Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies

Volume 3 | Issue 1 Article 7

5-30-2012

Marketing Muscles and the Public's Positive Response

Holly Claeys
University of Western Ontario

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Claeys, Holly (2012) "Marketing Muscles and the Public's Positive Response," *Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol3/iss1/7

Marketing Muscles and the Public's Positive Response

Keywords
First Blood, Rambo, Sylvester Stallone, Vietnam, war cinema, PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, marketing

Cover Page Footnote
This paper was originally written for an undergraduate American cinema course taught by Dr. Joe Wlodarz at the University of Western Ontario in 2012.

This article is available in Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol3/iss1/7

Marketing Muscles and the Public's Positive Response

by Holly Claeys

Throughout the sixties America saw an increase in cynical public opinion concerning the country's dubious involvement in Vietnam. Much of this criticism arose from the fact that the war in Vietnam was one of the first wars to be televised – bringing images of guerilla warfare into the homes of the American public. For years after the war, tensions remained as citizens tried to make sense of the mess that was Vietnam. This friction played out in the realm of popular media as well. Hollywood approached the war and surrounding issues in a variety of different ways, from *The Green Berets* (1968) to *Winter Soldier* (1972). However, there remained an "unease about these films because of the uncertainty of what exactly 'Vietnam' meant… and Hollywood was waiting for such consensus to emerge" (Wimmer 109). Then entered the Reagan Administration, declaring that "Vietnam was in truth a noble cause" (qtd. in Wimmer 110). The eighties saw an increase of right-winged interpretations of the war that aimed to re-write history in America's favour and to "respond to recent feminist challenges to patriarchal structures" (Jeffords 252). These ideals were personified through hard-bodied male heroes such as Rambo. The marketing of Ted Kotcheff's film *First Blood* (1982), like the majority of action films, focuses on the corporeality of an individual (white) male character that constructs a dominant reading of the film favouring spectacle over narrative. The marketing exploits Stallone's extra-textual depictions of 'real' masculinity that further emphasizes the male body as a spectacle, but also works to ascribe a sort of believability to film. Although much of this focus on physicality is carried over into the reception of the film—praising Stallone for his physical acting—there also surfaced a discourse that extended beyond the busy *surface* of Rambo. With the shift in government control and the emergence of post-traumatic stress disorder as a recognized physiological affliction during this period, the rhetoric surrounding Vietnam began to change, casting a new light on the veteran image. Popular and critical response to the film thus expands beyond the mere bodily presence of Rambo focused on by the marketing to interrogate the representation of Rambo as a victim of PTSD and the cultural significance this affliction assumed during the Reagan years.

At the time of *First Blood*'s release, Stallone's hard-bodied image had already been established through prior box office hits. Much of this image came from Stallone's success as Rocky Balboa, in the *Rocky* film saga (1976-2006). By 1982, three of the Rocky films had already been released, one only months prior to *First Blood.* Up until this point, Stallone was largely pigeonholed as the character Rocky, which began to define his off-screen persona. In October of '82, the same month of *First Blood's* release, the line between Stallone's on- and off-screen persona became even more blurred as he took on the role of boxing promoter for the ESPN network, while fictional character 'Rocky' became the honorary vice-chairman. Through Stallone's real-life embodiment of their hyper-masculine characters, the films in which

he starred became "stories about *real* tests of masculinity" rather than "on-screen *performances* of masculinity" (Ervo and Johansson 147). Films starring Stallone were privileged as authentic portrayals of strength and heroism, which was exploited as a lucrative marketing tool (and had a large impact on how audience's responded to his films).

