

Male Identity and Homosexual Invisibility in Van Damme's Movies

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Masculinity, as a cultural construction, has left its signifying tracks exposed for all to see.

(Nakayama, 1994: 171)

Social images are typically constructed in relation to the other, that which is different from the dominating group. The media disseminate these images, which thus offer a useful site for exploring forms of difference at play in the construction of identity. Hollywood in particular dramatizes this process of signification through which race, gender, and sexuality—mainly but not exclusively—take form in the social space. In this paper, I analyze some action movies against the backdrop of critical tensions in identity politics surrounding sexuality. As I explore the construction of white masculinity, I raise questions about how the homosexual identity, and consequently homoeroticism, is made invisible in U.S. popular culture.

Attitudes toward homoeroticism are changing in the film industry, but “it remains one of the greatest ironies that while many prominent players operating in the shadow of the Hollywood sign are closeted gays—including the heads of at least two major studios, and production vice-presidents at two others—the industry shuns gay themes, gay characters, and gay actors” (Ryan 1992: 59). In a homophobic society like the American—but not only it—where movies mirror it and inform its perception of itself, gay roles, when there are any, “generally reinforce negative stereotypes: flamboyantly lisping hairdressers (*Birds On A Wire*), transvestite serial killers (*The Silence Of The Lambs*), lesbian assassins ([...] *Basic Instinct*)” (Ryan 1992: 59). Invariably the gay world is presented as sick, degrading, and ritualistic as in *Cruising*, or as a grotesque caricature of heterosexual relationships in *The Birdcage*.

One Hollywood product, however, displays scene after scene of homoerotic content that seem to go unnoticed by the audience and censors alike: the action movies. In such movies, male-acting and -looking characters declare their sexual intentions to similar male characters and nobody in the audience so much as blinks in surprise. While in other kinds of film this behavior would stir boos and whistles from the audience, in movies where manly characteristics are at a premium, this is considered socially acceptable. Behind this apparent paradox in action movies there seems to lie a politics of homophobia that makes their gay content invisible. We may propose with moralists that it is a pervert's scheme to make kids grow up gay, or like weary observers of the fast-growing

gay market, we could dismiss it all as “a cynical sales ploy” (Crysell, 1992). There is more to it, though: action movies provide characters—and the audience—with the social space where to recenter their white, heterosexual masculine identities at the cost of suppressing alternative forms of sexuality.

Historical Perceptions of Same-Sex Desire

Historically, the view of homosexuals has changed from accepted to outlawed invisibility to willing visibility—in political terms, gay men were part of society, then were banned, and eventually returned to assert their rights. Up to a point in time and in various Western Societies, male-male desire was considered an integral part of the sexual make-up not only of the average citizen but also—and mainly—of warriors and soldiers. Examples range from Plutarch’s description of the sacred Theban squad composed exclusively of lovers to Frederick the Great’s saying, “If you want a sex life, go to the soldiers’ barracks,” in the 18th century. Masculinity and same-sex desire were not exclusive terms in the accepted sexual framework.

The next century saw the creation of the term “homosexual” that defines, by contrast, “heterosexual.” David M. Halperin (1989: 8-9) gives the following account of this sexual paradigm shift:

Homosexuality and heterosexuality, as we currently understand them, are modern, Western, bourgeois productions. Nothing resembling them can be found in classical antiquity.... In London and Paris, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there appear ... social gathering places for persons of the same sex with the same socially deviant attitudes to sex and gender who wish to socialize and to have sex with one another.... This phenomenon contributes to the formation of the great nineteenth-century experience of “sexual inversion,” or sex-role reversal, in which some forms of sexual deviance are interpreted as, or conflated with, gender deviance. The emergence of homosexuality out of inversion, the formation of a sexual orientation independent of relative degrees of masculinity and femininity, takes place during the latter part of the nineteenth century and comes into its own only in the twentieth.

As early as classical antiquity, the ban was not on same-sex love but on unmanly behavior, that is, cowardly acts unbecoming a man. Effeminate gays still exist but seem to have been upstaged by male-looking and -acting gays on the one hand and by drag queens on the other. Not to mention that many straight men are now in touch with their feminine side and looking less masculine than the previous generation. A reversal in the horizon of sexual expectations seems to be taking place

and the United States have become a nation obsessed with finding out who's bedding whom ... of the same sex (Kamp 1996).

