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# Ageing in Action: Hollywood's Ageing Ensemble Action Hero Series

Philippa Gates

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**Summary**

This paper explores the treatment of ageing in the ensemble action hero series *RED* (2010 and 2013) starring Bruce Willis and Helen Mirren and *The Expendables* (2010, 2012, and 2014) starring Sylvester Stallone and other 1980s action stars. These two series combine action with comedy to thematize two sets of issues in relation ageing—first, about competence and usefulness and, second, about meaningful relationships. In the *RED* series, these two overarching concerns are linked explicitly to ageing whereas, in the *Expendables* films, these concerns replace those about ageing. In other words, the *Expendables* series mainly ignores ageing and presents its heroes as operating in a continuum of middle-age action, while the *RED* series explores many of the key issues of ageing in twenty-first century America. The *RED* and *Expendables* series rewrite the established narrative of ageing and it is this departure from stereotyped representations of ageing which generates the comedic moments in the films but also what makes them interesting to ageing audiences. The stars and heroes of *RED* and *Expendables* are popular precisely because they are not acting their age.

**Keywords**

Ageing; Hollywood Action Films; Stardom; Comebacks; Sexuality; Film Series.

**Author Bio**

Philippa Gates is Professor in Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. Her recent publications include *Transnational Asian Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinemas: The Reel Asian Exchange* (Routledge, 2012), *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film* (SUNY Press, 2011), *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (SUNY Press, 2006), as well as articles on gender and race in genre film in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Journal of Film and Video*, *Framework*, *Post Script*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, and various edited collections. She is also a contributor to the *Crime Fiction Canada* database and *Crimeculture.com*

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Despite research to the contrary, older members of society are typically judged to be of lower competence, activity, intelligence, attractiveness, and health and, in popular culture, the elderly tend to be depicted as more stubborn, eccentric, and foolish than younger people.<sup>1</sup> With a good percentage of Hollywood's audiences being old especially with the Boomer generation moving into senior citizenship, Andrew Blaikie asks why are there no representations of old people except in stereotyped negative roles?<sup>2</sup> Blaikie blames our society's obsession with youth on our consumer culture: our bodies and appearance have come to reflect our morality with youth deemed good and old bad.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, only sporadically has Hollywood explored ageing in a thoughtful way as a narrative focus, for example *On Golden Pond* (Rydell 1981), *Cocoon* (Howard 1985), *Driving Miss Daisy* (Beresford 1989), and *Grumpy Old Men* (Petrie 1993). With film fans ageing, Hollywood has more recently realized that there is bankability in offering films centred on ageing characters (although notably only when they are played by famous actors). As Sally Chivers explains, since the turn of the millennium, we have seen "a silvering of the screen" with films featuring "aging prominently."<sup>4</sup> With ageing becoming a more common topic for Hollywood film, different kinds of plots and genres are emerging that explore ageing in different ways including the romantic comedies *Something's Gotta Give* (Meyers 2003), *It's Complicated* (Meyers 2009), and *Hope Springs* (Frankel 2012), the animated film *Up* (Docter and Peterson 2009), the dramas *The Notebook* (Cassavetes 2004) and *Gran Torino* (Eastwood 2008), and the US/UK co-productions *Calendar Girls* (Cole 2003) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (Madden 2011). Even the action film, a Hollywood staple typically aimed at younger male audiences, now also features ageing heroes with the *RED* and *Expendables* series.

Susan Jeffords argues that, in the 1980s, hard-bodied Hollywood action heroes represented an idealization of American masculinity in light of President Reagan's administration and in a reaction to the perceived feminization of white, heterosexual men.<sup>5</sup> Like 1980s war films, these action films offered a hero that symbolically re-fought the war in Vietnam and, in doing so, offered a "remasculinization" of America.<sup>6</sup> In the wake of 9/11 and the "War on Terror", Hollywood resurrected some of the 1980s most famous action heroes to "remasculinize" America once again, including Sylvester Stallone's Rocky in *Rocky Balboa* (Stallone 2006) and Rambo in *Rambo* (Stallone 2007), Bruce Willis' John McClane in *Live Free or Die Hard* (Wiseman 2007) and *A Good Day to Die Hard* (Moore 2013), and Harrison Ford's Indiana Jones in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Spielberg 2008). After the success of these films, other resurrections were rumoured: sequels to *Cliffhanger* (Harlin 1993), *The Untouchables* (DePalma 1987), and *Beverly Hills Cop III* (Landis 1994). Interestingly, none of these films were made; what did appear, however, were two series: *RED* (Schwentke 2010) and *RED 2* (Parisot 2013) starring Bruce Willis,

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<sup>1</sup> Doris G. Bazzini, William D. McIntosh, Stephen M. Smith, Sabrina Cook, Caleigh Harris, "The Ageing Woman in Popular Film: Underrepresented, Unattractive, Unfriendly, and Unintelligent," *Sex Roles* Vol. 36 No.7/8, 1997, pp. 541 and 532.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Blaikie, *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Sally Chivers, *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2013, p. xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1994, pp. 24-25.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 168.

