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'I never want to lose a fight': masculinity, machismo and the *Fast & Furious* franchise

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Introduction

The Fast and the Furious (2001) is both reviled and revered as a remake of the classic action film *Point Break* (1990). However, while popular commentary identifies clear similarities in terms of characters and plot (Jhaveri 2018), the bodies that appear on screen in the two films are starkly different. Whereas Patrick Swayze's charismatic gang-leader Bodhi brings physical grace, agility and strength to the earlier film (Tasker 1993a, Feasey 2022), his contemporary equivalent Toretto represents a far more rigid and retro iteration of the action hero, owing largely to the muscular physique of actor Vin Diesel. Diesel's hero has since been joined by other equally muscular and macho men within the gear-shifting franchise - namely, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson as Luke Hobbs and Jason Statham as Deckard Shaw, two characters who started out as antagonists - in *Fast 5* (2011) and *Fast & Furious 6* (2013) - before being integrated into the main cast. Although there are various other masculinities on offer in the *Fast & Furious* franchise - from blond-haired, all-American Brian (Paul Walker) to the tomboyish figure of Letty (Michelle Rodriguez) - the ripped and muscular bodies of Dom/Diesel, Hobbs/Johnson, and Shaw/Statham are worthy of further attention. After all, these physiques hark back to earlier performances of aggressively macho power and posturing more routinely associated with 1980s action stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, while simultaneously offering a space for negotiating such representations. On the one hand the hard-bodied tradition is both maintained and circulated as the films themselves and supporting media commentary draw attention to the physicality and by extension, potent masculinity of the herculean bodies in the franchise, and yet there remains another reading and reception of these bodies both within and beyond the screen space, a reading that sees these men struggling for hegemonic credibility.

Action films are committed to the display of male bodies, be they dancing, driving, fucking or fighting (Tasker 1993a: 35-233, see also King 2000: 115). Indeed 'the role of narrative is strictly secondary' to the hard bodies on offer (Barker and Brookes 1998: 113). And this is particularly true of the films in the *Fast & Furious* films (2001, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021) where the bodies of Diesel, Johnson and Statham loom large. Indeed, it is the multiplicity of male bodies on offer that simultaneously upholds and challenges earlier iterations of the hard bodied hero. Afterall, while the genre has routinely presented a singular muscular

action figure looking to save a city, town or global stage, the *Fast & Furious* franchise has scaled up the number of star bodies on display, allowing these bodies to work together while being simultaneously pitted against one another. The notion of ensemble action is relatively new in the genre in question, and while it affords many and multiple opportunities for physical excess, it does so at the expense of presenting a stand-alone hero or a clearly structured hegemonic hierarchy.

With the importance of such bodies in mind, Erich Schwartzel, writing for *The Wall Street Journal* introduces *Fast & Furious* fans and those less invested in the franchise to Diesel, Johnson and Statham's contractual requirements. Audiences are used to hearing about A-list demands in relation to credits, percentage of profits, screen time and script approval, but Schwartzel has heard from *Fast & Furious* producers and crew members about agreements with the studio to carefully balance punches, blows and kicks for the male stars in question (Schwartzel 2019, Bakare 2019). The story became the focal point for popular and professional commentaries and subsequent mocking of masculinity in relation to hard bodies, fragile egos and broader debates about contemporary male anxiety and masculine insecurity. Having to choreograph the performers so as to afford each equal 'muscle time' in the franchise (Schwartzel 2019) reminds us of the hegemonic hierarchy that equates successful masculinity with physical strength and stamina both on and off screen (Connell 2005). With this in mind, this chapter will draw attention to Schwartzel's article and broader press reception materials that foreground notions of age, appearance, power and potency in order to make sense of the masculinities, machismo and muscular bodies that are on display in the *Fast & Furious* franchise. The goal then is to consider the ways in which these hard-bodied action heroes can be seen to both uphold but also disavow their hegemonic credentials in line with earlier iterations of masculine action. These men are keen to secure and maintain their stoic, heroic and authoritative stature by way of their hard-bodied actions, and yet there exists a fine line between maintaining physical power and performing a parody of that self-same prowess.

