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"I wanted to be Rocky, but I also wanted to be his wife!": Heterosexuality and the (Re)construction of Gender in Female Film Audiences' Consumption of Sylvester Stallone'

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'I wanted to be Rocky, but I also wanted to be his wife!': Heterosexuality and the (Re)construction of Gender in Female Film Audiences' Consumption of Sylvester Stallone

Abstract

This paper examines the degree to which the performance of gender is sustained and/or problematised through the triangular relationship between popular cinema, film audiences, and the social/cultural contexts in which they are situated. It also interrogates existing attempts to explain the interconnection between the performance of gender and the discursive construction of heterosexuality. It addresses these questions through close analysis of the comments of actual female audiences for the films of Sylvester Stallone, responding to research into the star's complex representation of gender and an absence of work on actual women's engagements with male film stars.

Keywords: Gender, Heterosexuality, Masculinity, Femininity, Film Audiences, Female Audiences, Hollywood, Stallone.

Introduction

If gender might be 'performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1990: 20), then in what ways is this performance sustained, or problematised, through the triangular relationship between popular cinema, film audiences, and the social/cultural contexts in which they are situated? In addition, how might this performance of gender interconnect with other discursively constructed identities, specifically heterosexuality, through which gender itself has been seen to be produced (Dyer 1997: 270)? These are the questions to which I turn in this paper, focusing specifically upon female audiences for the films of Sylvester Stallone.

Stallone's value as a case-study lies in the potential complexity of the star's relationship to the performance of gender, as highlighted by a number of previous studies which have variously shown the way in which masculinity might be maintained or complicated

through his films. For example, whilst for some the star can be seen to have helped sustain reactionary notions of masculinity pivoting upon a normative 'hard body' (Jeffords 1994: 24-52), for others the star embodies a 'hysterical image of masculinity' that points towards 'the impossible nature of the phallic ideal' (Creed 1990: 133), revealing gender's performative status.^[1] However, the absence of original audience research within the majority of these previous studies means that we still have a limited understanding of how audiences have responded to these images, how and why they might take up particular gendered subject positions (or not), and the degree to which this is shaped by, and shapes, their everyday lives.

Valerie Walkerdine's work (1986) still remains the clearest insight into how interrelations between the texts of Stallone's films, the everyday lives of audiences, and wider social/cultural contexts may sustain the performance of gender, through her analysis of a class-inflected discourse of combative masculinity that frames one man's understanding of *Rocky II* (Sylvester Stallone, 1979) and himself. This leaves significant gaps in our understanding, though, not least of which is how *women's* gendered identities might be reinforced or problematised through their engagement with the star, and how these identities might be shaped by the discursive construction of heterosexuality. Despite the pivotal role of romance in the texts and promotion of the *Rocky* films, and representations of Stallone as a celebrity targeted towards a female audience,^[2] no attempt has been made to consider actual women's responses to the star. Such a lack of knowledge not only represents a gap in our attempts to understand the cultural dynamics at play in the consumption of Stallone (both in the past and today), but is also indicative of a relative absence of work on the popularity of male stars with actual female audiences.^[3] If we are to fully understand how women's gendered and sexual identities are constituted through their relationship to cinema then research into actual female audiences' engagements with male stars is essential. The example of Stallone is, hopefully, just a starting point.

The following discussion addresses these debates through detailed analysis of four specific women's engagements with the star. The women were chosen due to the way in which their comments typified the female respondents' most common description of Stallone's appeal, praising his ability to embody both strength *and* sensitivity as a figure.^[4] In addition, these four women were of particular value due to their more detailed elaboration on the nature of this appeal and/or the greater depth of contextual information regarding their everyday lives that they provided. In doing so, they consequently grant us a clearer insight into the way in which women's engagement with such a figure may be produced through, and produce tensions in, the discursive construction of gender and heterosexuality.

The women's comments were extracted from their responses to a qualitative questionnaire sent out around Britain to participants responding to a letter placed in regional newspapers and a range of national magazines (please see Appendix).^[5] A deliberate attempt has been made to reproduce the women's comments in some detail

and without abridgement as part of a desire to form a more open dialogue between those voices within and outside the academy, and offer greater transparency in interpretation. The women's voices are mediated, in part, by the design of the questionnaire and the selection of the comments. Nevertheless, these comments still have a force and direction of their own, which are not wholly reducible to the interventions of the researcher. Such characteristics deserve recognition and discussion, as do the complications and contradictions that emerge from their comments. Whilst my analysis is clearly framed by the 'starting paradigm' (Willis in Ang 1989: 110) outlined above, then, it is also committed to offering conclusions regarding the performance of gender and heterosexuality that are grounded in the fine detail of actual female audiences' reflections upon their relationship to the star.