“I don't know if I wanna fight you or fuck you”

A culturally accepted practice may be at play in the viewing of action movies, that of males admiring other males' courage and skill, or, on a more sensual/sexual level, other males' bodies. Homoeroticism is flagrant in many Hollywood action movies, and those by Jean-Claude Van Damme provide a good example. In most of them, there is always an opportunity for Van Damme to strut his stuff, to have other men comment on his body, on the nasty things they'd like to do to it (sometimes they actually do), and to find ways of displaying his naked torso.

In his early movies, Van Damme appears in a series of nude scenes that would make his the most famous buttocks outside porn movies. In *Bloodsport* (1987), for instance, without any plausible reason, he coyly drops his underpants so that the woman lying with him—and the audience—can see his cheeks. Jim McClellan (1992: 44) notes that *AWOL* (1991, a.k.a. *Lionheart* or *Wrong Bet*) is “[p]ossibly Jean-Claude's most overtly camp film—check all the sweaty manual labour, the skimpy cycling shorts, and the shots of him wiggling his way down the street.” Sex is barely under control in this movie where every boy and girl around wants his ass. Same-sex desire gets vocal as the bullying black sailor tells Van Damme: “Get your ass down below,” and “I want you down stocking my boilers, boy.” But one fighter best describes the politics of homoeroticism in Van Damme's movies: “I don't know if I wanna fight you or fuck you.” And, yes, there is a nude scene as Van Damme heads for the shower.¹

In the 90s Van Damme's career gathered momentum, and the exposure of his body reached a maximum in *Universal Soldier*. His first movie of the decade was *Death Warrant* (1990); here the homoerotics of *AWOL* continues: a variety of sweaty sadistic prison guards pursues him, strips him naked, and beats him up. As expected in a prison, inmates want sexual favors from the “fish,” the newly arrived prisoner. *Universal Soldier* (1992) offers the longest shot of Van Damme's

¹ I am aware that in *Bloodsport*, *Kickboxer* (1989), and *Double Impact* (1991), other issues are at stake. To use Nakayama's words (1994: 164), Jean-Claude as “a white male typically enters Asian or Asian-American social space and emerges victorious from whatever conflict is at hand.”

naked body viewed from behind. In *Nowhere to Run* (1993), he plays an escaped con who comes to the aid of a widow in distress and her two kids. After a lake bath, he comes out naked and is watched by the widow's children. The boy later comments to his mum that Van Damme has a big penis. So much for children's shyness in front of perfect strangers.

With *Street Fighter* (1994), Van Damme finally moves from R-rated to PG-13 territory in acknowledgment of his young fans. That does not mean, however, that homoerotics are kept in the closet. Quite the contrary. This is pure eye-candy, a fun movie that was based on a video game and yet incorporates so many gay references that you wonder how it got its new rating. Homosexual references appear as soon as the action begins. A woman journalist asks about Van Damme: "He just don't like women, does he?" Homosexual aesthetics appear just as quickly, with kickboxers exposing their pecs and staging fights to the sound of *Carmen's* "L'Amour est un oiseau," the aria Carmen sings to tease her lover.

Sexual innuendoes and jokes abound in the dialogue: one character is imprisoned and asks another for help, "Give a little hand here," to get the answer "We've been in prison for only two hours. Maybe next month." Such a request suggests a proposal for masturbation. Notice that the respondent refuses but in a month's time, who knows? Another character comments to a seminude guy: "Nice uniform." When Guile (Van Damme) and Bison (Raul Julia) have their showdown, Van Damme exclaims, "Your ass is six months overdue. And it is mine." He also asks, "Are you man enough to fight me?" Following the logic in *AWOL*, which equates fight with fuck, this translates, "Are you man enough to fuck me?"

The Allied Nations are the thinly disguised United Nations and serve the purpose of criticizing diplomacy. Soldiers are the ones who know what to do, while diplomats are always ready to surrender to terrorists. Diplomacy is a game for sissies, ineffectual, afraid of risking their lives, and very ready to deliver the country to the hands of bullying criminals. Soldiers follow the motto of *No Retreat, No Surrender*, which, not surprisingly, is the title of a 1986 Van Damme movie.