Helen Mirren, Morgan Freeman, and John Malkovich; and *The Expendables* (Stallone 2010), *The Expendables 2* (West 2012), and *The Expendables 3* (Hughes 2014) starring Sylvester Stallone and other 1980s action stars Jean-Claude Van Damme, Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson, Dolph Lundgren, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Bruce Willis. Both series featured ensemble casts of more than three principal actors of approximately equal importance to the plot and screentime rather than lone heroes as in the 1980s. And, instead of returning to the 1980s action hero, Hollywood embraced the model introduced by *Space Cowboys* (Eastwood 2000) about four retired astronaut-hopefuls who struggle with ageing. Film reviewer Scott Feschuk argues that it was the “[o]nly film of summer 2000 to target the Queen Mum’s demographic”<sup>7</sup> and its success confirmed its broad appeal (it earned over a \$128 million worldwide). Indeed, many reviewers were pleased to see *Space Cowboys* do well with audiences and suggested it was a call to Hollywood to value ageing stars and older audiences. As A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* suggested, the film was popular because, “without succumbing to bitterness or nostalgia or overstating the case for one generation’s virtues, [Eastwood] and his cohorts mount a vigorous and funny defense of maturity.”<sup>8</sup> Comedy it would seem is the politically correct and popular way to explore ageing. As Richard Corliss of *Time* notes, however, “To be old in America is almost as uncool as being poor” making a film like *Space Cowboys* “a bracing, useful social corrective.”<sup>9</sup> For that reason, the ageing heroes of *Space Cowboys* did something that very few action films have done: give voice and space to older men and to make ageing a central issue. In the same vein, the *RED* and *Expendables* series combined action with comedy to explore the struggles of their ageing action heroes.

This paper explores how the ageing ensemble action series *RED* and *The Expendables* focus on a handful of related concerns about ageing including the need to feel valued by, and connected to, others. In the *RED* series, these two overarching concerns are linked explicitly to ageing, namely that the opportunity to have meaningful relationships and to feel valued decreases as age increases; in the *Expendables* films, these concerns *replace* those about ageing. In other words, as this paper will explore, the *Expendables* series mainly ignores ageing and presents its heroes as operating in a continuum of middle-age action, while the *RED* series delves into many of the key issues of, and fears about, ageing in twenty-first century America. Both series suggest that retirement is not an option because retirement represents the beginning of the end of living.

### Successful Ageing

The recent proliferation of films about ageing is likely the product of Hollywood’s desire to capitalize on ageing audiences; what is confirmed, however, is that this exploitation is linked to the ageing of mainstream film’s stars. Hollywood has discovered that there is bankability in resurrecting the stars of their audience’s youth to draw them back to the cinema. Thus, films about ageing only feature well-known stars and, interestingly, only feature stars who are regarded to have aged “successfully.” As sociologists Barbara Marshall and Momin Rahman argue, there is an “increasing use of celebrity culture in fostering consumption” and ageing celebrities “who have developed a brand identity as successful agers.”<sup>10</sup> According to gerontologists John Rowe and Robert Kahn, the cultural discourse of “successful aging” implies that to age “successfully” one must avoid disease, maintain one’s cognitive abilities, and be socially engaged.<sup>11</sup> This approach to

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<sup>7</sup> Scott Feschuk, “Geezer Pleasers from Over the Hill,” *The National Post*, 3 Aug 2000, p. B3.

<sup>8</sup> A.O. Scott, “Voices of Experience, Rocketing to the Rescue,” *New York Times*, 4 Aug 2000, p. B16.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Corliss, “*Space Cowboys*,” *Time*, 14 Aug 2000, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara L. Marshall, Momin Rahman, “Celebrity, Ageing and the Construction of ‘Third Age’ Identities,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol.18, No.6, 2015, pp. 577-78.

<sup>11</sup> J.W. Rowe, R.L. Kahn, *Successful Aging*, New York, Random House, 1998, p. 38.

ageing has been criticized for its assumptions that ageing is dependent on personal choice rather than material conditions and social inequality; however, the myth of successful ageing persists and is the perpetuation of a middle-aged ideal foisted onto older people who can only struggle to attain it. The idea of “old age” is associated with “impairment, social immobility and non-participation in autonomous, self-fashioning consumerist lifestyles;” in contrast, those celebrities regarded as successful agers are aligned with what Marshall and Rahman define as the “four F’s:” fitness, fashionableness, functionality, and flexibility.<sup>12</sup> Being fit is tied to physical appearance and the staving off the negative effects of ageing on the body; being fashionable is associated with youthful and attractive consumers; being functional means to reject traditional ideas of retirement and social disengagement to remain useful and relevant; and, lastly, being flexible suggests the ability and desire to adapt and transform rather than be stubborn and intractable. It is this ideal model of ageing that successful-ageing celebrities represent. It may be difficult for the average person to attain; however, it is appealing to consumers and audiences and is the model that Hollywood capitalizes on to attract ageing audiences.

