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Mindful violence?

Responses to the Rambo series' shifting aesthetic of aggression

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Rambo (2008) saw Stallone once again adopting a headband in the name of heroism, although critics found little cause to celebrate the return of this iconic character. The 1980s boom period of blockbuster action cinema has been commonly conceived as 'the age of Rambo', and this testifies to the genre-defining status of the series (Tasker, 2004, 92–3). One result is that Rambo has become synonymous with aggression: indeed, Krenna notes that Stallone seems to have been singled out amongst his peers for his performances of violence.[1] This reputation stems from the amount of violence the second and third Rambo films contained: Rambo 'took out' armed platoons single-handedly. Yet, he did so with little explicit bloodshed. Even though Stallone has rejected the notion that the Rambo films are violent per se – stating that First Blood: Part II 'was a war movie, it was not like gratuitous violence'[2] – the latest sequel is markedly concerned with showing the effects of gunfire. This focus has led some reviewers to label Rambo the most explicitly violent film they have ever seen (Byrnes, 2008; Channell, 2008; Collin, 2008; Humphries, 2008; Law, 2008; McCoy, 2008; Tookey, 2008). The critical vilification of Rambo – which primarily highlights the film's violence – is the focus of my study. While academic responses to the franchise typically centre on its political/racial depictions or its portrayal of masculinity (see, for example, Jeffords, 1994, 78–89; Kellner, 2004, 72–8; Nishimie, 2005, 263; Rowe, 1989; Rutherford, 1992), I will not dwell on those topics here. Instead, my aim is to engage with shifts in the series' aesthetic of violence, and how reviewers have responded to those changes. I argue that violence itself is integral to our understanding of the series, and thus its varying portrayals of violence warrant more detailed study than they have received to date.

In order to identify trends in criticism surrounding these films, I will engage with reviews from English language newspapers (primarily US, UK, and Australian sources) accessed via the Lexis-library.[3] Having read every available review of the four Rambo films, I found that the responses to each film were surprisingly consistent, and distinct patterns emerged. While the vast majority of First Blood (Ted Kotcheff, 1982) reviews are concerned with the film being 'Stallone's first non-Rocky hit' (V. Scott,

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1982), assessments of the next two sequels are generally preoccupied with the political connotations of the violence; the films' 'rabid patriotism' and alleged anti-Soviet preoccupations (Hinson, 1988). Critiques of Rambo primarily comment on its violent content.

While Jeffords observes that 1980s action sequels offer 'more explosions, more killings, and more outright violence' than their predecessors (the Rambo films offering 'the most extravagant shift' in quantity [Jeffords, 1994, 155]), tone and explicitness also need to be accounted for. I will therefore begin by examining the way reviewers measure the series' increased violence both qualitatively and quantitatively. This will allow me to demonstrate how the aesthetic of violence has changed across the franchise. I will then contemplate why so many reviewers were offended by Rambo's depictions of violence. Here I will consider how critics frequently vilify potential audience pleasure, decry the realism of the violence, and condemn Stallone for juxtaposing fictional violence with authentic news footage of the Burmese civil war. This leads me to explore the ways in which Stallone's intentions have been implicated as part of the 'problem' with Rambo. I will then discuss the emphasis the film places on the consequences and aftermath of violence, drawing comparisons with the cartoonish style of violence employed elsewhere in the series.

'Have you not seen enough death?': shifts in Rambo's violence

The popular critical view is that the Rambo films have become 'dumber, nastier, louder and bloodier' since their inception in 1982 (Byrnes, 2008). However, it is not apparent from adverbial comparisons such as 'bloodier' whether this grievance is based on a qualitative or quantitative assessment. As a starting point for my discussion of the series' uses of violence, I will investigate that problem in detail.

While I will consider other forms of violence later in this section, since the term 'body count' has become synonymous with Rambo's violence, for the time being I will concentrate on murder as an indicative act of violence. The increasing body count of each film (see Table 1) has been used by reviewers as a measure of the series' diminishing worth. A similar rhetoric of decline has also been attached to the qualitative nature of that violence: the franchise's apparent worsening has been tied into its increasingly explicit depictions of homicide. In both qualitative and quantitative senses then, this discourse of decline has been predicated on the Rambo movies' portrayals of violence.