Hard bodies and hegemonic masculinities

Feminist film theory has long been interested in the representation of hard, muscular and/or hysterical male bodies. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's (1975) psychoanalytic work on sexual difference in the cinema, Steve Neale (1983/1994) examines the representation of male bodies in masculine-defined genres ranging from action films to westerns. His central thesis is that male bodies are put on display as a site of spectatorial pleasure. Although the object of the

spectatorial gaze is routinely associated with feminine lack, as per a binary split between the active/male and the passive/female (Mulvey 1975), Neale notes how on-screen male heroes typically have to *prove* their masculinity despite, and indeed, in part due to their spectacular bodies. Neale reminds us that active males in the action genre are routinely tested and qualified. These characters have to prove their strength, character and resourcefulness over other men in the screen space in order to earn their status as heroic, and indeed hegemonic, figures of masterful spectatorial identification (Neale 1983/1994). In line with Neale's central thesis, action films and franchises from the 1980s to the present routinely depict their hard-bodied heroes being tormented as plot and story demands. Yvonne Tasker (1993a: 39) likewise argues that the genre routinely depicts muscular bodies experiencing torture and suffering, whereby the boundaries of the hard male body 'are repeatedly violated [and] penetrated'. It is the ability to fight through these ritualised scenes of conflict and suffering that enables the hero to show their resolve, determination, and omnipotence. According to both Neale and Tasker, these heroes need to be tested and found wanting prior to their later physical victories, in order to earn audience investment in their journey and underline their masculine dominance at narrative closure (Neale 1983/1994). Men continue to be put in opposition to other men in the action genre. Strained and straining built male bodies are routinely presented as a site of spectacle, display and agency. Characters and by extension, star actors are routinely held up as heroic and hard bodies figures to emulate, their heroic and stoic efforts having been inextricably linked with the genre in question. A link seems to exist between the herculean body as capable of withstanding physical trauma and broader questions around male power and masculine potency as it relates to an oft valued and valuable iteration of manhood.

Outside of film studies, the work of Raewyn Connell (2005) provides a valuable framework for exploring the flexible and agile nature of masculine identity. Connell notes that there are myriad ways of expressing and experiencing masculinity (see also Feasey 2008). Connell's writing is useful for this discussion because it points to a hierarchy of masculinities rather than a fixed, single, monolithic iteration of manhood. And yet, the hegemonic hierarchy is said to point to a correct or preferred iteration of traditional masculinity that maps on to laconic hard bodied action figures of earlier generations. The pinnacle of hegemonic masculinity has long been associated with the genre wherein machismo, stoicism, physical prowess, agency, activity, self-reliance and independence are routinely championed above more domestic and connected iterations of manhood. However, even the toughest of these hard-bodied fictions have to earn and continue to earn their hegemonic credentials, film after film, sequel after spin-off in the franchise. Men do

not reach the hegemonic pinnacle and remain in that lofty position; rather, they have to be tested and qualified at each big-budget outing and beyond. This positioning is problematic because while society asks for 'New Men' to replace more traditional/regressive iterations of masculinity, looking to men as caregivers not just authoritative providers, the hegemonic hierarchy continues to hold sway. In short, our action heroes are presented to audiences as 'retro' models of masculinity to emulate or admire (Martin 2015).

Therefore, although the lacerated, bleeding and penetrated male 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' (Jeffords 1994: 50). In short, these men are seen to prove their masculinity and as such, earn their place at the summit of the hegemonic hierarchy. The hard, built, forceful and dominating body of the male is central to both the hegemonic hierarchy and the action genre. Such bodies, once tested, are sold to audiences as heroic and masterful, each dare-devil stunt, drive or fight is a display of strength, stamina and potency. That said, these visibly worked on bodies call into question that self-same power. The suggestion here then is that the hard-bodied male speaks to an anxious and threatened iteration of masculinity, a sort of protesting too much of power and authority (Creed 1987). Indeed, their 'hysterical excesses' are said to expose 'a version of masculinity in crisis' whereby muscularity itself is read as 'an act of desperation that lays bare its artificiality' (King 2000: 112). In short, it has been argued that the action genre speaks less of male 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' (MacKinnon 2003: 63). Tasker suggests that these excessive male bodies are open to 'humiliation and mockery' (Tasker 1993b: 237) while Richard Dyer finds such physicality 'harder to maintain straightfacedly and unproblematically' than in earlier patriarchal periods' (Dyer 1987: 12).