The *RED* and *Expendables* series notably do not feature new-comers, ageing actors that have burst onto the scene in late age, but famous actors with whom audiences have aged and who have celebrity status as successful agers. There is a reason why *RED* and *Expendables* feature stars like Bruce Willis and Sylvester Stallone who have maintained the fit bodies of their heyday and not Val Kilmer, Steven Seagal, or Kurt Russell who have gained too much weight or look too old. Similarly, it is Helen Mirren in *RED* and not Kathleen Turner, Karen Allen, or Brigitte Nielsen—1980s action women who lost their youthful and feminine look. Mirren is the exception as a woman whose career went international at the age most women are written off by Hollywood. Whether it is Mirren’s success as an actress that has seen her become a model celebrity for ageing or her status as a successful ager that has helped her garner top roles may be up for debate; however, what is confirmed is that she is “widely hailed as the ‘new face’ of fit, sexy, beautiful ageing.”<sup>13</sup> This status was cemented with the paparazzi shot of Mirren at age 63 in a bikini that, as film scholar Josephine Dolan suggests, “established hers as the idealized benchmark of the older women’s body, the embodiment of ‘senior sexiness’” but, importantly, as “natural” and not due to cosmetic surgery or photoshop.<sup>14</sup> Dolan criticizes this ideal of successful female ageing as “little more than an extension into old age of what Naomi Wolf termed ‘The Beauty Myth’” whereby old stars are regarded as models of ageing only if they maintain youthful ideals of beauty.<sup>15</sup> Pamela Gravagne agrees, arguing that our “beautification” industry creates a “devaluation of older women’s appearance” and “demonization of women’s sexual aging” supported by the medical profession.<sup>16</sup> As Chivers notes, “A crow’s foot still signifies the passage of time and symbolizes decay rather than improvement. Thus, the control of physical decay [...] offers a reassuring potential future to audience members.”<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, the image of on-screen ageing reassures older audience members that ageing can be managed; on the other, it encourages viewers to buy into the anti-ageing industry—to consume

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara L. Marshall, Momin Rahman, “Celebrity, Ageing and the Construction of ‘Third Age’ Identities,” op. cit., pp. 579-88.

<sup>13</sup> Marshall, Rahman, op. cit., p. 584.

<sup>14</sup> Josephine Dolan, “Smoothing the Wrinkles: Hollywood, ‘Successful Aging,’ and the New Visibility of Older Female Stars,” in Cynthia Carter, Linda Steiner, Lisa McLaughlin (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 346-47.

<sup>15</sup> Josephine Dolan, “Smoothing the Wrinkles,” op. cit., p. 346.

<sup>16</sup> Pamela H. Gravagne, *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2013, p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Chivers, op. cit., pp. xviii-xix.

the clothes, magazines, energy drinks, anti-wrinkle creams, plastic surgery, adult-lifestyle living, and organized senior travel that promise to stave off “unsuccessful” ageing.

Mirren is the exception since as, Dolan explains, it tends only to be older male stars who are “represented as employed, active, engaged, and hetero-virile and therefore readily available to embody the emergent discourses of ‘successful aging’ and, hence deferred retirement.”<sup>18</sup> Amelia DeFalco confirms that “aging is distinctly gendered” and “one might be tempted to assume that aging is primarily a ‘woman’s issue.’”<sup>19</sup> Ageing, however, is a man’s issue precisely because ageing is linked to feminization: for the man, to become old is to lose the traits associated with masculinity, most importantly strength and independence. Ageing, however, *is* gendered in that men have the advantage. As Chivers argues, there is the “invisibility of privilege against the visibility of physical aging:” in other words, older men are privileged and especially the ageing “bad boy” whose masculinity is “fully intact.”<sup>20</sup> This is the fantasy that films can offer, standing in for what Gabriela Spector-Mersel argues is the absent “hegemonic masculinity script” for later life: “While in relation to early and middle adulthood we find clear models of dignified masculinity, these become vague, even non-existent, when referring to later life.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the script that western society writes for men does not include what being old and masculine should look like; instead, we compare older men to the masculine script of middle age—and find them wanting. For Hollywood’s male heroes, Chivers argues, “aging successfully means continuing to achieve physical feats not common even for the average younger person.”<sup>22</sup> The *Expendables* offers the extension of the middle-age script into old age with its ageing heroes who prove themselves potent action heroes.

### **The Same Old Script**

The first *Expendables* film attracted audiences with its bringing together of some of the biggest action stars of the 1980s including Sylvester Stallone (aged 64 at the time of the film’s release) as team leader Barney Ross, Dolph Lundgren (52) as sniper Gunner Jensen, Mickey Rourke (57) as tattoo artist Tool, and Arnold Schwarzenegger (63) and Bruce Willis (55) in minor roles. The film paired the ageing stars with younger, more current, action stars including Chinese martial artist and action star Jet Li (47), British martial artist and action star Jason Statham (43), mixed martial artist Randy Couture (47), and football star Terry Crews (42). The film’s soundtrack of classic rock songs connects the heroes to earlier decades; however, despite the “Killing to the Oldies” soundtrack (as reviewer Liz Braun dubs it) the film rarely comments on the characters’ ages nor questions their abilities to defeat the enemy. Rather, the film suggests that they are men of an older time in terms of their skills: they are violent enough to protect society for money but too violent to fit into normal social roles.