While Louvre and Walsh (1988, 56) contend that the amount of violence is the cause of the series' critical disparagement, Morrell observes that even First Blood has gained a 'reputation' for being

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ultraviolent despite its low body count.[4] This association has been constructed partially in retrospect: the emphasis on the amount of violence was consolidated by a quantitative increase in homicide across the next two sequels, and this has enhanced First Blood's violent reputation. Indeed, responses to the sequels have increasingly posited that violence has come to constitute the content of the Rambo series.[5] Reviewers used this pre-established interest in quantity to assess Rambo, making consistent reference to the frequency with which deaths occur on screen (its kill rate of 2.59 per minute [Canberra Times, 2008b; Sunday Business Post, 2008; Webster, 2008]). Hence, many of the scathing comments regarding the quantity of violence are based on proportion; the claim, for instance, that 'ultra-violence' constitutes '90 per cent of the film' (The People, 2008). This is interpreted as an intentional ploy to mask 'the film'slack of obvious substance' (Monk, 2008b).[6] A number of other critics concur with this sentiment (Collin, 2008; Jenkins, 2008; Loder, MTV.com, January 25, 2008; Uhles, 2008; Vranjes, 2008). The emphasis on body count is therefore built-in to the critical narrative surrounding the series, even if it does not tell us a great deal about what that violence means.

	Total villains killed by Rambo	**Total villains killed by other Rambo's accomplices**	**Total number of villains killed**	**Total number of heroes/ innocents killed**	**Total number of people killed**
First Blood	1	0	1	0	1
First Blood: Part II	58	10	68	1	69
Rambo III	78	17	95	37	132
Rambo	83	40	123	113	236
Totals	220	67	287	151	438

Figure 1: The series' body count, tabulated from Mueller, 2008.

As Table 1 demonstrates, there is a clear increase in all categories of murder across the franchise. Notably, the total quantity of villains killed is nearly double that of the heroes/innocents. Moreover, Rambo himself is the central agent of homicide. In total, he slaughters 220 villains: 71 more than the number of heroes/innocents killed across the series. Both of these trends suggest that the series' morality is easy to comprehend: good tends to win out over evil since Rambo, our hero, eliminates 'the enemy'. Yet it is also worth noting that in Rambo, John kills only five more villains than he does in Rambo III, while the total death tally rises by over 100, and the number of hero/innocent

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casualties more than triples. In that sense, the fourth film may have been particularly vilified by the press as their expectation that homicide would be contextually justified was confounded by the proportion of innocent fatalities. Quantitatively speaking, Rambo does not depict a clear victory of 'good' over 'evil'.

However, we also need to account for how that violence is represented. While First Blood has been deemed 'brutal' (J. Scott, 1982), it is worth noting that its violence is not portrayed in a bloody fashion. It is instead constituted by threat and non-explicit injury. Accordingly, critical responses to First Blood were not overly hostile. Reviewers rarely complained about its violent content, and sometimes even defended its uses of violence (see, for example, Maslin, 1982).

Despite including a greater quantity of deaths than its predecessor, explosions dominate First Blood: Part II: balls of fire consume the victims, with the result that the viewer cannot see their suffering. Where bullet impact is depicted, victims quickly evacuate the shot: they fall over or jump out of frame, their injury is covered by a red spray as they fall, or the camera cuts away. In each case, the point of impact is emphasized, while the consequences are avoided. In all cases, injuries are not graphically detailed. Suffering, pained expressions, and screams are not dwelt upon. The quantitative increase in murder from the first film to the second was tolerated by the critics of the period, perhaps because of the absence of consequential suffering. However, it was not until the release of Rambo III that reviewers began to praise the spectacle of the previous film: that is, First Blood: Part II's 'photogenic' way with violence (The Economist, 1988; Brode 1988).

In the rare instance of Rambo III being extolled, it was similarly on the grounds of its aesthetic and 'spectacle'.[7] Yet the majority of reviewers panned Rambo III, many focusing on its increase in graphic violence.[8] One trait of Rambo III unacknowledged by reviewers is the escalation in the number of innocent casualties, such as the instance of a mother and baby being consumed by an explosion during a raid on an Afghan village. This incident gains its impact aesthetically; she is silenced mid-scream by the explosion, which powerfully indicates her terror and subsequent absence. The presence of children in the village who need rescuing by adults connotes the innocence of village populace: they are not soldiers, simply bystanders caught in the crossfire.

The overall aesthetic approach of Rambo III is reminiscent of First Blood: Part II: the filmmakers refrain from dwelling on injuries, suffering, or cadavers during the moment of violence. The editing supports this ethos, again cutting after explosions land so as to de-emphasize each individual death. Yet, the village sequence closes with some suggestion of emotional toll: Rambo covers his face, and

surveys the landscape of dead bodies (though blood and visceral damage are not displayed). Unlike its predecessor, greater emphasis is placed on screams as victims are shot in Rambo III, and on four occasions we briefly see the facial reactions of gunshot victims. These subtle shifts may explain some of the negativity surrounding responses to Rambo III's violence following First Blood: Part II's positive reviews.