By the mid-90s, Van Damme stars in *Sudden Death* (1995) as heroic ex-fireman Darren McCord, now working as a temporary security guard in a stadium. The American Vice-President is going to attend the final game in the hockey series, where terrorists are planning to take him hostage and demand a fabulous ransom. Van Damme has long moved from the Asian forests to a more urbane setting. Here, masculinity is constructed within the sports milieu, where hockey suggests violence. Most of the homoerotic references occur in the locker room, a man's world and the territory of male companionship, where being naked is the rule.

Van Damme introduces his son to this domain of masculinity, and the boy ecstatically admires his athletic heroes. Van Damme asks the team star Luc Robitaille, "Ce soir, quelles sont vos chances?" (What are your chances tonight?) and Robitaille brags, "On va les enculer" (We're gonna fuck them). Of course, a young boy is not supposed to understand this as natural, masculine behavior, but as a sports code shared by male players. So instead of the sexual threat, the father translates it as "He thinks ... they're gonna win." Shortly after this exchange, muscular Brad Tolliver teases Van Damme: "Show up one of these afternoons. I'll show the difference between the game you played and I play." Van Damme stares at his bulging naked torso and replies, "I can see the difference." He can. Nevertheless, we cannot and are left wondering what that difference might be. Another homoerotically charged scene has hockey player Duckerman nude in the locker room, in half profile. The American VP, who is paying the team a visit, remarks, "Nice outfit, Duckerman." As a public man, the VP gets the reinforcement of his masculinity by entering the male space and in turn recodes it as a place empowered by the visit of a high-ranking public authority. Van Damme follows the same code and enacts his role of introducing a young male into the social space of masculinity. He once belonged in that same arena, which he exchanged for that of firefighters and the security force, symbols loaded with male power significance and thus overcharged with homoerotic value.

However ridden with homoerotic allusions Van Damme's movies are, his refusal to accept them reasserts his masculinity against the sexually and racially other. If we consider the narrative in these movies, we will see them for what they are—versions of Westerns that substitute martial arts for fistfights and pistol duels at sundown. As expected, Far Easterns share with Westerns many intertextual elements: the white guys are the good ones out to defeat the Asians, the latest incarnation of Native Americans. Foreign masculinity is marked as negative, whereas white masculinity organizes and directs the construction of possible meanings. Van Damme's body centers our gaze, orders the narrative, and drives the signification process.

Other movies besides Van Damme's also depict this encoding of white masculinity. In *Show-down in Little Tokyo*, for example, Scandinavian Dolph Lundgreen opposes American-Asian Brandon Lee, recentering white male identity according to gender, race, and sexual codes. Lee takes the passive, feminine, and acculturated role as opposed to Lundgreen's active and masculine whiteness. Homoerotic references swarm (Nakayama 1994). One will serve to exemplify the signifying process at work. Brandon Lee confesses to Lundgreen: "Kenner, just in case we get killed, I wanted to tell you . . . you have the biggest dick I've ever seen on a man." To which

Kenner/Lundgreen replies, “Thanks, I don’t know what to say.” Is there anything else to say? Hardly. Yet, audiences (not to mention Hollywood moral codes) do not seem to have any problem with such exchanges.

The Biological Hypothesis

Homoerotic references seem to go unnoticed in action movies, perhaps because homoeroticism could be a fundamental component of both genders, and men and women would prefer the company of their own sex. They would mate only because they cannot escape the sexual imperative. *Homo sapiens*, like any other animal species, can hardly refuse to answer this instinctual call. Males and females serve a reproductive function, the purpose of which is to perpetuate the species. Bodies, then, serve as indices of better reproductive chances. The male has to be strong and beautiful to attract as many females as possible, or at least to ensure that the female he happens upon will not refuse his sexual advances. The male body has at the same time to be attractive to females and threatening to other males. In terms of ecological economy, males are expendable, because one male can impregnate hundreds of females. This explains why males fight each other to death, contrary to female behavior. When chances for survival diminish, that alone makes males redundant and turns females into assets, since they can guarantee the continuation of the species.

Procreation aside, social bonding happens more often than not among individuals of the same sex. People from one sex are alien to the mindset of people from the other sex. They sometimes see the other group as coming from different planets; *Women are from Venus, Men Are from Mars* is the title of a recent book. Men enjoy other men’s company better; witness what happens in sports, bars, business, and politics: women are not exactly welcome to these social places. Men tend to keep company to themselves, like a pack of wolves, and as such, they perceive women as prey. Like predators, they are playful among themselves and their favorite sport—by a metonymical dislocation—is war.