The idea of being expendable harkens back to the World War II film *They Were Expendable* (Ford 1945) and is re-articulated in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos 1985) when Rambo (Stallone) is asked why he was chosen for the mission:

Co:           Why did they pick you? Because you like to fight?  
Rambo:       I’m expendable.  
Co:           Expendable? What mean expendable?

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<sup>18</sup> Dolan, op. cit., pp. 344-45.

<sup>19</sup> Amelia DeFalco, *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2010, p. x.

<sup>20</sup> Chivers, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

<sup>21</sup> Gabriela Spector-Mersel, “Never-Ending Stories: Western Hegemonic Masculinity Scripts,” *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2006, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> Chivers, op. cit., p. xii.

Rambo: It's like someone invites you to a party and you don't show up. It doesn't really matter.

In *The Expendables*, CIA operative Mr. Church (Bruce Willis) hires the team to liberate the Caribbean island of Vilena from its dictator. When team leader Barney Ross (Stallone) discovers that they have been hired to do a job that the CIA won't acknowledge, he realizes that the team is regarded as expendable. As Ross says, "Nobody's gonna miss us." Despite being skillful mercenaries who rescue hostages from Somalian pirates in the opening sequence, the Expendables do not feel valued by society; however, by choosing to complete the mission for moral rather than merely monetary reasons, the heroes find purpose.

The decision to pursue the mission is inextricably linked to the question of romantic relationships and coming to the rescue of damsels-in-distress. "Christmas" Lee (Statham) is in a relationship but his girlfriend, Lacy (Charisma Carpenter) has taken up with another man because she feels like Lee is absent and uncommunicative; in contrast, Ross is alone and sceptical of the possibility of Lee's fantasy of love. Ross says to Lee, "Look [...] let's just say you're with her for a couple of hours and it's nice and it's hot and heavy—but after that? Think about it. What do you do for the rest of the day?" Ross thinks that he and Lee are cut out only for a life of action and that such a life excludes love. Lee, however, uses action to repair his relationship with Lacy but beating up her abusive new boyfriend. Literally moments after Ross dismisses the idea of relationships to Lee, in walks Sandra (Giselle Itié) to whom Ross finds himself immediately attracted. Later, Ross consults his former colleague, tattoo artist Tool (Rourke), about the subject of love and Tool explains how it was his life of action that made him realize the importance of love:

I promised myself, I didn't want to die all alone full of holes in the mud and blood. I'm gonna die with something that counts—I'm gonna die with a woman. I'm gonna die with someone, you know, who cares about me, you know. I don't wanna die *for* a woman; I wanna die layin' next to a woman.

Later, in a surprisingly intense and poignant scene atypical in the action genre, Tool tells Ross the heart-wrenching story about a woman in Bosnia that he watched commit suicide instead of saving her—a scene shot in a tight and unwavering close-up of Tool's age-ravaged face. Both Tool and Ross tear up as they realize that Tool will never be able to forgive himself for letting a woman down and this inspires Ross to go back to Vilena to save Sandra. This is the turning point in the film where the heroes will take action—not because they are paid to, but because it is the "right" thing to do.

The issue for the ageing team is not necessarily to prove that they have they have retained the physical skills to beat the bad guys because they demonstrate those skills from the beginning of the film. Instead, the key issue for the ageing rebels is the feeling that no one outside of the team values them. By taking on a mission for moral rather than financial reasons and defeating evil that threaten a future democracy, the Expendables prove themselves admirable. This point is driven home when, after the final shootout, Ross comes face-to-face with the film's head villain: ex-CIA officer, James Munroe (Eric Roberts), who is running a drug racket through Vilena. Munroe asserts that he and Ross are the same: "We're both the same. We're both mercenaries. We're both dead inside." Ross, however, knows in his heart that he is different because he is there not for money or revenge. When Munroe says, "Why the hell did you come after me?" Ross retorts, "I didn't come after *you*, dipshit. I came for *her*!" As they leave Vilena, Ross gives his share of the mission reward to Sandra so that she can restore her country. Ross, by doing the right thing, proves himself a true hero that is worthy of love, even though he does not get to keep the girl.

The sequel, *The Expendables 2* was even more expensive and more popular than the first film.<sup>23</sup> In general, reviewers preferred the sequel, citing more humour and action but found the plot and dialogue lacking. While the first film wrestled with questions about love, loneliness, and usefulness, the second devoted more of its screentime to its action sequences—and its increasing number of action stars. The film foregrounded its action legacy with self-referential humor, for example with Trench (Schwarzenegger) saying, “I’ll be back” (a reference to his famous line from the *Terminator* series). When Church (Willis) counters, “You’ve been back enough,” Trench mumbles, “Yippee-kay!” (a reference to Willis’ *Die Hard* hero). It would seem that the series producers and writers (including Stallone) thought the success of the first film was due *only* to its star-studded cast and action sequences, and in the sequel they offer more screentime to a growing list of ageing action stars: Chuck Norris (72), Schwarzenegger (65), Willis (57), and Jean-Claude Van Damme (51). Despite having more ageing action stars, the sequel continues to ignore fears about getting older and it is only with the third film that there is finally a serious debate about ageing.