The pejorative responses to Rambo follow this pattern. Critics employ an array of colourful adjectives to describe the fourth film's violent spectacle.[9] Collin's (2008) assertion that each frame of the film 'resembles a zero-gravity butcher's window' is indicative of the near hysterical response to Rambo's violent aesthetic. While reviewers continue to assert that the series 'relies' on violence – a critical narrative established in reviews of Rambo III – they typically overlook the aesthetic differences between the third and fourth films. In Rambo, body damage – the viscera of bone, blood, and missing limbs – is explicitly detailed. The shift is made obvious by comparing parallel instances in the two films. For example, during John's attempt to rescue Trautman in Rambo III, John grabs a guard around the neck: the camera moves above them, obscuring the detail of the violence that ensues, then moves to frame Rambo after-the-fact from the torso up, excluding the guard's corpse from the shot. The viewer is thus distanced from the act. When rescuing Sarah in Rambo, John similarly sneaks up behind an enemy guard and graphically tears out his trachea. In this instance, the camera remains in front of the villain, not only showing the injury in process but also aligning the viewer with Sarah's vantage point. Refusing to shy away from bloody injury and positioning the camera in an identificatory position serves to heighten the emotional impact of the sequence, augmenting the apparent violence.

Moreover, while the village massacre scene in Rambo III avoids dwelling on injury, the equivalent village raid in Rambo details victimization explicitly. Unlike the gunshots and explosions from afar that characterize First Blood: Part II and Rambo III, in Rambo the village inhabitants are subject to more intimate attacks: they are bayoneted, kicked, and held down. Where guns are used, they tend to be fired at close range: both victims and shooters are tightly framed, giving an impression of increased proximity compared with previous films. Slow motion is also utilized to emphasize the suffering of innocent victims.

One other significant change is John's absence during Rambo's village sequence. Where in Rambo III the raid motivated John (the conflict became 'his war'), the parallel sequence in Rambo serves to heighten only our anger and upset. The dead bodies of the villains are not dwelt on after-the-fact, while the victims' corpses haunt the landscape, being strung up or left to rot. Except for the rapid

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slaughter of pirates by quick-fire shots and some brief flashbacks in John's nightmare, all violence committed in the first half of the film is aimed at innocent civilians and is committed by the villains. In fact, the majority of villains are only dispatched in the final 20 minutes of the film, meaning the film's violence appears to be aimed primarily at the virtuous.

A further qualitative concern stems from the specific behaviours depicted. Unlike the previous three films, Rambo features sexual assaults and dwells on the murder of minors. While Stallone claims to have intentionally highlighted these forms of victimization in the name of authenticity,[10] concentrating on women and children as victims is politically dubious. Depicting attacks upon women and children to create emotional affect fosters the stereotype that men are active, in contrast to those 'weaker' parties who are endangered or rescued by men. Yet, none of the reviews I encountered raised such concerns: they suggest these moments are offensive, but the affront is perceived as qualitative in nature. That is, the reviewers cited examples of women and children being injured and killed as evidence of the 'level' of violence presented in Rambo (Kalamazoo Gazette, 2008; Tookey, 2008; Total Film, 2008; Uhlich, UGO Online n.d.; The York Dispatch, 2008). This indicates that violence, rather than victimization per se, is the problem for these critics. As viewers are more likely to find violence enacted against vulnerable or innocent victims more upsetting than violence aimed at those who 'deserve' their punishment, Rambo's uses of rape and torture – which are exclusively directed towards the 'good' – amplifies the overall impression that its violence is morally abhorrent.

Thus, the cumulative feeling of increased violence is partially contingent on who is victimized by whom, even if critics do not raise that issue. Reviews of First Blood, for example, clearly side with John as victim of police harassment, referring to the cops (coded villains) as 'sadistic' (Kempley, 1982; Ansen, 1982; Maslin, 1982). This key term is used much more ambiguously in reviews of Rambo , where 'the violence' itself is referred to as being sadistic (Smith, 2008; Russell, BBC Online, February 22, 2008; Vranjes, 2008). Employing negative adjectives to describe images is problematic because that judgment is based on estimations of intent, and presumptions about the reception of those images. Violent images cannot possess intentional properties such as sadism, so the perpetrators of violence must be the sadists. What these reviewers overlook then is that Rambo's violence is quantitatively balanced: an equal proportion of the violence is aimed at those characters coded innocent and those coded villainous. Where the previous films relied on Rambo's violence to delimit the boundaries of 'good' and 'evil', the proportion of violence committed by John himself (compared to his accomplices and enemies) significantly decreases in Rambo. These reviewers thus seek to resolve

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moral ambiguity by deferring the trait of sadism onto 'violence', instead of attending to the source of their discomfort.