In relation to the *Fast & Furious* franchise, we are asked to consider if the ageing muscularity of the cinematic universe stands in for masculine power or parodic performance. After all, these hard-bodied displays are not simply spectacular male bodies in action, but rather, they are excessive hard bodies drawing attention to their cars, muscles and by extension, their very masculinity. As such, there remains a question as to whether these gym-honed, fast driving men are destined for the pinnacle of the hegemonic hierarchy or challenged for their excesses as a

site of contemporary male anxiety. In short, interested and invested audiences are considering if, on the back of the franchise itself and the commentary underpinned by Schwartzel's revealing article, Statham, Johnson and Diesel can be read and received as hard bodied hegemonic figures in line with their potent on-screen performances, or if their concern over competing male bodies lessens their machismo and by extension their hegemonic credentials. The assumption here is that a man in, with and of power (Kimmel 2004: 186) should not need to concern himself with the potential potency of his contemporaries, meaning that any posturing on the topic could be taken as a sign of male fragility rather than active hegemonic agency here.

Hierarchies of masculinity in the *Fast & Furious* franchise

The muscular Diesel plays the elite street racer, auto mechanic and convict Toretto, who appears in the majority of films in the series. Although at various points Toretto is presented as a brother, brother-in-law, husband, uncle and father, it is his efforts as a high-stakes hijacker and later, explosive government recruit that loom large on screen. The ever herculean Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson is introduced as Hobbs, a Diplomatic Security Service agent and bounty hunter in *Fast 5*. Hobbs is tasked with arresting Toretto's racing crew for the murder of Drug Enforcement Administration agents, but tensions and testosterone are put on hold between the two when Hobbs learns of Toretto's innocence. Toretto and Hobbs shift from arch rivals to begrudging team mates and later something akin to friends as the franchise progresses. Last but not least, we are introduced to Jason Statham as he plays the macho and posturing Shaw, a former British special forces soldier and MI6 agent turned mercenary. Shaw appears as an overarching antagonist in *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006) and *Fast & Furious 6* (2013), before taking on the role of Toretto's central antagonist in *Furious 7* (2015). Although Shaw seeks revenge on Toretto and his team for hospitalizing his brother, the two evolve into something resembling allies. In the somewhat predictable, but no less enjoyable tradition of a buddy-cop movie, Hobbs and Shaw move from hostile muscle-bound adversaries to brothers in arms in the *Fast & Furious* spin-off, *Hobbs and Shaw* (2019).

Cars and drivers are both watched and judged for their size, speed, strength, stamina, power, and performance in the franchise (Martin 2015). Just as the cars jostle for pole position, so too, the hard bodies jostle for their poling on the hegemonic hierarchy. The racing circuit appeals precisely because it can be read as the last bastion of hegemonic masculinity, with racers lining up both on the streets and in the rankings of male power. With hard bodies and hierarchies in mind then, it is worth noting that ex pro-wrestler Johnson stands at 1.96m, Diesel stands at

1.82m (although there is much popular media commentary to suggest that he speaks of a taller frame) while former Olympic diver and model, Jason Statham is the shortest of these actors, at 1.78m. While the average adult male stands at 1.75m in both the UK and the US respectively, it is clear that all of these performers stand above the average male, albeit some from a loftier position than others.

Even a cursory glance at the films make it clear that the physically masterful characters of Toretto, Hobbs and Shaw are presented as sites of physical spectacle. The hard bodies are routinely and repeatedly put on display in scenes and sequences that are asking us to view and champion the stamina and resilience of each man in turn. While altercations between the men routinely end without victor or victory, other sequences in the franchise seek to demonstrate physical prowess without a direct face-off. By way of an example, the prison fight scene from *Furious 7* is a hard-bodied ensemble set-up that encourages us to gaze at the physical prowess of both Hobbs and Shaw as they break out of an ostensibly secure prison. Even though the scene begins with macho banter and verbal sparring, teasing audiences with the possibility of a 'straight up old fashioned fist fight' between the two characters, we are soon left watching the herculean efforts of these men separately but simultaneously as they escape their cells. Both bodies are depicted as active, potent and masterful, both looking to take their place at the pinnacle of the hegemonic hierarchy, thus deflecting and negotiating genre conventions that routinely award a singular figure as victor and hero. All three male stars of the franchise can be seen to construct and maintain their power and potency against the other men in the screen space, but this appears counter to a hegemonic drive that assumes battles of will and strength, victory and defeat with a sole active male driving much mainstream cinema in general, and the action genre in particular here (Mulvey 1975, Neale 1983/1994). The ways in which the franchise negotiates the hegemonic hierarchy can be seen to extend outwards from the films and into the press reception and commentary, acting as a barometer for wider debates about gender, masculinity, sexuality and ageing.