*The Expendables 3* (2014) begins with Ross (Stallone) disbanding the team after one of the team is shot and then creating a new, younger team, composed of Marine John Smilee (actor Kellan Lutz, 29), weapons expert Mars (boxer Victor Ortiz, 27), bouncer Luna (mixed martial artist Ronda Rousey, 27), and computer expert Thorn (actor Glen Powell, 25). It would seem that what makes the team expendable in the third film is, finally, age. The new team of 20-somethings were intended by the film’s producers to attract a younger audience to the film: they are, using *Variety* reviewer Justin Chang’s clever quip, the “Hip Replacements.”<sup>24</sup> The Replacements question whether the Expendables are too old to be effective while the Expendables question whether the Replacements have the experience: Mars calls the Expendables a “bunch of has-beens still trying to be hard” while Lee calls the Replacements “young [and] dumb.” While the Replacements accompany Ross on the next mission to Europe, the Expendables are left at home, struggling with the rejection from being forcibly retired: Lee lies on the couch, drinking beer while watching infomercials and twirling his knife expertly; Caesar (Crews) lies in a hospital bed on life support; Doc (Wesley Snipes) sits in a motel room, staring at his knife; Gunner (Lundgren) vents his rage at the shooting range while drinking; Toll (Couture) watches a group of men hang out at a bar where he sits alone; and Lee concludes the montage sequence by throwing his knife into his TV. The conclusion is clear: these men have nothing to retire too so must keep playing hero to feel relevant. Luckily, for both teams, the Expendables find out that Replacements are in trouble and head to Europe to save them. The two teams then work together to bring down the enemy’s army, each member getting to showcase their specific skills. The debate about the old vs. new generation is settled as the new recruits are welcomed into the Expendables family—and this echoes the second shift in themes in the series about relationships: romantic love has been replaced by family. While on the mission, Ross says to Luna, “If you’re looking to go the family route, this is the wrong job for you.” Luna counters, “There *are* different kinds of family. And when my life is on the line, that’s my *family* fighting with me.” The Expendables is a family and, as Ross looks over the Replacements, Lee says, “You look a proud, demented father.” It is ironic that the key speech on ageing in the film comes from Antonio Banderas, aged 54, to Stallone, aged 68. Banderas’ sharpshooter pleads with Ross to hire him saying, “Mr. Ross, age is just a state of mind. You know, you’re only old when you surrender. When you give up, and I haven’t...not yet.”

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<sup>23</sup> Its budget was reportedly \$92 million (compared to \$80 million) and grossed over \$310 million worldwide (compared to \$274 million). All box office figures are from BoxOfficeMojo.

<sup>24</sup> Justin Chang, “The Expendables 3,” *Variety*, 4 Aug 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/film/reviews/film-review-the-expendables-3-1201274799/>



Although the most critically derided of the series,<sup>25</sup> *The Expendables 3* still earned \$206 million worldwide. Domestic interest had dropped off (earning only \$39 million in North America) and reviewers noted two issues that might be responsible: the film opened at the same time as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Liebesman 2014) and a pirated version of the film was downloaded over 2 million times before its release. However, others blamed the reduction in interest on the producers' attempt to attract younger audiences by lowering the level of violence to a PG-13 rating.<sup>26</sup> *Variety* reviewer Chang explains, this was “a gutless decision that drains the action of its excitement, its visceral impact and its glorious disreputability.”<sup>27</sup> The producers had misidentified the core audience for the film. As film scholar Norma Jones explains, the key demographic for these films is the “graying” audience who grew up watching the action stars in their heyday.<sup>28</sup>

The first *Expendables* offered 9 heroes on its poster, the second had 11, while the third looks pretty crowded with 16. Additions to the all-star ensemble cast included 1980s action stars Mel Gibson (58), Harrison Ford (72), and Wesley Snipes (52). Producer Kevin King-Templeton explains,

To top the first *Expendables*, we added a few more names to the second film. On this one, we wanted to find a way to keep the concept fresh and excite audiences all over the world, so we invited every action star we could think of to join the cast.<sup>29</sup>

However, as reviewer Gary Susman argues,

The initial *Expendables* seemed like a great idea—put a bunch of aging action stars together and let their combined nostalgia power make up for the fact that none of them is the hitmaker he once was. Three movies in, however, the novelty has worn off.<sup>30</sup>

*Variety* reviewer Brent Lang agrees: “Audiences may have grown tired of watching AARP members with guns, even if the producers excavated a few more Reagan-era stars.”<sup>31</sup> More thoughtful in its themes and concerns—especially about ageing—is the *RED* series which, as Chang notes, is “an AARP-friendly version of [...] *The Expendables*.”<sup>32</sup>