Critical crisis? Vilification as response to violence

While the series' aesthetic of violence has changed both in qualitative and quantitative terms, the corresponding value judgment – that, for reviewers, an increase in the explicitness and amount of violence makes parts three and four of the franchise 'worse' – is unjustified. It is therefore worth considering the principles underpinning those responses to Rambo in greater detail.

One tension I wish to investigate is the assessment of Rambo's violence in a way that seeks to continue critical narratives established around its predecessors. In comparison to Rambo , the previous sequels might seem tame, yet it is important to observe how they were received in the 1980s context. As Byrnes (2008) notes, '[t]owards the end of Rambo: First Blood Part II ... [the body of an enemy general] exploded into a million bits': this 'kind of "pink mist" shot' was 'fairly uncommon' in the 1980s, 'even in heavily violent movies'. Rambo, in contrast, features this type of shot throughout, and that shift trips up a number of reviewers, especially those suggesting that Rambo 'resembles [the] previous sequels' (McCoy, 2008).[11] The notion that Rambo is akin to its predecessors contradicts the desire to frame Rambo as 'the most violent, horrific and cynical' film in the series (Baker, 2008). This discrepancy, I argue, may be the source of much of the critical discomfort surrounding Rambo. It indicates that reviewers went into the film expecting a particular aesthetic approach to violence, and were subsequently unprepared for how visceral the film was. This, I contend, led to the consensus that Rambo's violence is a 'problem'.[12]

One prominent strategy reviewers use to negotiate this paradox is to point not only to the images, but also to the audience. Rambo is frequently referred to as 'Torture Porn' by critics (Law, 2008; Total Film, 2008; Adams, 2008; Collin, 2008; Vranjes, 2008; Wirt, n.d.),[13] the intention being to discredit viewer pleasure. Alongside references to 'the audience's blood lust' (Sadovski, Empire Online n.d., my emphasis), sexualized terminology such as 'orgy'is also employed to describe the violence (Webster, 2008; Wirt, n.d.; Monk, 2008a; Jones, Chicago Reader Online, n.d.; Express and Echo, 2008; Hodgson, 2008). These phrases exaggerate viewer gratification (connoting sexual thrill at witnessing evisceration), and hyperbolize the obscenity of the images. Elsewhere, one reviewer uses similar rhetoric to dismiss the film as 'pornographically stupid' (Sunday Business Post, 2008).

This technique of labelling the audience 'dumb' or the films themselves as 'boring' (Lowing, 1988),[14] again follows a critical precedent established in reviews of the previous Rambo films. Tasker (2004, 107) notes that insulting viewer intelligence was a common strategy employed in culturally situating the series, stemming from a critical inability to explain the popularity of the first three films. However, such criticisms appear to have been amplified to accompany Rambo's increased violence. Macklin (2008) in particular seeks to directly insult viewers that take pleasure in the film: 'Is gore glorious? Is brutality orgasmic? Is spurting blood the fountain of fun? If so, Rambo is 4 U.' The '4 U' makes no attempt to hide Macklin's perception that he is intellectually superior to viewers who enjoy Rambo. He continues by proposing that '[t]here is an audience that goes to the movies simply for ... mere visceral experiences', suggesting that Rambo's audience is incapable of thought, in contrast to his presumably 'higher', cerebral experience of cinema.[15] Drake also seeks to distance himself from an audience who enjoy Rambo, to the extent that his tone is patently accusatory: 'There is an audience for the cartoonish mayhem Rambo is selling, and you know who you are' (Drake, 2008, my emphasis).

This sense of culpability extends to Stallone himself. His intent is central to the critical disdain surrounding Rambo, and its politics in particular. The film uses Burma – an environment characterized by real-life atrocity and bloodshed – as a backdrop for Rambo's fictional violence. In doing so, Rambo perpetuates the series' trend of situating the US soldier against 'foreign' and politically contentious surroundings, which has been a continuing source of critical discomfort. First Blood was accused of 'exploitation' inasmuch as some reviewers interpreted the film as using the reality of Vietnam to rationalize 'gratuitous, sensationalistic eruptions of violence' (Arnold, 1982). This critical narrative continued in the responses to First Blood: Part II (also set in Vietnam) and Rambo III (set in Afghanistan). Byrnes' (2008) review of Rambo – in which he accuses Stallone of 'cheapen[ing]' the situation in Burma – is a direct continuation of his 1988 review of Rambo III, in which he criticizes Stallone's desire to 'show that war is a disgusting act', on the grounds that Stallone 'has probably spilled more fake blood ... than anyone in film history'.

