the Russian policeman who he slipped by discovers him hesitating on the ledge, Cruise's body performing the clenched muscles, push forward and definitive recoil as Ethan repeatedly steels himself to go through with the jump to a waste-disposal skip below, and repeatedly fails to initiate it. The policeman who watches from a nearby window is so sure he won't jump that he lights a cigarette to enjoy the show, but as a van approaches Ethan uses an electricity supply line as a zip wire to launch himself at the van so that its momentum can break his fall to the pavement. What is significant is not just the hesitation before the jump, but Ethan's surprised expression at the end of the jump as he realises he has made it: the implication is that he was fully expecting not to be successful in the endeavour, but tried anyway. Later Ethan is uncharacteristically happy to verbalise his reluctance to risk life and limb in an operation to climb the outside of the world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. No longer the stoic, confident agent, he asks, 'How am I supposed to do this?' before his attempt, and there is a long pause at the window's edge before initiating the task that speaks of genuine trepidation. It is a trepidation that is borne out by malfunctioning equipment: falls threaten after one of the magnetised gloves that hold him to the building surface short-circuits, when the glass cutter he is using to breach the target window explodes, and when he must use a length of canvas rope which is too short to try to swing back into the window from which he started. Moreover, the resulting final giant jump misfires, so that he bounces off the top of the window frame and is only saved by his colleagues who grab his legs to stop his fall. Yet at the same time, when the solution to the problem of the too-short rope presents itself, he does not hesitate to attempt the giant jump, assertively throwing his body into it.

As in this example, Cruise frequently now plays characters within whom a tension exists between a hesitating uncertainty about whether the body can still match its younger capacities, and an openness to trying anyway. Such characters are, in a sense, a response to the phenomenological force of Cruise's own body-in-motion, which increasingly pulls in two directions: between the normative implications of visible ageing on the one hand, and the achievement of the same levels of stretching acrobatic agility that we are familiar with from earlier in his action career on the other. Cruise retains a flexible relation to ageing that marks him out from other ageing action stars, but not because he is still 'forever young'. Where the 'uncanny' of the other ageing action bodies we have considered was generated by the clear difference between present and younger selves, a difference that serves to unproblematically reinforce the decline narrative, the 'Tom Cruise uncanny' depends

on eroding that difference – and by extension eroding culturally imposed generational boundaries – through a dynamic and shifting confusion of (normatively speaking) ageing and youthful attributes and attitudes. In contrast to other ageing action hero films, where hesitation to act speaks of a hero's stable relation to normatively defined and supposedly irreversible forms of age-related diminution, hesitation in a Cruise-in-age film represents a liminal state of possibility that may be triggered by ageing but is certainly not bound by it. Cruise's increasingly open acknowledgement that he performs his action exhibitionism with a body that is starting to visually evidence signs of age productively moves Cruise's ageing action star body outside of the frame of decline and attempted disavowal that structures other ageing action hero movies. Cruise's famous corporeal intensity and form, sustained in an openly midlife Cruise body, reminds us that the middle-aged body has the capacity to be physically powerful outside of narratives of lost youthfulness and evocations of past glories. As a result, while Cruise's real-world access to highly expensive and bespoke forms of cosmetic expertise and physical and nutritional regimes does not trouble decline narratives, I suggest that the affective qualities of his action stardom as it is performed and showcased in action might.

## Notes

1. 'Dadcore' can refer to music that one's father listened to, or, according to Taylor, 1980s and '90s 'macho' movies. See Patches 2013, Singer 2014 and Tucker 2014 on the modern ageing action star.
2. Christine Holmlund (on Clint Eastwood) and Yvonne Tasker (on Sylvester Stallone) offer eloquent descriptions of their subjects' physiological appearances, but are less specific about the detail of their performances-in-motion (for example, Holmlund's comment that Eastwood's movements are 'not as "catlike" as Leone originally found them' (2002: 148) seems ripe for further elaboration).
3. Wayne in *The Green Berets* (1968), *Rio Lobo* (1970), *Cahill U.S. Marshall* (1973), *McQ* (1974) and *Brannigan* (1975); Lancaster in *Ulysses' Raid* (1972), *Go Tell The Spartans* (1978) and *Zulu Dawn* (1979); Eastwood in *In the Line of Fire* (1993), *Blood Work* (2002) and *Gran Torino* (2008); Ford in *Firewall* (2006), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), *Cowboys and Aliens* (2011) and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015).
4. See Ford 1976 [1971], Holmlund 2002 and Tasker 2014.
5. Some (Clooney, Cruise) are prolific producers beyond their own vehicles; others (Cage, Washington, Lundgren, Willis) produce to ensure a variety of starring roles or to extend their career, or both. The disparity with 1980s female action stars (Cynthia Rothrock with five extant producer credits, Sigourney Weaver with two, Brigitte Nielsen with one) reflects disparities in gender and race shaping the 'occupational life-course' more generally in the US, and in Hollywood (Lincoln and Allen 2004: 611–12).
6. See Boyle and Brayton 2012 on the casting of celebrity athletes in *The Expendables*.
7. See Patches 2013, Singer 2014, Tucker 2014 and Lee 2015.
8. For example: 'Tom Cruise Running', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJdMDvjfyQ0>; 'Run Tom Run – Ultimate Tom Cruise Running Mashup' (2015) HD; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qicaxJLxuOI>; 'Tom Cruise Running', <http://tomcruiserunning.tumblr.com/>; and 'Why Is Tom Cruise Running?', <http://whyistomcruiserunning.tumblr.com/>.
9. In *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation* (2015), *Oblivion* (Joseph Kosinski, 2013), *Jack Reacher*, *Rock of Ages* (Adam Shankman, 2012), *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol*, *Knight and Day* (James Mangold, 2010).

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