Theorising Heterosexuality and Gender

Existing attempts to understand the discursive construction of heterosexuality have tended to conceptualise the category in monolithic terms, whilst also oversimplifying its relationship to the construction of gender. Sheila Jeffreys explains that:

Masculinity and femininity, the genders of dominance and submission, are eroticised to create the sexuality of male supremacy which I call heterosexual desire (Jeffreys 1996: 76).

Here, heterosexuality is denied 'any complexity at all: it simply *is* eroticized power' (Jackson 1999:164) and the genders male and female are seen to uniformly embody the power difference upon which heterosexuality rests and patriarchy thrives. This power difference is largely absent from Judith Butler's conception of the 'heterosexual matrix', but the monolithic status of heterosexuality remains as she attempts to expose the 'regulatory ideal' of heterosexuality as 'a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe' (Butler 1990: 139). She argues that:

The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine", where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male and female" (Ibid: 17).

She also adds, importantly, that the coherence produced by this matrix is illusory and unstable due to the fact that 'the naturalistic effects of heterosexual genders are produced by imitative strategies; [and] what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity' (Butler 1991: 21). Nevertheless, as Jackson notes, 'while Butler aims to destabilise the 'regulatory fiction' of gender and the heterosexual ordering of desire it gives rise to, heterosexuality itself is denied the possibility of being anything other than an unexamined norm' (Jackson 1996: 29). Also, as in Jeffreys, the genders 'male' and 'female' are seen to be causally linked to heterosexuality, albeit discursively,

and produced as discrete, oppositional entities through it. The comments of my respondents, however, reveal the complexity of heterosexuality as a discourse, undermining simplistic notions of the way in which power is articulated through it and complicating our understanding of its relationship to notions of gender.

Helen

Helen, a 28 year old from Birmingham^[6], gains pleasure^[7] from Stallone's portrayal of characters who use their strength to protect those that they care for, enjoying 'the contrast between Stallone's muscle-bound body and the tenderness his characters also seem capable of' (Q11 – What is your attitude towards Stallone's body?). Such a contrast carries echoes of the discourses employed by female readers of romantic fiction, as discussed by Janice Radway, with her interviewees displaying a 'tendency to describe the ideal hero in paired terms...with such phrases as "strong but gentle", "masculine but caring", "protective of her and tender"' (Radway 1984: 129-130). For Radway, the appeal of such figures lies in their ability to combine 'fatherly protection' with 'motherly care', as well as offering 'passionate adult love' (Ibid: 149). Helen's desire for the protective figure of Stallone is complicated, however, by the fact that it is she who adopts this role in real life:

Stallone in his films can be very attractive when he is being the protective male. Again, from the *Rocky* films, you get the impression that he would guard his family like a lion. In real life I must point out that I have never gone for this type of man! I am a very strong woman, and if anybody in my family does the protecting, it's me! It's nice to have a bit of fantasy though isn't it? (Q37 – What kind of masculinity do you find to be represented by Stallone?)

Indeed, Helen's enjoyment of Stallone is marked by her identification with the star as well as her desire for him:

If I remember rightly I was at High School during the *Rocky* and *Rambo* periods. I come from a working class family and went to a large comprehensive. I was always a tomboy and I loved the fact that Stallone played characters who were outsiders, treated with disregard, but yet they were exceptional people. It was a strange relationship I had with these characters. I both wanted to be the character, and be the person loved by the character. I wanted to be Rocky, but I also wanted to be his wife! I guess that this could be put down to the lack of strong female roles in film at the time. Now, even Bond girls have brain and Kung Fu skills, back then women were more generally portrayed as the weak feminine type, the whore, or the plain but independent type. Not good role models for impressionable young girls! (Q19 – Could you please give me a short biography of your life since you have been watching Stallone's films)

Helen appears to have felt constrained by the dominant gender definitions that existed at the time she first became interested in Stallone, using the specific example of the limited representation of women in Hollywood films of the period. She clearly feels that such representations did not do justice to the variety of actual women's lives, particularly her own, identifying a strength in herself that was unacknowledged by the crude stereotypes that she was invited to identify with. It appears that it is this strength of character that leads her to categorise herself as a tomboy, and to identify with the characters portrayed by Stallone. Such a term 'generally describes an extended childhood period of female masculinity' (Halberstam 1998: 4) and can be seen to serve to reinforce a binaristic notion of gendered behaviour through its use of language, even as it is used to describe women who show the fallacy of such binarisms. Halberstam also notes how 'tomboyism is punished...when it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence' (Halberstam 1998: 4), and such punishment could be echoed in the poignancy of Helen's identification with the outsider status of Stallone's characters, who were 'treated with disregard' but were, nonetheless, 'exceptional people'.