While Stallone has declared that his intention was to use Rambo III to educate the public about real-life atrocity (Liper, 1988), he has more recently stood accused of using political settings as scenery for one-dimensional moral fantasies that celebrate American heroism (Total Film, 2008; The Boston Herald, 2008). One of the assumptions made in these reviews is that Stallone himself is oblivious to the political implications of his directorial choices. For instance, Channell (2008) expresses concern over Stallone's hypocrisy: that is, 'deliver[ing] a message of nonviolence' by creating 'one of the most

violent action films of recent memory'. Most of these accusations are thus founded on the same rhetoric of 'stupidity' that is assigned to Rambo fans.

Further problems arise from Stallone's decision to include news footage of the Burmese situation in the opening of Rambo. Again, this choice is indicative of the shift between Rambo III and Rambo. Macdonald (the director of Rambo III) is reported to have considered 'using actual documentary footage shot in Afghanistan' in Rambo III, a notion which Stallone rejected in 1988, fearing that the audience would 'freak out if the real atrocities were shown in the movie' (Wedel, 1988). His volte-face 20 years later is evident in his declaration that Rambo is 'supposed to be disturbing. I want people to be upset' (Baker, 2008).[16] Judging by the critical response, he achieved this aim.

Stallone stands accused of offering an incoherent political vision on the basis that his 'thumbnail sketch of the situation in Burma' does not become an integrated part of the film's message (Canberra Times, 2008a). The combination of real-life footage and realistic looking fictional violence underscores much of the disdain raised over Rambo, some reviewers declaring that Stallone lacks the artistic ability to convincingly combine the two modes. 17 But these accusations do not stem from technical misadventure: none of the reviews I encountered suggested that the CGI effects were unconvincing. In fact, the film's incredibly realistic look is at the heart of what makes Rambo authentic and disturbing for some critics (Channell, 2008; Frank, 2008; Collin, 2008).

The amalgamation of genuine atrocity footage and realistic gore effects results in instances of critical confusion that are worth briefly outlining. The reviewer for Kalamazoo Gazette (2008) makes no distinction between the real and the fictional, for instance: 'Rambo ... incorporate[s] actual news footage of atrocities against the Karen people – including close-ups of mutilated corpses and butchered bodies – and ... close-ups of children being bayoneted or having their heads crushed beneath soldiers' boots.' The 'close-ups' referred to are from the fictional parts of the film, but the writer does not distinguish these incidents from the authentic news footage. The reviewer for The People (2008) suggested that Rambo is a form of '[e]scapist ... nightmarish propaganda', yet the term 'escapist' is somewhat problematic given Rambo's direct attempts to forge connections between fiction and reality. For this reviewer, Rambo is a form of fantasy distraction, and that contradicts Stallone's didactic intention. Other reviewers had precisely the opposite reaction, suggesting that the 'brutal' reality footage opening the film made the fictional violence that followed 'impossible' to 'enjoy' (Antagony & Ecstasy blog post, 2008).

These responses are indicative of a critical desire to separate the reality of the opening footage and the fantasy of the film, despite the fact that the opening clearly impacts on Rambo's fictional narrative. Point-of-entry into a text is vital, as it allows us to apprehend how the narrative constructs and justifies hostile action (Cerulo, 1998, 40–3). In the previous films, the point-of-entry is Rambo himself. In the First Blood films, he is the earliest character presented. Despite Trautman being the first character depicted in Rambo III, he (like the audience) is looking for John, and the first line of dialogue is the name 'Rambo' (as it is in the second film). Since our point-of-entry in Rambo is the reality of Burmese civil war, the subsequent fictional violence is situated against a broader moral context rather than being a motivating factor for John. Placing emphasis on the innocent casualties of war in this way heightens our empathic response to their suffering. Thus, the first fictional sequence – in which soldiers force scared civilians to run across a landmine covered rice-paddy – underscores the enemy's cruelty.

However, this is not to defend Stallone's use of reality footage per se, or his decision to use the Rambo character (with its accompanying cultural baggage) to pass commentary on current affairs. Stallone encourages the audience to sympathize with innocent casualties by contrasting them with over-simplified, one-dimensional villains: the Burmese military are just inherently 'evil'. This is certainly how the previous Rambo films operate, yet if Stallone sought to root Rambo in reality, his approach to this conflict should have dealt with the moral complexities.

'Hell've a time for humor, John': cartoonishness and consequences of violence

Further problems stem from Stallone's account of the series' representational shifts. Stallone repeatedly uses the terms 'truthful', 'authentic', and 'plausible' in his DVD commentary for Rambo, but makes no explicit reference to his prior relationship with unrealistic depictions of violence. For instance, he comments that he 'didn't want to have ... the ubiquitous machine gun that never runs out of bullets' (Antagony & Ecstasy blog post, 2008), yet neglects how his previous iconic Rambo films are responsible for the ubiquity of such sequences. As he continues, 'I've always wondered why ... usually you see bullets, "oh it's a nick, it's a hit", it knocks them down. But when you're hit with a .50 caliber weapon ... it vaporizes the body' (Antagony & Ecstasy blog post, 2008), Stallone again fails to explicitly account for what the shift in Rambo's violent aesthetic might mean.