### Retired Extremely Dangerous

Just as A.O. Scott praised *Space Cowboys* in *The New York Times* for not “succumbing to bitterness or nostalgia,” so too did Chang laud *RED* in *Variety* for managing “to get at some of the basic frustrations of old age in an entirely sincere and good-humored manner, giving it a tone that, if not exactly elegiac, is more bittersweet than one usually expects from this sort of fare.”<sup>33</sup> *The New Yorker*'s Anthony Lane said that *RED* “like *The Expendables*, clearly results from a heart-searching recognition, at the loftiest levels in Hollywood, that more should be done to serve the older audience”; however, he observes that the only concession is that the heroes are 50-somethings

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Howell, “The Expendables 3 is, well, Expendable,” *The Toronto Star*, 15 Aug 2014, p. E1.

<sup>26</sup> Scott Mendelson, “PG-13, Not Piracy, Killed ‘Expendables 3,’” *Forbes*, 18 Aug 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2014/08/18/pg-13-not-piracy-killed-expendables-3/>

<sup>27</sup> Justin Chang, “The Expendables 3,” op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Norma Jones, “AAADRRRIIAAN! I’ll Be Baaaaaaack!: Schwarzenegger and Stallone as Aging Action Heroes,” in Norma Jones, Bob Batchelor (ed.), *Aging Heroes: Growing Old in Popular Culture*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> Anon., “Production Notes,” *The Expendables 3*, Lionsgate, 2014, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Gary Susman, “Why did ‘The Expendables 3’ flop?” *MovieFone*, 18 Aug 2014, <http://news.moviefone.com/2014/08/18/box-office-expendables-3-flop/>

<sup>31</sup> Brent Lang, “‘Expendables 3’ Fumbles With \$16.2 Million, ‘Ninja Turtles’ Tops Charts,” *Variety*, 17 Aug 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/film/markets-festivals/box-office-expendables-3-fumbles-with-16-2-million-ninja-turtles-tops-charts-1201284794/>. AARP stands for the *American Association of Retired Persons*

<sup>32</sup> Justin Chang, “Red,” *Variety*, 29 Sept 2010, <http://variety.com/2010/film/reviews/red-2-1117943749/>

<sup>33</sup> Justin Chang, *Ibid.*

instead of 20-somethings.<sup>34</sup> *RED* was based on a three-issue DC Comics mini-series (2003-04); however, while the comics focussed on a lone hero, Paul Moses, the film version opted for an ensemble cast with Bruce Willis (55 at the time), John Malkovich (56), Helen Mirren (65), and Morgan Freeman (73) playing retired CIA operatives who are struggling with their retirement. Scholars Victor Marshall and Philip Taylor argue, the institution of retirement and the perceived “normal” age at which people should retire is “socially constructed,” mainly because of the rise since World War II of state and private pension plans, which are based on retirement at specific ages, typically 60 or 65.<sup>35</sup> In both the *Expendables* and *RED* series the message is clear: action heroes cannot retire if they want to feel valued.

*RED* begins with retired operative Frank Moses (Willis) waking up, making coffee, working out in his basement, and fetching his mail. That Frank is living a boring suburban life is confirmed by the 360 degree pan of Frank’s street of identical homes. Frank has a crush on Sarah (Mary-Louise Parker), a 40-something Government Customer Service Agent, and every month he pretends that his pension cheque has been lost in the mail so that he has an excuse to call her. Sarah reads trashy romance novels which find a couple negotiating exciting action and intrigue. Retirement does not suit Frank and office life does not suit Sarah: they both long for excitement and meaning in their lives. Their mutual desire for action is granted when three assassins are sent to retire Frank permanently after the CIA declare him “RED” (Retired Extremely Dangerous). As the two of them attempt to find out why Frank has been targeted, they assemble a team, including former CIA agent, Joe Matheson (Morgan Freeman), who is living in a rest home and represents Frank’s potential future. Joe explain, “I never thought *this* would happen to me.[...] Getting old. I mean, Vietnam, Afghanistan...*Green Springs Rest Home?*” As Joe suggests, ageing ends the life of adventure and purpose that they once lived and suggests that Frank can still take a different life course. They also pick up former Black Op and conspiracy theorist, Marvin Boggs (John Malkovich), who is angered at the lack of respect young people show him. A young red-haired woman confronts Marvin and Frank with a machine gun and says, “That’s right, old man!” before firing on Marvin. Marvin queries, “Old man?” Frank agrees, “No respect!” When Marvin then asks Frank, “Can I kill her now?” Frank nods his head in definite approval. The last team member is former English MI6 assassin, Victoria (Helen Mirren), who has not settled into retirement just yet.

Frank: How d’ya do it?[...] How did you make the transition? You seem so calm and at ease.

Victoria: I love it. I love it here. I love the baking, I love the flower arranging, I like...I like the routine. [pause] Well, I do get a bit restless sometimes. I take the odd contract on the side. I...I just can’t stop.[...] You can’t just flip a switch and become someone else.