The fact that Helen desires the strong, protective figure of Stallone as well as identifying with him could be seen as a result of her socialisation into a culture which, as Radway has shown, produces such figures as objects of desire for women.^[8] However, this desire only appears to exist at the level of fantasy and there appears to be no suggestion that she would like such a fantasy to become reality. Indeed, she seems proud of her protective position within the family and is keen to point out that 'in real life...I have never gone for this kind of man'. It could be that Helen's challenging of rigid, binarised notions of gendered behaviour makes it difficult/unacceptable for her to gain pleasure from a strong, protective male figure in everyday life, implicitly choosing men with which she is on a more equal footing. This, however, does not mean that she cannot gain heterosexual pleasure from a protective male figure at all, only that such pleasure must be separated off into the realm of fantasy. Also, whilst it may be 'nice to have a bit of fantasy', there is no suggestion that this fantasy is more pleasurable than her reality. It is, rather, a different kind of pleasure. Helen's actions thus support Ang's argument that:

in the play of fantasy we can adopt positions and 'try out' those positions, without having to worry about their 'reality value'...we are [not] bound to take up these positions and solutions in our relations to our loved ones and friends, our work, our political ideals, and so on' (Ang 1985: 134-5).

In addition, whilst Helen may perhaps be concerned that her heterosexual fantasies are incompatible with more fluid/reciprocal notions of gender, her response to this problem actually reveals the way in which heterosexuality can easily accommodate and, in fact, facilitate, her challenge to oppositional, hierarchical gender definitions. This is due to the diversity of ways in which heterosexuality can be experienced and practised, including its differing, and potentially separate, existence as fantasy and reality. Jackson describes 'experience as what is felt both sensually and emotionally and what is thought, while practice refers to what we do and how we do it' (Jackson 1996: 32). It would appear that

Helen's experience of heterosexuality is diverse, encompassing a range of thoughts and sensations, but that she channels this into a limited range of practices in order to maintain her sense of power as an individual. In doing so, she inverts the gendered power relations proposed by Jeffreys, and weakens the force of the heterosexual matrix as described by Butler. Her responses thus suggest that:

we need a means of understanding how we become gendered and how we become sexual without conflating gender and sexuality, without assuming that particular forms of desire are automatically consequent upon feminine or masculine gender and without reducing complexity of desire to the gender of its object (Ibid: 28).

Lindsay

The responses of Lindsay, a 45 year old from East Sussex, deepen our understanding of the connections between women's everyday lives and the pleasure they may gain from Stallone's portrayal of characters who are strong yet tender, whilst further complicating our understanding of the relationship between heterosexuality and gender:

I think Stallone embodies some fantasy male qualities – he's mostly a man's man and is how many men would like to be and aren't. Let's face it, most men couldn't take endless punishment in the boxing ring, or perform amazing feats of strength on mountain tops or underwater, or be an explosives expert who's always one step ahead of the game. This is not a sexist comment! Most women don't look for that in a man, especially one you might want to make a serious commitment to – but the tough loner who goes through hell and always beats the bad guy/the system/forces of nature is a strong male image widely promoted in film.

But – and when discussing films I sometimes have trouble convincing people of this – Stallone also can show a sensitive side, and although most men would pooh-pooh this or act embarrassed, this is a manly trait – don't knock it guys, it generally appeals to women and therefore it has to be a male thing doesn't it!! I guess I'm particularly thinking about *Rocky* and *The Specialist*, but also about *Demolition Man*, in the scene where he thinks he's going to make love to Lt Huxley and is worried about his breath!

So, to sum up, I think the tough invincible side of Stallone is the fantasy male and the more vulnerable side is the more realistic male. You admire the first from a distance, the second is more accessible and more appealing.

Lastly, you can't forget his amazing physique. The strength and muscle are 100% male. Great stuff! [underlining by respondent] (Q37 – What kind of masculinity do you find to be represented by Stallone?)

It appears that, for Lindsay, it is Stallone's sensitivity, rather than his strength, that really appeals to her. This is because his vulnerability represents a more appealing quality in real life than his heroic exploits. She appears to recognise the problems inherent in a model of masculinity that eulogises the 'loner' as the ultimate 'man's man'. Such a model leaves little room for women. In contrast, Stallone's concern over his breath in the love scene in *Demolition Man* (Marco Brambilla, 1993) shows Stallone to be sensitive and eager to please his lover, and thus grants women some power and respect in emphasising Stallone's vulnerability. Lindsay suggests that the 'invincible side of Stallone' is ultimately a fantasy for men rather than women. It is 'how many men would like to be and aren't' whereas 'most women don't look for that in a man, especially one you might want to make a serious commitment to'. She thus reveals the tensions which may exist between particular constructions of gender and particular conceptions of sexuality.