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What Stallone does underscore is Rambo's investment in the consequences of violence. Hollywood narratives typically centralize causal relations to drive the plot, and this ethos is perfectly embodied by gunplay, which distils the cause– effect dynamic (Jacobs, 1996, 163). In the first three films, violence is mainly inflicted on landscape rather than bodies (leading Siskel and Ebert to complain about the 'destruction of private property' in First Blood).[18] This is still violence, yet it lacks the emotional weight carried by bodily destruction. Rambo amends that pattern by illustrating the messy truths of bloodshed.

In these films, the overall tone is contingent on their representations of bodies. The 1980s Rambo films focus on Stallone's physique, and his muscularity signifies his invulnerability. Thus, Rambo is 'shot at without significant consequence' 74 times in the first three movies (Mueller, 2008). In parallel to Stallone's idealized body, the exploding locales seem to be equally impervious or subject to miraculous healing. In the second and third films then, the consequences of violence are de-emphasized. Jeffords (1994,24–7) contends thatthis is partofthe 'hardbody' ethos of 1980s action cinema; the hero attains 'mastery by … refusing to be "messy" or "confusing", by having hard edges, determinate lines of action, and clear boundaries for their own decision making' (see also Ayers, 2008; Tasker, 2004).

The earlier Rambo films therefore assign vulnerability to the 'soft' bodies of victims/enemies. Yet, the violence attributed to those 'soft' bodies is tonally understated, the 'hardest' violence being reserved for John's hard body. Consequently, audiences typically find the moments in which Rambo sews up a bullet gash in First Blood and cauterizes his torso wound in Rambo III the most uncomfortable to watch (Jeffords, 1994, 49; Lichtenfeld, 2007, 66). This is because the hero is the narrative's focal point, while other victims of violence carry less emotional weight. Rambo rewrites that position. The victim's bodies are exposed to the hardest violence. They are clearly still 'soft' (they literally fall apart), and the contrast between hard violence and soft bodies is dwelt upon. The previously assured invincibility of Rambo's body is thus called into question, as he no longer endures the hardest violence. This change is in keeping with the ageing of Stallone's body, which is clearly less sinewy in 2008 than it was in 1988. His physical vulnerability signals the decline of his heroic power, and without that invulnerable centre, victims are left exposed to hard violence.

The graphic bloodshed of Rambo thereby retracts the cartoonish or comic-book war fantasy presented in FirstBlood: Part II (Rutherford, 1992, 186; Bredice, 1986). The second and third films are archetypal 'muscle epics' in that respect, 'court[ing] a high-style cartoony excess', by portraying violence without accounting for the 'real impact of pain' (Andrews 1996, 145–6). This 'cartoony' aesthetic came under fire in reviews of Rambo III in particular. For instance, Pulleine (1988)

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complains that 'Rambo's indestructibility is akin to that of a cartoon cat, which after being blown to smithereens in one shot can magically reassemble itself for the next ... with apparently no after-effects'. Similar sentiments are prevalent in reviews of Rambo III (Barr, 1988; Partridge, 1988; Lowing, 1988; Cullen 1988; Elliott, 1988; Mietkiewicz, 1988; Brode 1988), and this comparison to cartoon violence highlights that Rambo III neglects the consequences of battle.

Despite the emphasis Rambo places on graphic bloodshed, this critical narrative has continued. Rambo has also been described as cartoon-like (Gritten, 2008; Russell, BBC Online, February 22, 2008; Byrnes, 2008), even if some critics have 'updated' their frame of reference by using terminology such as 'videogame' (Smith, 2008; Jones, Chicago Reader Online, n.d.) and 'Xbox generation' (Sadovski, Empire Online n.d.) to make the same point. This line of criticism is contradicted by Rambo's retraction of the series' previous comic-book approach: referring to Rambo as cartoonish ignores the significance of the film's aesthetic and tonal shifts.

A further comic-book trope that changes across the series is John's wisecracking (a trademark of the 1 980s action hero), which reached its pinnacle in Rambo III. Here it was employed seemingly to counterbalance the film's increased body count. The wisecrack connotes the hero's control, especially in instances of peril. 19 In comparison, Rambo might give an overall impression of being more violent because John is grave to the point of misanthropic cynicism; for instance, after killing the river pirates early on in Rambo, John shouts that 'they'd have raped [Sarah] 50 times'. This outburst serves to amplify, not relieve the tension, signalling John's lack of control (as opposed to the self-assured wisecrack), thus highlighting his – and subsequently their – vulnerability.