The *Fast & Furious* franchise can be understood as a crucial site for debating and negotiating ideas around contemporary masculinity and appropriate machismo on and off screen. Indeed, the ways in which a range of popular media discourses pick up on the men, bodies and masculinities on offer make it clear that the iteration of machismo seen in the screen space extends beyond the fictional narratives. Even before Statham joined the 'franchise', *Essence* was talking about Diesel and Johnson as the 'eye candy' of the film series (Essence 2011).

Elsewhere, Diesel is singled out as a 'musclehound' for audiences to admire (Eschrich 2015) while Johnson is swooned over for this 'square jaw and gorgeous girth' (Essence 2011). Indeed, the franchise as a whole is championed for its 'prodigious displays of musculature' (Bloomer 2019), 'macho melodrama' (Puchko 2020) and 'testosterone-soaked action' (Martin 2015). Since Statham joined, these films have been said to house 'three of the biggest, beefiest actors in Hollywood' (Millar 2019). These men are not just presented to us as muscular frames to admire, but rather, they are routinely held up as figures, and 'shredded' physiques to emulate (Jussim 2018, Banham 2015). Their bodies are hard, built, 'taut' and 'ready for action' (Dyer 1992/2002: 129), and it is this physicality and hard-bodied agency that drives on and off screen hierarchies of masculinity.

Commenting on the proposed Hobbs and Shaw sequel, we are told that there are 'two solid facts that can be confirmed: Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson keeps growing more muscles, and Jason Statham's beard stubble gets coarser and manlier every time he punches a baddie in the face' (Tye 2020). In short, muscles and machismo are central to the *Fast & Furious* cinematic universe, forming a key part of both its film/star brand and identity. In an article for *Digital Spy*, Tom Eames (2017) provides a rundown of the franchise's best stunts. The listicle includes all the predictable visual pyrotechnics routinely associated with big-budget action spectacles, be it driving *through* planes, driving *on to* speeding yachts, men taking on submarines and torpedoes, skydiving off a plane *in cars* and driving *under* an exploding tanker. However, one entry on the list is simply sign-posted as 'Dom vs Hobbs'. *Fast 5* is scripted and choreographed so as to allow the central protagonists to square up to one another, encouraging audiences to read them as hard bodied *equals*, wielding their male power and potency in such a way that demonstrates and maintains rather than defies or disavows their hegemonic credentials and extended potency in the franchise. Indeed, the fight scene is described as 'a fight so sweaty and full of testosterone that we're amazed the room didn't explode' (Eames 2017). From the perspective of these lists, watching these men punch and brawl is on a visual par with the most elaborate and explosive stunts of the franchise. These bodies are presented to audiences as a site of masculine hard-bodied spectacle.

From formidable to fragile masculinity

Seminal work from the field of feminist film studies and more populist review media makes it clear that the appeal of the action hero lies in the new and diverse ways in which their strength, physicality and, by extension, masculinity are tested within the narrative (Neale 1983/1994). In

Tasker's work on the genre we are reminded of the 'expansive landscapes' and the 'staggering obstacles' that the hero 'must overcome' (Tasker 1993b: 233). Whether it is a terrified looking Schwarzenegger/Dutch being hunted by the Predator (*Predator* 1987), Stallone/Rocky as the perennial underdog in the movies of the same name (1976, 1979, 1982, 1985, 1990, 2006, 2015, 2018), or even Tom Cruise/Ethan Hunt being *almost* killed in the *Mission Impossible* franchise (1996, 2000, 2006, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2022, 2023), these men are all pushed to their breaking point before they earn, or reclaim their heroic credentials. Indeed, John Beynon (2001: 65) argues that while hard and muscular physiques are important to the action hero, it's ultimately their 'determination ... to survive' that sets them apart in the filmic narratives. Thus, the hero's suffering is a central trope in the action genre, one of several 'masochistic spectacles' that allows for the 'eroticisation of the male body, through physical punishment and near-destruction', while also offering the opportunity for 'regeneration and remasculinization' (Fradley 2004: 239).