For the most part, promotions for the film *First Blood* simply used this pre-existing physical presence of Stallone (on- and off-screen) in the new context of Rambo. This is shown in the 1982 advertisement that reads, "STALLONE: This time he's fighting for his life" (Orion; see Appendix). The use of this tagline works to market the film through cross-textual references in two specific ways. First, by using the name Stallone rather than Rambo, audiences are directed to read the film not as a single, isolated text, but rather in relation to other film texts and the extra-textual activities of the actor – all of which are heavily associated with masculinity and the over-presence of the body. Secondly, the subheading 'this time he's fighting for his life' would make little sense for viewers without prior knowledge of the star's film history. Being the first film of the *Rambo* series (1982-2008), it seems peculiar to state that "this time" Rambo will be fighting for his life, since we have not yet been acquainted with the character nor with any other fights in which he has participated. Thus, this statement begs the question: "this time" as opposed to what other time? In relation to the rest of the Rambo series this tagline may make sense, since in *First Blood* Rambo is fighting for survival, whereas in later films he is fighting to free American POWs (*Rambo: First Blood Part II* [1985]), fighting alongside the Mujahideen forces in Soviet-era Afghanistan (*Rambo III* [1988]), and, finally, fighting to rescue missionaries from the military regime of the Burmese SPDC (*Rambo* [2008]). However, since this is the beginning of the Rambo saga, the subheading may be taken as a direct reference to the fighting in the Rocky series. Therefore, through the exploitation of audience familiarity with other Stallone films, *First Blood* is marketed as an action film, *this time* in the context of some type of guerrilla warfare (as suggested by the visuals) rather than in a boxing ring.

The marketing of *First Blood* as an isolated text follows similar ideas of masculinity and action, while also communicating other ideas such as Rambo as a social outcast and as a white male colonial figure. First, the focus on the individual casts Rambo as a loner. Stallone is featured alone in the woods on the movie poster, and the film's trailer tells audiences that he must work in solitude to overcome the injustices with which he is faced. Throughout film history, the combination of masculine individualism and corporeality has been used to portray socially out-casted groups. That is to say, "the over-presence of the body frequently marks the representations of marginalized social groups," such as African Americans and homosexuals (Ervo and Johansson 141). Audiences can infer from this that Rambo's rugged individualism is not a choice, but a result of being socially alienated for reasons not yet known. Despite his place as an outsider, the 1982 film poster also works to reassure audiences that normative white masculinity is not in danger.

Rambo's tanned skin and clothing suggest that he is no stranger to guerrilla warfare. These physical indications, in addition to his muscular body that dominates the woodland backdrop, signify Rambo's apparent mastery of the environment. Also, "the built body in a colonial adventure is a formula that speaks to the need for affirmation of the white male body without the loss of legitimacy that is risked by its exposure" (Dyer 263).

Equally as important as what the advertisements may touch on, is what they leave out. The 1982 promotional trailers and posters for *First Blood* focus heavily on the individual and his physical presence rather than on his psyche, despite the fact that Rambo's psychological trauma acts as the catalyst for the entire story. Overall, the marketing may imply that Rambo "has such a busy surface one inevitably suspects there's nothing much below" (Ervo and Johansson 148).

Since *First Blood* was sold as an action movie, it follows that critics judged the film accordingly. In an article from the Hartford Courant, Malcolm Johnson sums up the majority of reviews when he writes that the film "wisely allowed its star to say very little" (B4). Reviewers agree that the film's dialogue is insignificant, but the "truly exciting action scenes of Stallone" (Siskel C3) are more than enough to compensate. One review went as far as to say that *First Blood* "is probably the best use yet of Stallone's outsized, outrageous presence" (Benson H12). The fact that the film received favourable reviews despite the lack of complexity "indicates a degree of acceptance in society for Reagan administration values" (Katzman 21). More specifically, the public seemed to embrace "a complex anti-feminist restructuring of the image and position of the white American male" (Jeffords 529), exemplified by the hyper-masculinity and physicality of John Rambo. The action star helped to pacify the crisis of masculinity faced by Americans as men attempted to "hold on to their social power across new circumstance" (Ervo and Johansson 155).

Although only briefly, the popular and critical reviews of *First Blood* mention that Rambo's violent spree was set off by Vietnam flashbacks. Less clear, however, is whether Rambo's physical reaction to a physiological trauma made him a victim or a cold-hearted sociopath. In order to understand this question it is necessary to understand the changes in rhetoric surrounding Vietnam that were taking place in the 1980s.