She acknowledges these contradictions when she states that most men would 'act embarrassed' about admitting sensitivity, but that 'it generally appeals to women and therefore has to be a male thing'. Whilst this comment reinforces the equation of maleness with heterosexuality, it broadens the scope of what attributes constitute heterosexual masculinity, underlining the legitimacy of sensitivity through its desirability to women. Rather than being defined by oppositional, hierarchical characteristics, the nature of gender is here defined through the qualities desired by each sex. As Lindsay shows, these qualities may include those which are commonly associated with the gender of those who are desiring as much as those who are desired. Thus, while the binary of male and female sex remains, and heterosexuality retains its normative position, the characteristics of gender necessary for the functioning of heterosexuality appear fairly malleable. This suggests that the gendered limits we impose upon our identities may come from the wider construction of gender in society, rather than its specific functioning within heterosexuality. The fact that men may be embarrassed by exhibiting sensitivity, despite its potential appeal to women, suggests that they are responding to forces outside of heterosexuality – dominant conceptions of gender actually existing in tension with heterosexuality in this instance. This is not to say that heterosexuality cannot be the conduit for repressive notions of gender. Stallone's physique is also central to his appeal to Lindsay because 'the strength and muscle are 100% male' – her comments here conforming to gendered limits/expectations for the body. However, this is not the only source of her heterosexual pleasure and, as we have seen above, this desire for Stallone's body should not be conflated with a desire for the 'tough invincible side' of his characters. Her delight at those scenes portraying Stallone as a conscientious lover suggest that her pleasure appears to come from the idea of this body being utilised to please her. Like Helen, Lindsay's comments thus serve to fracture any simplistic notion of the power relations at work within heterosexuality as it is experienced and practiced. Nevertheless, despite the more fluid gendered identities that emerge within this context, and an apparent awareness of 'tough invincible' masculinity as a performance, the performative nature of gender itself is still sustained through Lindsay's investment in 'the more realistic male' and the touchstone of a '100% male' physique.

Michelle

Michelle, a 33 year old from Lancashire, also categorises Stallone as a 'man's man' with a 'softer, gentler side' (Q37/35 – What kind of masculinity do you find to be represented by Stallone?), and her interest in the star recalls that of Helen. She shows that whilst her heterosexuality may be articulated through the terms of sexual difference, the qualities she desires in Stallone actually involve a level of sameness. This is due to the fact that she contradicts binarized, oppositional notions of gender through her hobbies and interests – displaying evidence of a lifestyle that is as 'all action' as the Stallone characters she desires:

I'm now 33 years of age. Female. Live in Standish, nr Wigan. Born in St Helens (some 15 miles down road). Living with partner, who I met in college (at Wigan) when I was 19. No children, no desire to have any. Boyfriend doesn't share my passion for Stallone. Like mentioned, discovered him when 13. Watched the first 3 films (*Rocky*) over 30 times. Could recite *Rocky I* word for word inc music. Bought the LP of *Rocky III* music. Collected beer mats and spelt Rocky on my wall in them. Tried to draw the LP cover and also put that on my wall. Watched everything/read all I could about Stallone. Follow St Helens RLFC - like the physical contact (due to liking Rocky and Rambo - all action) and read Horror and Thriller books (Stephen King, Stuart Woods, Michael Slade). Enjoy all types of music - and watch lots of Heavy Metal/Rock groups (Iron Maiden, Queensryche). Work for TNT Newsfast, trained in Building Trade. Also worked in Nightclub and for sandwich delivery service. Feel I'm very Tom Boy Type. Most of my friends boys, especially when young. Don't smoke, drink occasionally. Drive a silver 's' reg Fiesta just recently bought. Go skiing in the winter. Not good at lying around doing nothing - need to be active. Love to read and follow my beloved 'Saints' Rugby team. Have one sister and one brother - both younger. Love competitive team sports (to watch and play). (Q19 – Could you please give me a short biography of your life since you have been watching Stallone's films)

Michelle is another self-confessed 'tomboy', and the detailed account of her interests that she provides allows us to further interrogate the relationship between this term and the pleasure that she gains from the films of Stallone. Michelle's enjoyment of Sylvester