The men of the *Fast & Furious* franchise do battle with rocket launchers and robot cars and as such, their ability to withstand pain, suffering, torment and torture is clear and noted. However, rather than continue to present these hard bodies as sites of power and potency, the characters of Toretto, Hobbs and Shaw, and by extension, the actor, wrestler and diver, could alternatively be read more in line with Barbara Creed's notion of anxious and hysterical masculinity than hegemonic hard-bodied heroes (Creed 1987). According to Creed, the drive to construct and maintain a gym-honed muscular physique speaks to a man's desire to be read as assertive and authoritative rather than as evidence of any innate or assumed power or potency behind that labour. The time and energy dedicated to bulking up in line with the action body can be seen to challenge masculine potency in the sense that genuine male power would not demand such painstaking efforts. Picking up on Creed's seminal thesis, much popular and professional news and review media questions the ostensible mastery of the men behind the franchise.

Schwartzel's article on the fragile egos of these muscular action heroes was soon picked up by a range of mainstream news and magazine titles keen to mock the seemingly macho stars for their hard-bodied insecurities. The on-set stories revealed to *The Wall Street Journal* and circulated through surrounding channels of discourse coincided with the latest release in the franchise, so that the media reporting of the 'evenly matched' fight scenes became part of and intertwined with the more formulaic and orchestrated press junket that was scheduled to assist in marketing the film (Di Placido 2019). The much repeated commentaries about physical parity

and the matching of threats, punches and prowess meant that reviewers, commentators and critics alike veered between humour and hostility when they spoke about the 'perfectly balanced tedium' of fights between the action men (Heritage 2019).

Criticisms and commentaries spanned countries, contexts and interest groups ranging from automobile-leaning publications, entertainment and pop culture websites, investigative news titles and business sites. Irrespective of the title in question, they shared a dismissive and derisory tone in their consideration and condemnation of the bulky men in the franchise, drawing attention to the bulging biceps and ripped bodies while highlighting the gulf between their assumed bodily power and their fragile egos. If the hegemonic hierarchy demands that men be forceful, dominant, assertive and victorious in the public realm we are being told that the big name and bulky stars of the franchise only have the appearance rather than the substance of men in, with and of power. As one Universal spokesman put it, 'every character has their moment ... all are seen as formidable opponents' (Schwartzel 2019). Formidable opponents indeed. It is rare that Toretto, Hobbs or Shaw ever win a fight in the franchise. Rather, there is a 'strange symmetry that afflicts the fight scenes' (Di Placido 2019), whereby 'everyone comes out the victor' (Barfield 2019). It is noted that in order 'to appease the demands of all this fragile masculinity' fights between the big name and bulky performers 'tend to end as draws, usually stopped by miraculous outside forces' (Heritage 2019). Dani Di Placido echoes this point when he states that a 'firm resolution to physical conflict is almost always interrupted by a *deus ex machina*' (Di Placido 2019) in the hyperbolic franchise.

Michael Ballaban comments that 'given the advanced state of musculature, experience, and career level of action stars like The Rock, Jason Statham, and Vin Diesel' you would assume 'that all three would feel very secure and self-actualized' ... before adding that 'You would, reportedly, be wrong' (Ballaban 2019). He goes on to note that all three men 'have such massive egos that entire scenes have to be stroked and massaged around them' (Ballaban 2019). Likewise, Alexander Pan (2019) tells us that '[p]itting three protein-chugging bros on a *Fast and Furious* movie set was always going to end in tears' because the last few films have 'essentially consisted of trying to not make either Diesel, Johnson or Statham look, ahem, weak' (Pan 2019). Review literature leaves little to interpretation when it described *Hobbs & Shaw* (2019) as 'the most hilariously brittle willy-waving contests in living memory' (Heritage 2019). In short, Schwartzel's news story became the central focus for the contested and fraught nature of the masculinities offered up in the franchise. Reviewers negotiated a link between hard bodies

and the hegemonic hierarchy when it shifts the emphasis from physicality and fighting to sex and performance:

perhaps it would be a good idea to expand the contractual clauses to other, non-violent aspects of their work ... it would be wise to add a sex scene clause ... make each sex scene last for exactly three thrusts, during which the female actor yawns distractedly, before the male actor cries and apologises (Heritage 2019).