Rambo therefore seeks to demonstrate the effect a life of violence has had upon John himself. During a flashback sequence which establishes his character, his hatred of humankind ('fuck the world') is tied into a discourse of culpability. He shoulders personal responsibility for his life of homicide ('you killed for yourself, not for your country'), and his memories of inflicting bloodshed are juxtaposed with violence imposed upon him. The montage combines torture sequences from the previous films with the 'fantasy' of Trautman executing John (the footage originally intended to close First Blood). It may be the case that '[k]illin's as easy as breathing' when necessary for survival, but Rambo also asserts that there is nothing 'easy' about living with the consequences of murder. This augments the general sense of retraction offered by Rambo, drawing the violence of the previous films (which was 'easy') into question.

Ultimately Rambo's narrative context supports violence on a moral level inasmuch as the leader of the Burmese Junta 'deserves' to die, and Rambo is clearly coded as a hero, no matter how disturbed. Yet, dwelling as it does on the dead and the maimed, the film hardly proposes that violence is a solution. Brutality haunts and defines the individual even if one walks away from it (as Rambo does). The narrative arc that spans the series – which begins with the threat of violence in First Blood, then offers two sequels that perform battle without dwelling on the negative outcomes – closes by exploring the ramifications of violence. While intended as a pejorative term, Loder's (MTV.com, January 25,2008) description of Rambo as 'slaughter-centric' is thus apposite to convey the central importance of violence here.

Conclusion

The Rambo series presents a continuing story, and so reviewers are expected to judge each film as part of that developing context. However, the prevailing pattern is that reviewers failed to acknowledge that Rambo could offer anything other than repetition. From the reviewers' uses of adjectives we may ascertain that they were offended or shocked by the film, and this perhaps led to a general unwillingness to engage with Rambo's content in detail. However, their offence is rooted in a broader issue, which helps to explain why the fourth film clearly upset so many reviewers: Rambo did not comfortably fit the critical narrative established around the 1980s Rambo films. Part of the reason Rambo never could fit is that the coherence of that critical narrative was an illusion in the first instance. The earlier entries in the series differ in a number of ways, but it appears that the 20-year hiatus between Rambo III and Rambo led reviewers to over-emphasize the aesthetic similarities of the 1980s Rambo films. Where differences were recognized, they were tied into the apparent 'quality' of the films: the first movie was generally taken seriously, the second typically perceived as a fun action romp, and Rambo III was commonly disparaged on the basis of its political stance and high body count. These shifts are intimately intertwined with how these films portray violent acts, and to what ends.

Rambo's violence was destined to be a critical issue then, and Stallone's decisions – to amplify the realism; to dwell on consequence; to depict more intimate forms of violence; to include footage of genuine atrocity – appear to have exacerbated the problem. However, because these elements did not fit the pre-established critical narrative, this led to a series of frustrated responses in which reviewers sought to disparage the quality of the film, to insult the filmmaker, or to vilify viewer pleasure. A number of the negative responses to Rambo's on-screen violence then are really

concerned with what is happening off screen: converging on the question of Stallone's 'right' to use the plight of the Karen in a commercial context, and his inability to alter their political situation by representing it (particularly via a character with such a problematic cultural legacy). Yet, part of the disorientation Rambo's violence offers – its impact and power – arises precisely from the character's history, and what the series was expected to deliver in terms of 'cartoon' violence. That the film unsettled many reviewers testifies to its affecting nature.

We may conclude that it is difficult to remain indifferent to graphic depictions of violence, since violence is emotionally provocative. That being the case, the footage of real-life atrocity that opens Rambo carries with it a certain irony. The plight of Burma's citizens has probably been the subject of less passionate public discussion for Anglo-American journalists than Rambo itself has. The critical response to Rambo highlights a willingness to vehemently react to fiction, while real violence occurring 'elsewhere' in the world is ignored. Although Stallone has been accused of lacking 'conscience' for including footage of 'real-life genocide' in his film (Webster, 2008), critical passivity in the face of genuine suffering is, I would argue, far more politically dubious and horrifying than the content of Rambo itself.

Notes

1. 'We Get to Win this Time' featurette on the Sony Pictures 2008 DVD release of First Blood: Part II.

2. Ibid.

3. Those reviews constituted only by plot synopses were discarded, as were those reviews that replicated the same information and phrasing verbatim: in these cases, the newspaper with the broadest distribution has been consulted. I did not otherwise make value distinctions between the sources based on their distribution reach: reactions to each film remained consistent in any case. Note that when quoting I have opted for citations that summate the critical pattern most concisely, even if it is not taken from the most broadly distributed news source.