Stallone forms one part of a much wider engagement with what is traditionally perceived as masculine culture - Rugby League, Horror books, and Heavy Metal music, to name the most obvious examples. These are hobbies heavily populated by men, in their production and reception, and she feels comfortable in their presence. She notes that 'most of my friends boys, especially when young'. It seems that her interest in Stallone featured early in the evolution of this sense of her identity. She mentions elsewhere in the questionnaire that 'In 1980 my dad brought home two videos. One was *Indiana Jones* and the other *Rocky I*. I remember thinking I hate boxing but after 20 mins I was hooked' (Q2 – When did you first get interested in Stallone, and how?). Her engagement with the film appears to have triggered a desire for similarly themed cultural products, leading her to seek out sports, books and music that would offer her the same action, energy and excitement of the film. She admits a 'need to be active' and loves to play competitive team sports, and her other hobbies also reflect this fascination with the fast-paced. The fact that men dominate the kinds of hobbies that offer these pleasures can be seen as a continuation of the gendering of sport and leisure in the nineteenth century, and the idea of biologically inferior women that such a gendering was built upon, and helped reinforce (Parker 1996: 127). Her friendships with boys thus appear inevitable due to the ability to share such interests with a like-minded community, and her self-categorisation as a tomboy the logical outcome of this gendering of leisure. However, like Helen, through using this term she reinforces binarised notions of gendered behaviour through her language, even as she challenges such notions through her actions. Indeed, she praises Stallone as a 'man's man', despite the fact that she possesses similar qualities to his characters.

One quality she does not possess, however, is the star's physique. It is this which first attracted her to the star, and it appears that it is Stallone's apparent embodiment of discretely gendered difference through his physique which underscores the relevance to Michelle of the discourses surrounding gender which she employs (however contradictory they may be). Indeed, when asked in the questionnaire whether she would consider emulating the star's physique, Michelle replies 'No – cos I'm a girl!' (Q13 – Have you ever tried to emulate Stallone's physique?). One could suggest that the pleasure she gains from Stallone's physique is due, in part, to the way it reaffirms boundaries between masculine and feminine that are otherwise blurred for Michelle. As such, this serves to remind us of the potential desire for discretely gendered difference within heterosexuality, and the way in which such desire may discursively overshadow the pleasures of sameness which still exist. We also need to bear in mind the power relations which such discourses reproduce. Through these discourses the 'naturalness' of Stallone's muscular physique is reinforced which could, in turn, serve to legitimise 'male power and domination' due to the symbolic value of muscles as a sign of strength (Dyer 1982: 71). Thus, whilst Lindsay's earlier comments warn us from simplistically equating the pleasure gained from Stallone's physique with women's eroticisation of their subordination, we should recognise that the notion of discretely gendered bodies that both Michelle and Lindsay draw upon may serve to disempower women in a wider sense.

The value that Michelle attaches to Stallone's 'softer, gentler side' is also complexly positioned by discourses which construct our understanding of heterosexuality and gender. Stallone's tender treatment of Adrian in *Rocky* forms a liberating appeal to Michelle, drawing, as it appears to do so, upon some of the tensions outlined above. This is specifically embodied in Rocky's seduction of Adrian in his apartment:

When I watch *Rocky I* – the bit where Rocky invites Adrian to his room, overcoming her shyness and seeing the person she was behind the glasses, woolly hat and overcoat. Although I had plenty of friends at school – I never felt very attractive and watching that I felt that out there somewhere was the man for me. Now I'm older I feel much sexier and more attractive and feel that Rocky made me feel I wasn't an ugly duckling and all people are beautiful for other reasons to other people – not just to be physically attractive. (Q23 – Have you ever felt a connection between Stallone's films and your own life?)

Such an account echoes Helen's reflections on her 'outsider' status. As noted earlier, this sense of exclusion appears to stem from the stigma attached to girls who do not conform to narrow definitions of gendered behaviour and appearance. Michelle's comments reveal the way that heterosexuality can reinforce these repressive notions of gender, through those discourses which label such girls as unattractive. However, the self-confidence Michelle gained from her identification with Adrian reveals the way in which heterosexuality may be reconfigured to accommodate more diverse conceptions of gender. Adrian's relationship with Rocky gave Michelle faith that she would not have to change herself to find a man, but that she would eventually be found by the one who is right for her – one who can look beyond the culturally constructed markers of what is 'physically attractive'. This faith appears to have been borne out by the fact that she is able to juggle her stereotypically 'masculine' hobbies and interests with a boyfriend of 14 years. However, we do need to recognise the fact that this still positions Michelle's self-esteem as dependent on male approval. Whilst men may face similar pressures within heterosexuality - their self-esteem greatly reliant on their ability to attract women – it is arguable whether they face these pressures to the same degree as women. An awareness of such nuances can thus help us to better understand the complex gender and power relations that can occur within heterosexuality.

Haley

Haley's engagement with the figure of a strong yet sensitive Stallone carries a particular inflection that appears to be formed from the integral role that family plays in her life. The 33 year old from London notes of the star that:

I find him to be a very caring but masculine person. He comes across as the sort of person to be a good father and good husband in all of his films. He also comes

across as the sort of person you can depend on to protect you.(Q37 – What kind of masculinity do you find to be represented by Stallone?)