The film confirms that you can lose your purpose in retirement and you cannot be content when you deny who you really are as a person—even if that person is an assassin who needs to kill to feel valued.

Related to the debate about romantic relationships in older age is the issue of sex—and this is a significant as it is an issue that traditionally has been underexplored in mainstream film. As film scholar Dolan explains, even when older female stars are “positioned to embody idealized aging femininity [...] this is rarely articulated as active sexuality.”<sup>36</sup> *RED*, however, explores not only the connection between a life of action and a sex life for the male hero, but also the sexual desires of

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony Lane, “Last Hurrahs,” *The New Yorker*, 1 Nov 2010, p. 121.

<sup>35</sup> Victor W. Marshall, Philip Taylor, “Restructuring the Lifecourse: Work and Retirement,” in Malcom L. Johnson (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 572-73.

<sup>36</sup> Dolan, op. cit., p. 345.

two ageing women. The film is surprisingly more concerned with the sexual fantasies of 40-something Sarah than those of 50-something Frank: Sarah thinks it is hot when Frank kicks in a wall to break into the CIA vault and commits other acts of violence. The film is also concerned, however, with the sexual desires of 60-something Victoria. Victoria tells Sarah that love and espionage do not mix and that her loyalty to MI6 was tested when they asked her to kill the agent with whom she was in love: she put three bullets in his chest. Later, former Russian agent Ivan (Brian Cox) reveals that he was the man that Victoria shot, but that he knew that she loved him otherwise she would have shot him in the head. At the hotel gala, Victoria looks Marilyn Monroe-esque with her white gown, blonde hair, and red lips as she fires weapon after weapon to keep the villains pinned down in the kitchen. Unfortunately, she is wounded in the crossfire and, just as she is about to meet her fate, Ivan rescues her. The film ends with Ivan and Victoria happily reunited and Sarah and Frank kissing. The final image of the film is of Sarah and Frank's kiss transposed onto the cover of one of Sarah's romance novel, suggesting that her romantic fantasies have come true.

*RED 2* (2013) begins three years after the first film concludes and again highlights the perceived dangers of retirement—and the intertwined themes of successful action and fulfilling sexuality. Frank (Willis) and Sarah (Parker) have settled once again into suburban life, including shopping at Costco where Sarah watches a senior couple struggling to reach a pack of toilet paper off a high shelf. She realizes that this is her future with Frank and her concerns are compounded when Frank expresses excitement over a powerwasher and new window treatments. Luckily, Marvin (Malkovich) rescues them. He asks what Frank is doing “playing house” and can see the toll it is taking on Frank that he has not “killed anyone in months.” They discover that a document has appeared on the internet that claims that they were active in a clandestine, Cold War operation called “Nightshade” to smuggle a nuclear weapon into Russia. In Paris, they run into Katya (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a Russian counterintelligence agent, with whom Frank had a relationship. Katya causes friction between Sarah and Frank as a “dusky femme fatale” (as Sarah refers to her) and she is confirmed as Frank's “kryptonite” (as Marvin refers to her) when she greets Frank with a voracious kiss. Sarah, however, is able to retain Frank's interest when she proves herself to be an action hero herself: first, she extracts information from a source through feigned seduction and, second, she kills a man in order from the team to infiltrate the Iranian Embassy. In the first film, it was Frank who must be an action hero to attract Sarah; in the second, it is Sarah who must be an action hero to attract Frank. As in the first film, Victoria (Mirren) and Ivan (Cox) represent the romantic *and sexual* ideal for older couples. When Frank, Marvin, and Sarah are facing a Russian firing squad for execution, Victoria picks off the members of the firing squad one by one with her rifle. Ivan, watching her, says, “there is nothing more sexy in all the world than a beautiful woman with an incredible gun.[...] I love the way your toes curl right before you fire.” He then takes one of her boots and sniffs it with pleasure. Later, Ivan and Victoria plan to meet up for a romantic island getaway when their mission has wrapped up to “spend all night beneath the stars.” As they part with a lingering kiss, Sarah looks on with a shy smile: this is the romance she wants in her golden years—not the one she witnessed at Costco. *RED 2* ends with Frank, Sarah, and Marvin taking a job in Venezuela, confirming that it is retirement—not ageing—that leads to a boring and lonely life.

## Conclusion

Amir Cohen-Shalev distinguishes between “ageing” and “old age,” the former being the process and the latter being the destination.<sup>37</sup> Both the *RED* and *Expendables* series imply that by changing the process, you can defer your arrival at the destination. These films confirm the assumption of

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<sup>37</sup> Amir Cohen-Shalev, *Visions of Ageing*, op. cit., p. 7.

“successful ageing” discourse that old age is not something that occurs at a specific age, but rather an undesirable state that one arrives at when one stops fighting to delay it. Both the *RED* and *Expendables* series reject the idea of an identity that changes as we age and, instead, advocate for retaining our seemingly “true” (i.e., middle-aged) identity despite society labelling us old and redundant.