A lack of sexual stamina and disappointing bedroom performance are indicating a split between hard bodies and hegemonic credibility here. As stated from the outset of the franchise 'it's not how you stand by your car, it is how you race your car that counts' (*The Fast and The Furious* 2001), and the mocking tone of the commentary makes it clear that the action stars are lacking sexual potency, routinely linked to male mastery. Indeed, hard and built gym bodies can be chided for their interest in appearance and attractiveness over health and fitness, potentially lacking the authenticity of their less bulky counterparts. Indeed, it is the more agile figures such as Keanu Reeves who are being championed as the new face of action as their lightly toned physiques speak of a quiet but powerful masculinity in contrast to the excesses of hard bodied men who continue to perform in the franchise in question (Feasey 2022).

Review media is openly chiding in their reading of hard bodies as muscular yet hysterical masks for anxious and fragile masculinities in action. There remains a question here about the ways in which audiences view the muscular masquerade as either reinforcing hegemonic power relations or undermining them. Although one might suggest that the *Fast & Furious* franchise and its surrounding media texts go some way towards denouncing the hegemonic hierarchy, we are reminded that such muscular posturing, or what might be termed the masculine masquerade remains 'eminently popular, and undeniably potent' with audiences and fans alike (Holmlund 1994: 226). Indeed, while criticisms and commentaries are at turns dismissive and disparaging of the hysterical bodies and the fragile heroics on and off-screen, there remains an equally popular discourse that reads these bodies as beacons of macho strength, prowess and potency (Leydon 2019), where the physical site of excessive labour is watched, monitored, championed and revered (Langberg 2015). Much like the cars of the franchise whose bodies are buffed, polished, monitored and exalted, these hard male bodies are worked on and over, routinely and repeatedly. The men in question share their work-outs with a willing audience between action installments via men's health magazines and broader social media posts and commentaries (Banham 2015). Even Diesel who has had to deal with speculation over his

fluctuating weight and muscle tone befits the action star who always, like the action men of Neale's foundational thesis, come back harder, firmer and ready to fight another day. In short, these herculean bodies can be understood as negotiated sites of male power, and potency for the actors, characters, creatives, audiences and reviewers within and beyond the franchise.

While seminal work on the action genre makes it clear that a hero needs to be tested, to prove his masculine credentials for the characters on screen and the invested audience, critics and commentators echo this need for trial and investigation. We are reminded that it is compelling to 'see one's favorite action hero fall, be beaten to a pulp, only to rise against his aggressor later. Failure is, after all, absolutely integral to the hero's journey' (Di Placido 2019). Although contemporary 'action movies are all about stakes and vulnerability ... we need to see them fail so that they can pick themselves up again' (Chatterjee 2019), *The Wall Street Journal* revelations make it clear that the men of the *Fast & Furious* franchise are not prepared to put themselves in these positions of vulnerability up against a potentially hard/er co-star, irrespective of the more routine genre conventions or the hegemonic rewards that are associated with a hero's recovery from pain and torture. Irrespective of the way in which men in the action genre are routinely tested in order to earn their hegemonic and heroic status in the narrative, for the men in the high-octane franchise, the desire to maintain power and potency actually works against their hegemonic credentials. While tortured hard bodies are remembered for their heroics, earned over the protagonist's narrative journey, the ostensibly hard bodies of the *Fast & Furious* franchise are singled out for their inability to lose a fight, not in a way that garners respect or approval from audiences, industry or reviewers, but in a way that is said to signal their 'crippling fear of emasculation' (Di Placido 2019).

Seminal work on masculinity as spectacle talks about a relatively clear-cut struggle between a hero and villain (Mulvey 1975, Neale 1983/1994), referring to the plight of a singular hero suffering at the hands of his nemesis before overcoming and overpowering the inferior masculine threat. In the action films of the 1980s and 1990s, the hero's physical strife was an engaging and entertaining way of providing muscular, masculine, hegemonic and alpha credentials against other men in the screen space. And yet, while such hard won mastery makes sense for earlier westerns, war films and historical epics, it doesn't necessarily take into account the ensemble macho casting of the *Fast & Furious* franchise. Although the stars are happy to jostle with their role as either protagonist or antagonist, they are less flexible when it comes to their hegemonic credentials. While the literal superheroes of the Marvel cinematic

universe are regularly seen 'absorbing, and distributing, devastating blows to one another' (Di Placido 2019), the men of the *Fast & Furious* have no superhero credentials to fall back on. It is as if their very masculinity is, in line with the hegemonic hierarchy, only as good as their last fight or drive, meaning that they cannot let their characters, and by extension their star images be tainted by anything less than a bulky draw. Hobbs may well be referred to as the Hulk, Captain America or a Samoan Thor on different occasions in the franchise, and yet the muscular action man neither throws nor receives a devastating blow in the *Fast & Furious* universe. The alpha credentials of the hard-bodied heroes are tentatively challenged but never fully negotiated. That said, the heroic men of the high-octane franchise are heading towards 'geri-action' territory, and as such, it is useful to consider the ways in which they might be received in future *Fast & Furious* installments.