If we look at Haley's description of her life during the period she has been watching Stallone's films, we can gain a clearer understanding of the value of this reading to her:

I was in secondary school when I first saw *Rocky*. And I went through my teens too. I had a baby just before I was 19 and then met my future husband who took me to see *Rocky IV* as he liked Stallone too. I then had another 3 girls in 86, 87 and 92. I was married in 89. I then got divorced from my husband in 93 and began seeing my best friend in 94 and then had another girl in 95. All my children like Stallone films too. They love *Rocky* and recently I bought them *Daylight*. They also love *Lock Up, Tango & Cash* and *Cliffhanger*'. My boyfriend now also likes Stallone. The only jobs I have had are Sales rep jobs. I lived in Tottenham when I first saw *Rocky* but then moved to South London and have lived all around there since. I am now going to become a nan this year. (Q19 – Could you please give me a short biography of your life since you have been watching Stallone's films)

With five children and two long-term relationships, family is clearly something that dominates Haley's life, inflecting her appraisal of Stallone as 'the sort of person to be a good father and good husband' in his films. Through his ability to be 'caring but masculine' the star appears to offer the fantasy of emotional protection for Haley and her family as well as the more traditionally male forms of physical and economic protection. The failure of her previous marriage seems to have made her acutely aware of the inability of some men to offer these qualities. Stallone, in contrast, can be seen to embody all of these qualities in the character of Rocky. Within the first film he offers Adrian physical protection from the bullying ways of her brother Paulie, whilst also offering her enough financial support to enable her to leave her demeaning job. Rocky's tender courtship of Adrian also underlines the emotional support he can offer her, and this subsequently characterises their relationship (e.g. Rocky reading to Adrian every day through her coma in *Rocky II*). Rocky extends this emotional support to his children. Indeed, when asked about the relevance of any of the films, Haley writes of 'trying to convince his son that he cares like I do with my children' (Q23 – Have you ever felt a connection between Stallone's films and your own life?). This seems to specifically refer to the *Rocky* films, as Rocky develops a particularly close bond with his son. For example, in *Rocky IV* (Sylvester Stallone, 1985) Rocky has a tender heart-to-heart with his son before he leaves for Russia, telling him that 'You're the best boy in the world. Daddy loves you'. It is important, however, that such emotional support is only desired *in*

addition to Stallone's more 'masculine' side. Indeed, through linguistically splitting off Stallone's caring side from his masculine side Haley implies that it is not masculine to be caring, despite her desire for this quality in a man. This serves to reinforce those gendered boundaries which disempower women through marking them primarily as carers whilst granting men greater physical and economic mobility. Her desire for the protective figure symbolised by Stallone thus reveals the way in which heterosexuality can reproduce discretely gendered identities which do appear to be organised around differences of power that favour men.

Nevertheless, Haley is keen to communicate Stallone's value as a role model to her existing partner ('My boyfriend *now* also likes Stallone'), as well as her children ('All my children like Stallone films too'). He has become part of the family himself. Indeed, her relationship with Stallone has outlasted any of her other relationships. Stallone appears to be the one man 'you can depend on'. What began as a teenage fascination has now grown in relevance as Haley and Stallone have both aged. She mentions elsewhere in the questionnaire that 'I feel he is getting better with age' (Q2 – When did you first get interested in Stallone, and how?). Developments in Haley's life have intensified the bond between herself and the star, forming an opinion of Stallone's career that appears in stark contrast to his largely declining box-office and his reception in popular media.^[9] Haley's pleasure in Stallone thus appears to have been important in providing emotional reassurance across periods when she was not always getting the amount that she needed, even if it is characterised by the positioning of a man as a necessity for a happy family. In addition, if Helen's comments showed the way in which her desire for the strong, protective Stallone could exist just as a fantasy, detached from her everyday experience of gender and heterosexuality, Haley's comments reveals a greater conflation between this fantasy and her everyday life. Her responses thus warn us from overstating the potential gap between women's heterosexual fantasies and their everyday relationships, and from dismissing the power relationships embedded within such fantasies as without implication.

Conclusion

Through consideration of actual female audiences' engagements with Stallone we can see how 'popular cinema affirms gendered identities at the same time as it mobilises identifications and desires which undermine the stability of such categories' (Tasker 1993: 5). More significantly, we can also see the way in which heterosexuality as a discourse can work to affirm such identities whilst also accommodating potentially transgressive identifications and desires. Jeffrey's and Butler's monolithic conceptions of heterosexuality and their overly deterministic accounts of the relationships between sexuality and gender are undermined by the complexity of the respondents' comments. However, the respondents' comments do still reveal the way in which discourses surrounding sexuality and gender may serve to reinforce each other in such a way as to