4. Morrell's commentary for the Sony Pictures 2008 DVD release of First Blood. This is confirmed by Kempley's (1982) review of First Blood that describes the film as 'non-stop action and violence'. It is perhaps worth noting that Morrell's original vision of Rambo was imbued with this quantitative

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sensibility, and that this was intended to be translated from book to film; 'in the original script, [Rambo] was a homicidal psychopath. He killed everybody' (Chase, 1982).

5. Jeffords (1994, 84) argues that Rambo III consists 'almost entirely' of 'combat scenes of various kinds'. Having been credited as 'the most violent film ever made' by the Guinness Book of World Records (Drake, 2008), quantity is clearly part of the cultural iconography of Rambo III, and subsequently Rambo. Of the critical reviews of Rambo III, a number point to the quantity of violent acts as if they are a measure of the film's worth. The accompanying use of descriptors such as 'filled', 'crammed', and 'packed' with violence, and an insistence on detailing the film's length in comparison with the number of acts of violence (Trott, 1988), indicate that frequency or 'scale' as one reviewer puts it (James, 1988) is a central focus for complaint.

6. As Pangonis (2008) pejoratively states, '[i]f the body count of an action film were directly proportional to its quality, Rambo would be the film of the year'.

7. Praise is offered for Rambo III's 'dazzling explosions' (Burke, 1988), and its 'action showdown', which Elliott (1988) argues 'is one of the most strikingly filmed violence ballets ever filmed'.

8. For example, it is described as 'horrendous ... graphic ... brutal stuff' (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, 1988). Hinson (1988) offers similar commentary.

9. The film is thus described as 'gruesome' (The People, 2008; Turkish Daily News 2008); 'grisly' (The Sun, 2008); 'gruelling' (Macklin, 2008); 'astonishingly graphic' (Loder, MTV.com, January 25,2008); 'hysterically gory' (The York Dispatch, 2008); 'Brutal ... barbaric' (Adams, 2008); 'bloody, shocking and bloody shocking' (Total Film, 2008); 'reprehensible ... totally unnecessary' (Humphries, 2008); 'nauseating' (The York Dispatch, 2008); 'breathtakingly nasty' (The People, 2008); 'sickening, almost degenerate' (Turkish Daily News 2008); 'repulsive and ridiculous' (Joyce, 2008). In each case these terms are accompanied by detailed descriptions of violent acts such as 'limb-severing and skull-bashing' (Loder, MTV.com, January 25, 2008), 'bodies being atomized' (Turkish Daily News 2008), 'throats being clawed open . . . arrows penetrating skulls' (Kalamazoo Gazette, 2008), and 'grenades turning people into an abstraction of limbs' (Sunday Business Post, 2008). The consensus is that Rambo is 'a mess of graphic cruelty' (Macklin, 2008).

10. Stallone's commentary on the Sony Pictures 2008 DVD release of Rambo.

11. Indeed, one British tabloid suggested that faced with Rambo's revival, 'it is just as if the previous

20 years of cinema never happened' (The Sun, 2008). As an example of this tension, Loder's (MTV.com, January 25, 2008) assertion that the fourth film 'quickly descends into the familiar Rambo world of endless annihilation' fails to adequately account for how this world has changed, and is contradicted by his subsequent remark that '[e]ven in a cinematic age as murderous as our own, the movie is exceptionally violent'.

12. While for some, quantity is marked as a fulfilment of expectation (one reviewer stating that the bloodshed occurs with 'satisfying regularity' (Antagony & Ecstasy blog post, 2008), others frame the quantitative violence of Rambo as indicative of escalating aggression across the series (McCoy, 2008). This of course may be read precisely as a promise that the film 'delivers' for audience members who are invested in the genre.

13. The same connotations apply to the terms 'gore porn' (Total Film, 2008), 'death porn', and 'blood porn' (Byrnes, 2008), all of which are used to describe Rambo.

14. The terms 'dull' (The Sunday Independent 2008), 'dreary' (Sunday Business Post, 2008), and 'unimaginative' (Adams, 2008) are used elsewhere to the same ends.

15. Similarly problematic is Pangonis' (2008) dismissal – 'the movie does provide some kicks for sadists and 8-year-olds' – and Tookey's (2008) 'observation' that 'Rambo can safely be recommended to people who hate intelligence and love exploding body parts.'

16. Indeed, Stallone's comments regarding the impact of sound on 'the parasympathetic and the sympathetic nervous system[s]' in the commentary for the Sony Pictures 2008 DVD release of Rambo demonstrates an awareness of the effect violence would have on the audience.

17. The combination is pejoratively termed as 'grafting' (Hodgson, 2008) and 'attaching' (Byrnes, 2008).

18. Morrell's commentary for the Sony Pictures 2008 DVD release of First Blood.

19. On the role of wisecracking and perceptions of violence in the action film, see King (2000) and Ayers (2008, 56).

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