The first fear of ageing explored in both the *RED* and *Expendables* films is the prospect of losing one’s mental and physical faculties. In a reflection of this, the films see their ageing action heroes struggle to feel competent and, more importantly, useful to, and valued by, society. As Gravagne argues, films highlight ageism “through the assumptions of decline and incompetence that family and authority figures make.”<sup>38</sup> The ageing action heroes of both *RED* and *Expendables* fear that they peaked in the 1980s and may not be needed in the twenty-first century; however, they are ultimately reassured that age and experience are the best weapons to combat evil in a world dominated by information technology. In other words, “real” American heroes must possess proficient hand-to-hand combat skills to successfully defeat the enemy and this is a skill set that 1980s heroes excelled. Relatedly, *RED* sees its heroes experience prejudice because of their age and appearance but then offers the fantasy of proving society wrong about the correlation between age and ability, sexuality, and worth. The second key issue explored in both series is the difficulty in older age to form or maintain meaningful relationships whether platonic, familial, or romantic: both series confirm that such relationships are necessary for happiness in older age. Romance is a key issue in the first *Expendables* but abandoned by the last where the team-as-family becomes the focus. In contrast, the *RED* films confirm that the secret to ageing successfully is to engage with people and life actively, rather than lead boring and disconnected lives because of technology. More specifically, the *RED* films suggest that older people can be sexually potent through leading an exciting life of action. Lastly, both series confirm that retirement is not an option, for retirement is seen as giving up on life and a fast track to the end.

The two series differ, however, in an important way. While the *Expendables* films attempt to ignore the issues of ageing and suggest that ageing heroes can be just as virile and effective as they were in their youth, the *RED* series explicitly highlights the struggles that ageing people face as they age and retire. The *Expendables’* producers did not seem to recognise that the older viewers who were attracted to the first film wanted more exploration of the issues of ageing; instead the series was re-worked to attract younger viewers and, subsequently, alienated their original demographic. A new *Expendables* film has been officially announced and the cast, it is reported, will include more older stars including Pierce Brosnan, Hulk Hogan, and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.<sup>39</sup> It would seem that Hollywood may have learned its lesson that older audiences are a demographic to be reckoned with and catered to. Certainly, as Chivers explains, ageing was once Hollywood’s “nightmare”: in the 1950s and 1960s, Hollywood stars Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, and Gloria Swanson played creatures of horror in films that conflated age with disability.<sup>40</sup> Despite the fact that there are more films about ageing in recent years, Chivers argues that their “light-hearted and light-witted images of aging [...] do little to challenge common attitudes towards growing old.”<sup>41</sup> While the *RED* and *Expendables* films as may attract older viewers, their comedic tone and easy answers for tough questions about ageing mean they offer only fantasies about

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<sup>38</sup> Pamela H. Gravagne, *The Becoming of Age*, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> An article on *Lawyer Herald* says that casting choices are being firmed up for the next film. Anon., “The Expendables 4 is Confirmed, with New Comers The Rock, Hulk Hogan,” *Lawyer Herald*, 30 Dec 2015, <http://www.lawyerherald.com/articles/24431/20151230/expendables-4-confirmed-new-comers-rock-hulk-hogan.htm>

<sup>40</sup> Chivers, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> Chivers, op. cit., p. 5.

growing old rather than realities. Gravagne likens such fantasies to fairy-tales with their attempt “to integrate contradictory emotions or experiences” that threaten our sense of security and, in doing so, they “reinforce the dominance of a particular discriminatory discourse.”<sup>42</sup> The danger then, according to these scholars, is that, by offering a happy ending, the *RED* and *Expendables* films might reinscribe the very ageism they seem to be railing against.

However, I argue that their foregrounding of ageing characters and themes is, using Corliss’s words, a “useful social corrective.” Scholars Bob Batchelor and Norma Jones argue that, “despite the increasing number and variety of aging portrayals in film, television, comics, and other mass media channels, much of the cultural understanding has been limited to outdated stereotypes,” mainly of “weakness and frailty” or nearing death.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Amir Cohen-Shalev argues that popular film tends to present ageing only through “a narrative of decline.”<sup>44</sup> To that end, the *RED* and *Expendables* series do present different—and positive—models of ageing with older heroes who are strong, useful, and admirable. In other words, the *RED* and *Expendables* films rewrite the established narrative of ageing from one of decline to one of empowerment. It is this departure from stereotyped representations of ageing which often generates the comedic moments in the films but, more importantly, also what makes them interesting to audiences. The stars and heroes of *RED* and *Expendables* are popular precisely because they are *not* acting their age.

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<sup>42</sup> Gravagne, *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>43</sup> Bob Batchelor, Norma Jones, “Introduction—Bad Abides: Jeff Bridges, Ideal Aging Hero,” in Norma Jones, Bob Batchelor (ed.), *Ageing Heroes: Growing Old in Popular Culture*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, pp. xi-xii.

<sup>44</sup> Amir Cohen-Shalev, *Visions of Ageing: Images of the Elderly in Film*, Eastbourne, Sussex Academic Press, 2009, p. 1.

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