limit women's experiences whilst fostering unequal power relations between men and women. We thus need to 'recognise the force of cultural and ideological constructions of sexuality and the constraints of social structure' without denying 'human agency and therefore the possibility of challenging and resisting dominant constructions of sexuality' (Jackson 1996: 28). Indeed, the complex relationships between fantasy and the everyday that emerge from the women's comments display the agency women may have over their individual subjectivities, whilst also showing the way in which social structure can weigh upon this agency. The more complex notion of heterosexuality that emerges from these women's responses consequently complicates our understanding of its ability to retain its normative position in society. It would appear that whilst the sexual difference of male and female is essential to the functioning of heterosexuality, the 'expressive attributes' (Butler 1990: 19) of these sexes are clearly open for a certain amount of reinterpretation at an interpersonal level. As such, Butler's notion that gender subversion may serve to destabilise the normality of heterosexuality proves to be somewhat overstated. Indeed, she appears to acknowledge this in her preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1999: xiv). If anything, the pleasures these women gain from Stallone appear to thrive on the contradictions of gender that emerge from their gender subversions and those of Stallone. However, the fact that these subversions are still policed through the respondents' use of language, and the fact that the notion of gender itself remains unchallenged, reminds us of the power of those discourses producing gendered difference (of which heterosexuality can form one part). As such, an acknowledgment of the complex ways in which gender and heterosexuality are articulated should not lead to the abandonment of discussions of power, only more refined analysis of its operation.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on Sylvester Stallone and British Film Audiences.

Thank you very much for requesting a questionnaire.

I am conducting research at the University of Sussex on the popularity of Sylvester Stallone with the British public over the course of his career. As a result, I am interested in hearing your opinions.

The questions that follow are an attempt to investigate Stallone's popularity from a number of perspectives. An important element of my research is a full consideration of the way in which an enjoyment of Stallone's films fits into your everyday life, and how your enjoyment of his films may have changed (or not) over the period of his career. As a result, I am as interested in your life as much as Stallone's career. Also, whilst all the questions are important, some may not be applicable to you personally, so do not feel under pressure to answer them all - only answer where you feel comfortable. Please write your responses on the plain paper attached to the questionnaire, placing the number of the question you have answered next to each response. If you need more space please feel free to attach more paper, or write on the back of the questionnaire. If there is anything you would like to add which you do not feel is covered by the questions, please write it down.

Ian Huffer

Stallone as Star.

1. What is it you like, or did like, about Stallone? What in particular makes his films enjoyable?

2. When did you first get interested in Stallone, and how?

3. Has your enjoyment of his films changed over time? If so, or if not, why? Are you less interested in Stallone now than you used to be? If so, why?

4. Has Stallone always been your favourite film star or has he been replaced - if so, by whom and why? Was Stallone ever your favourite film star? Do you have a favourite

star?

5. What other film stars do you like? What do other stars offer that Stallone doesn't?

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6. How important are film stars to your enjoyment of a film? Is the type of film more important than the star? Is it a combination of both star and type of film?

Stallone's Films.

7. What are your favourite Stallone films, and why? What is it you like about them?

8. What are your least favourite Stallone films, and why? What is it you don't like about them?

9. Is your enjoyment of Stallone dependent on him being in a particular type of film? If so, why?

10. Do you like Stallone as one type of character, or playing different characters? Why?

11. What is your attitude to Stallone's body? How important is it to your enjoyment of his films? Are there some films (or moments in his films) in which you admire his appearance/physique more than others? Are there some films (or moments in his films) in which you don't like his appearance/physique?

12. Have you ever tried to emulate Stallone's physique? If so, how and why?

13. Please rank the Rocky films in order of preference, with your favourite first e.g. Rocky II, Rocky I, Rocky IV, Rocky V, Rocky III, and explain why.

14. Please rank the Rambo films in order of preference, with your favourite first, and explain why.

15. Would you like to see a new Rocky or Rambo film? Do you think there could be one? What would you want it to be like?

16. Do you think films have changed much over the last 25 years? Do you think they have got better, worse or stayed the same - why?

17. Do you have a favourite era for films?

18. Do you think Stallone is as popular with film audiences as he was in the 1980s? If so, or if not, why?

About You.

19. I would be grateful if you could give me a short biography of your life since you have been watching Stallone's films - what kinds of jobs you have had, whether you were at school, where you were living, whether you were married, whether you had a family etc...

20. What television programmes do you like, and why?

21. What music do you like, and why?

22. What hobbies or interests do you have (other than film)? Why do you enjoy them?

23. Could you also consider whether if, at any point in your life, you felt a connection between Stallone's films and your own life (not necessarily a literal connection but, perhaps, an emotional connection).

Experiencing Stallone.

24. How do you find out about Stallone and his films? Through friends or through the media? If through the media, are there any particular magazines, newspapers, television programmes, Internet sites you look at?