Theorist Ferdinand de Saussure suggests that it is the structure of language that conditions our experiences as individuals because of the ideas it allows and disallows. This is important in understanding the reception of *First Blood* because it was released during a time when the idea of post-traumatic stress disorder was first entering popular consciousness. Before this time, the psychological plight faced by returning veterans could not be discussed because the concept/term had not yet been fully articulated. After the emergence of the idea of PTSD in the 70s, however, portrayals of veterans could be explored and analyzed in a new light. Throughout the

80s, Hollywood highly exploited the idea of veterans suffering from the effects of a physiological trauma, which helped turn the immoral Vietnam Veteran figure into one that warranted sympathy. Changing American attitudes were exemplified in "a 1979 Lou Harris survey that asked people to rate their feelings towards different groups of people on a scale of one to ten… Veterans who served in Vietnam during the war received an average of 9.8" (Jeffords 533). Higher yet was American POWs, scoring straight tens across the board. Veterans were no longer categorized as 'baby killers,' and, "if anything, negative attitudes toward the war were associated with higher levels of sympathy toward these veterans" (533). This is particularly significant because turning the Veteran into a victim moves discussion away from questions regarding the morality of America's involvement in the war. After all, "to be a victim means never having to say you're sorry" (Studlar and Desser 11) – even after single handedly destroying an entire town. The fact that Rambo was framed as a victim made the excess of violence enjoyable, and even praiseworthy.

For the few reviewers that looked deeper than the glamorization of violence in Hollywood's representations of war, a different discussion surfaced. Both Lorraine Holden and D.E Love found the true victims of *First Blood* to be the real-life veterans, who suffered the ramifications of war that Hollywood was exploiting. D.E Love argues that the saturation of Rambo-like images in the media is fallacious because "not all of us [veterans] came back with the desire to kill anymore." Holden agrees that *First Blood* and similar films could be considered a disservice to veterans, but also expressed concern for adolescents exposed to these images. In the article "What Have American People Learned About War's Effects?" Holden asks, "I wonder how many adolescents in that audience will associate what they saw in Stallone's character with the true, and real effects of ALL war".

Overall, it seems that although *First Blood* explores notions of post-traumatic stress disorder in Vietnam veterans, the marketing and reception of the film proves that the glamorization of violence and action, with its ties to the star figure of Stallone, overshadows any serious endeavor into Rambo's character and his post-war state of mind. The victimization of Rambo is examined just enough to provide justification for the mayhem he creates, while also capitalizing on the newly emerging sympathy for the Vietnam veteran in the American public mindset.

Appendix

Figure 1 - Orion Pictures.

Works Cited

Benson, Sheila. "Life After Vietnam." *The Los Angeles Times* 22, Oct 1982: H1, H12.

Crook, David. "Ring Around 'Rocky' Stallone." *The Los Angeles Times* 9 Oct 1982: G1.

Dyer, Richard. "The White Man's Muscles." *The Masculinity Studies Reader*. Ed. Rachel Adams and David Savran. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002. 262-73.

Ervo, Soren and Thomas Johansson. *Bending Bodies: Mounding Masculinities*. England: Ashgate, 2003.

Holden, Lorraine P. "What have American people learned about war's effects?" *The Hartford Courant* 20 Jan, 1983: E2.

Jeffords, Susan. "Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male." *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988): 520-541.

Johnson, Malcolm. "First Blood – Taut, Engrossing." *The Hartford Courant* 27 Oct 1982: B4.

Katzman, Jason. "From Outcast to Cliché: How Film Spaced, Warped and Developed the Image of the Vietnam Veteran." *Journal of American Culture* 16.1 (1993): 7-24.

Love, D.E. "Exploiting Vets." Editorial. *The Los Angeles Times* 31 Oct, 1982: S87.

Maslin, Janet. "The Screen: First Blood." *The New York Times.* 22 Oct, 1982: C6.

Orion Pictures. Advertisement for *First Blood* (1982). Artwork: Drew Struzan. 1982.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. "Course in Literary Theory." ed. by Michael Ryan and Julie Rivkin. Blackwell Publishers. 2001.

Siskel, Gene. "First Blood is quart low in the believability count". *Chicago Tribune.* 22 Oct1982: C3.

Studlar, Gaylyn and David Desser. "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: *Rambo*'s Rewriting of the Vietnam War." *Film Quarterly.* Vol. 42 (1988): 1-25.

Wimmer, Adi. "Recyclings of the Frontier Myth in Vietnam War Films of the 1980s." *Constructing the Eighties: Versions of an American Decade*. Ed. Walter Grunzweig, et al. Ammerbuch: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992. 109-40.

Films Cited

First Blood. Dir. Ted Kotcheff. Orion Pictures, 1982.

Green Berets, The. Dir. John Wayne. Warner Brothers, 1968.

Winter Soldier. Dir. Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Milliarium Zero, 1972.