50 is the new ... action hero

Late 40 and 50-something action stars are neither new, nor a novelty in Hollywood (Feasey 2011). While Sean Connery returned to the role of James Bond in *Never Say Never Again* (1983) aged 52, Roger Moore kept performing in that role until *A View to a Kill* (1985), aged 57. Likewise, action stars such as John Wayne, Burt Lancaster, Steve McQueen and Clint Eastwood have all performed middle aged or more mature heroic roles (Tasker 2010). Virginia Wexman (1993: 69) makes the point that the careers of many western stars 'blossomed as their youthful allure faded' (Wexman 1993: 69) and 'a number of classic westerns made in the late 1950s to mid-1970s take the aging of these stars as their narrative focus' (Holmlund 2002: 143). However, although these ageing stars were performing images of the tough male hero, they were not having to present their bodies as hard, potent spectacles. In fact, 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), Sylvester Stallone (60) in *Rocky Balboa* (2006) and Harrison Ford (66) in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008). In order to understand the popular appeal of such performances, it has been suggested that 'the aging body can work as an asset, just another challenge that our battered hero has to overcome' (Tasker 2010). In this way, ageing masculinity is not read as unreliable or failing, problematic or powerless because it is 'skill, toughness and endurance' rather than appearance that is 'valorised' in the genre in question (Beynon 2001: 65). These ageing bodies are still hard bodies, capable of withstanding pain and punishment, and as such they maintain their hegemonic credentials. Any receding hair-lines

merely reinforce the notion of power and potency as these men continue to fight, scuffle and come back victorious against younger, ostensibly more virile counterparts.

Ideas of ageing masculinity and/or appearance are directly relevant to a consideration of the *Fast & Furious* franchise. After all, at the time of writing and as we welcome the release of *F9* (2021) and await the next installment, Johnson (49), Diesel (54) and Statham (54) are well past their youth and firmly into middle adulthood. However, 70 appears as the new 50 in the action genre. After all, a number of middle aged-action icons are continuing to perform in line with the action aesthetic at a time when the audience would be looking forward to retirement; namely, Harrison Ford (71) in *The Expendables 3* (2014), Arnold Schwarzenegger (72) in *Terminator: Dark Fate* (2019) or Sylvester Stallone (73) in *Rambo: Last Blood* (2019). The late forty-something Johnson and his fifty-something co-stars appear youthful in comparison to their septuagenarian counterparts, and as many of these original action heroes still sport their original hairlines, the bold bald look of the *Fast & Furious* team appear unconnected with notions of aging masculinity.

Bruce Willis was losing the battle with his hairline throughout the *Die Hard* (1988, 1990, 1995, 2007, 2013) franchise, with the later, hairless instalments accompanying a commentary about his ageing physique. And although the body showed little signs of frailty or fragility, the hair line was evident of time passing. Alternatively however, in relation to the men of the *Fast & Furious* franchise, Diesel, Johnson and Statham were bald from the outset, both on and off-screen. Indeed, Diesel and Johnson made a conscious effort to shave their heads, be it for aesthetic, active or aerodynamic reasons, so their hairlines have little bearing or impact on their hegemonic credentials here. Rather, the close-cropped hair should be read as an extension of their sleek, well-oiled physiques and/or the turbo-boosted cars that they race. These men demand our gaze due to their strong jaws and gym-built bodies, hair styles or styling are superlous to aesthetic or assertive requirements here. The hair, like their hard bodies, appear ageless, challenging any decline in virility, potency or visibility that often accompanies later decades. Indeed, their lack of hair is read as an external sign of their testosterone-fuelled masculinity rather than a commentary on their ageing or appearance over the course of the franchise. When Kirsty Puchko speaks of Diesel's return to the franchise in a proposed *F10* she refers to the star in question as the 'premiere bald badass' of the franchise (Puchko 2020). The commentary says nothing about age or ageing, rather, we are being asked to consider the interlinking of hard, heroic and hairless masculinity here. Indeed, while the 2012 headline 'Are