25. How much does the publicity/advertising for a new Stallone film affect your decision to go and see it?

26. How much does the publicity/advertising for a new Stallone film shape your expectations of it?

27. Do/did you watch most of Stallone's films at the cinema, on video, on DVD or on the television? Why is this? Which do you prefer and why?

28. Do/did you watch most of Stallone's films with friends or on your own? Which do you prefer and why? Does your enjoyment of/involvement with Stallone's films change in these different situations?

29. Do/did you watch many of Stallone's films with your family? Which films? Any family members in particular?

30. Do you have a video collection of Stallone's films? Why did you want to keep the films? Where are they in your house?

31. When did you, or your family, first get a video recorder? Why did you get one?

32. Do you go to the cinema more often now than you used to?

33. Do you enjoy going to the cinema more now, or in the past?

34. Do you think a trip to the cinema is different now - if so, why?

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35. Do/did you have any merchandise relating to Stallone's films? What was this e.g. Survivor records? Why did you purchase it, or ask for it? Why do/did you enjoy owning it?

36. How much do you know about Stallone's personal life/personal opinions? How did you find out this information? Has this knowledge ever affected your enjoyment of/involvement with his films in any way at any time (positively or negatively)?

Stallone and Society.

37. What kind of masculinity do you find to be represented by Stallone? Has this changed over time? Is it different in different films? What aspects of his masculinity do you enjoy, which aspects don't you enjoy?

38. What are your opinions on America? Have these opinions changed over time? What do you enjoy about the representation of America in Stallone's films? Is there anything you don't enjoy about the representation of America in Stallone's films?

39. Are you aware of, or can you remember, any political messages in Stallone's films? Are/were these important to you?

40. Do you think the coverage of/attitude towards Stallone and his films shown by the media in general is fair or unfair? Why?

Responses

Name:

Address (optional):

Sex: Male []

Female []

Age:

Ethnicity: Afro-Caribbean []

Asian []

White European []

Other (please specify) []

Sexuality:

If my research was published would you be prepared to be quoted?

by first name []

by full name []

anonymously []

not at all []

[1] See Tasker (1993: 109-131) and (1993b: 231-232), and Holmlund (1993) for further discussion of these debates.

[2] For example, the romance and consequent marriage between Rocky and Adrian is pivotal to the narrative within the first two films, with the poster for the first film consisting of a silhouetted image of Rocky in his shorts and boxing gloves holding hands with Adrian, accompanied by the title of the film in bold capitals and the tag line 'His whole life was a million-to-one shot'. In addition, Stallone featured regularly in television guides of the 1980s and 90s, in terms that appeared to assume a female readership: 'Playing *Rocky* and *Rambo* may have made Sylvester Stallone (with wife Brigitte, left) rich beyond belief, but it's had its heartaches, he tells Lesley Salisbury...Admire him, too, in our star portrait on pages 52 and 53 (Anon, *TV Times*, vol 125, no. 48, 22 November 1986, p.3)

[3] Jackie Stacey's groundbreaking work on female film audiences (1994) is notable for its sole focus upon women's identification with, and desire for, female stars.

[4] 9 out of 19 female respondents described Stallone through these terms. Of the remaining 10, 7 described the star as a more straightforward tough guy/hero, and 3 focused on his ability to combine heroism and humour.

[5] I received approximately 100 requests. 51 questionnaires were returned, consisting of 32 men and 19 women.

[6] Respondents were asked if they preferred to be quoted anonymously, by first name by full name, or not at all.

[7] Whilst this paper attempts to examine the politics of pleasure, questions still remain over its precise constitution. See Patricia MacCormack at www.cinestatic.com/transmat/MacCormack/PPD1-1.htm for a brief overview of the philosophy of pleasure and Barker and Brooks for some consideration of the varied cognitive and sensory experiences that may constitute it (1998: 133-151)

[8] See also Helen Taylor (1989: 109-139) for a discussion of female audiences' investment in the protective but caring figure of Rhett Butler in the book and film of *Gone With The Wind*.

[9] Stallone's box-office from <http://www.the-movie-times.com/thrdir/actors/actorProfiles.mv?sstallone> [last accessed 5 October 2007]. The review of *Driven* (Renny Harlin, 2001) by Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* is typical of the reception of Stallone's recent films in the media: 'The big question is: can Mr Stallone at 55 years old, cut it as a speed king? You've got to be kidding. With his massive ungainly bulk, and that great leathery face with its permanent slack-mouthed sneer, Sly doesn't look like he can walk 100 yards without veering off sideways and ending upside down in a ditch' (in *G2*, October 5th 2001, p. 15). The star's latest Rocky instalment, *Rocky Balboa* (2006), has, however, prompted a slight critical re-evaluation, with Ian Freer in *Empire*, for example, praising the star's 'innate dignity and hangdog charm' ('Rocky Balboa' in *Empire*, Issue 212, Feb 2007, p.48).

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