This biological imperative could account for the identity attributed to men and women in action movies. Men display their muscular, masculine bodies and fight each other to the death to guarantee the preservation of the species, if only at a biological level. Such a level of animal signification founded and can still legitimize the power relations between and within the sexes that inform various cultures. Our society, however, does not approve of such animal behavior and curbs our basic instincts by force of moral and ethical codes. As Freud was keen on telling us,

instincts can be repressed but not destroyed, so we need to act them out, if not for our private satisfaction, for the good of social institutions. That may explain why large audiences pay to see movies that have been summarized by the formula “F&F”—fight and fuck. In such movies women are wimps, mere prizes for brutal men to do with as they please, objects of desire but never the subjects of their own desire. Homosexual behavior is not recognized as such in this context (or from this biological perspective) but as a correlation of forces in a game of male, “maler,” and “malest.” Since there is no political space for women, neither is there for any socially deviant sexual behavior. Homoerotic references, thus, become an index of natural weakness to be purged.

The Social Construct Hypothesis

Another hypothesis for why homoeroticism passes unnoticed by homophobic audiences may be that images of gay men are constructs (Bad-Object Choices 1991, D’Emilio 1992, Plummer 1992, Pronger 1990, Sedgwick 1985, 1990) and as such can be absorbed or “naturalized” in the social context. Bronski (1984: 190) proposes, “At the end of the 19th century, a distinct homosexual identity emerged in Western culture, and along with that identity, a distinct culture and sensibility.” The historical contextualizing explanation emphasizes the construction of a cultural identity and contradicts the “natural” or fundamental features hypothesis.

This identity was established enough in culture to ensure its visibility and survival and, thus, provoke homophobic forces to acknowledge it. The strategy of trying to ignore homosexuality can therefore be defeated. Such a strategy relies on ignorance, feigned or not, of that phenomenon. Ignorance is as potent and as multiple a weapon as knowledge, warns Eve Sedgwick (1990: 4-5): “it is the interlocutor who has or pretends to have the less broadly knowledgeable understanding of interpretive practice who will define the terms of the exchange.” For instance, because heterosexual men, with superior extralinguistic resources and privileged discourse positions, are often less likely to treat perspectives different from their own as mutually available for communication, their attitudes are more likely to leave a lasting imprint on the social fabric than those of homosexual men.

Audiences would be strategically blind to what they do not want to see, the existence of different sexual behavior that refuses to be recentered within the strict limits of cultural codes. By staging that deviance in hypermasculine space—distant countries at war, the Foreign Legion, sports arenas, police forces, postcataclysmic worlds—action movies disguise any homoerotic references as male bonding, also known as the “buddy syndrome.” Same-sex desire is recoded as

male camaraderie, friendship between soldiers at war, and thus becomes “naturalized,” invisible to less critical moviegoers.

Recentered Masculinity, Decentered Homoeroticism

Jean-Claude Van Damme’s identity in films has so far been that of the white male as constructed by American society and spread by the media. Gender, race, and sexual orientation are some codes that can determine such an identity. In Van Damme’s movies, he is the good guy with the white hat, as in the formula for Westerns. He does not need to wear the hat, because his “whiteness” already marks him as the good guy opposing those of a different skin color. As he refuses to accept the homosexual innuendoes and invitations offered him, he claims his masculine identity in contrast to the sexually other. In his movies, as in other action movies, sexual signs overflow, weaving a web of homosocial relations, against the background of established heterosexuality.

The formula “F&F” characterizes a reading that encodes sexual behavior in action movies as essentially heterosexual: men fight men and fuck women. The substitution of the disjunctive “or” for the connective “and” in Van Damme’s movie announces a revolutionary possibility that is never actualized: whether to fight or fuck the opponent. Imagine if men fighting in the streets or soldiers at war chose the alternative. That would subvert the establishment further than the hippie movement of the 60s intended. This, however, is a false possibility. Fucking only confirms our deeply embedded cultural expectations: the one fucked is the weaker, and another metonymical dislocation equates fight and fuck, an equation widely reproduced in the linguistic expression of various social codes.

Social images, as propagated by the media, are constructed in contrast to the other, the different from the accepted in diverse cultural codes. Binary oppositions such as male/female, white/nonwhite, native/foreigner, and homosexual/heterosexual, however, no longer seem to account for human identities. We need pluralistic perspectives that can account for differences if we want to understand as many social phenomena as possible.

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