Bald Men More Virile' is accompanied by a stern looking Willis (Hammond 2012), the more recent 'Bald Men Are More Confident and Attractive' is accompanied by a photo of Statham, with reference also to Diesel (Petter 2017). In the recently published GQ feature 'Studies Say Bald Men Are More Dominant And Attractive Than Their Thick-Haired Brothers' the article is anchored by a photo of Diesel, Statham and Johnson (GQ 2019). When their lack of hair is commented on it is only ever championed and applauded in line with assertive masculinities. In her review of *The Fate of the Furious* (2017), Shani Silver goes as far as to suggest that the franchise is 'where attractive bald men come to thrive' (Silver 2017). The baldness of Diesel, Johnson and Statham, is not framed as evidence of their diminishing powers or the frailties that might normally be seen to come with ageing, rather, it is held up as further indication of their power and their laboured bodies which are primed and ready for spectacular action, to be gazed at and upon.

Although one might assume that a dialogue about age/ing and accompanying questions around power and authority is relevant for the bald 50-something male action heroes that dominate the cinematic universe, it is the bodies rather than hair lines or wrinkled visage of these men that is presented as worthy of their hegemonic credentials and by extension, the continued success of the high-octane franchise. It is as if these men have become a touchstone for ideas of bald beauty, attached to virility and potency. The smooth, muscled men in question can in this sense be understood not just as men of power, in power and with power, but as the epitome of phallic masculinity, with baldness standing in for agency and omnipotence in the cinematic universe. The characters of Toretto, Hobbs and Shaw, and by extension, Diesel, Johnson and Statham can help audiences make sense of the hegemonic hierarchy, considering the role of bodies, hairlines, virility and action to the ranking of contemporary machismo. However, even though one can look at these men as sites of herculean power in a fast and furious universe, the fact that they remain unwilling to show weakness or vulnerability in the face of an alpha threat demonstrates their tenuous grip on masculine power.

Conclusion: multiple readings and star images

There is no single, monolithic or fixed reading of the hard bodied men of the franchise. Rather, audience reception can be constructed and circulated by; the stars themselves who are keen to ensure their on-screen potency, the filmmakers who ensure and enable the carefully balanced fights and theatrics (Schwartzel 2019), by men's health media who position the performers as empowered role models of physical strength, training and endurance, by popular commentators

who fawn over the beauty of the men in motion, or by a wider set of professional review commentaries who situate these men as the pinnacle of anxious, fragile overworked and excessive manhood. These men are held up as figureheads of hard and assertive hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously foregrounding the challenges that accompany excessive and laboured bodies. In short, the franchise can be understood as a space for contested, and indeed contradictory readings as they relate to masculinity, machismo, power and potency in contemporary action.

If we were to think about the role of star images to career longevity, Diesel, Johnson and Statham might be looking to maintain their hegemonic credentials so as to afford continued employment in mainstream Hollywood. That said, beyond the *Fast & Furious* franchise these built performers are seen to play to the more routine codes and conventions of action cinema whereby their bodies and by extension, their masculinities can be challenged, tried and tested. Indeed, Johnson appears happy to be cast as a hard body without accompanying hegemonic credentials, presented as outlier, punchline or punching bag, going as far as to mock his hegemonic status outside of his furious encounters in a range of family friendly fare. The former-wrestler parodies his carefully orchestrated action man persona in *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island* (2012) before playing the underdog in the *Jumanji* universe (2017, 2019, proposed 2022), a role that he has played twice and is said to have signed up for for a third time. The entire premise of his casting here is to send-up the herculean hard bodied masculinity that his *Fast & Furious* character is looking to project, drawing attention to the almost comedic size, scale and strength of the body on display (Crow 2019).

It is the 'alpha' credentials of the ensemble *Fast & Furious* cast that finds Diesel, Johnson and Statham refusing to be perceived as weaker or weakened at the hands of the other male stars of the franchise. Writing about the shifting nature and social construction of manhood, Michael Kimmel (2004: 186) noted that 'other men watch us, rank us [and] grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood'. And this sense of men in competition with other men, sizing them up, judging, challenging and finding them wanting is particularly evident in both the *Fast & Furious* films and the promotional discourse surrounding them, where the muscular, hard-bodied performers each compete to carefully balance atop the hegemonic hierarchy, a place routinely saved for a single figure elsewhere in action cinema.

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