**Mark McKenna
ABSTRACT**

‘Sylvester Stallone has been widely understood as the embodiment of 1980s Hollywood action cinema and of Reagan-era masculinity’ (Gallagher, 2014:97). With the star inexorably linked to notions of youthful masculinity and an image that was crystallised more than thirty years ago, recent academic attention has been largely concerned with the ways in which age is gradually moving the star away from the idealised image that had previously defined his stardom. How he negotiates the realities of ageing, the impact this has on the roles available to him, and his ability to endure the physical requirements of these roles has been the subject of much academic interest (Tasker, 2014, Donnar, 2017). This chapter will offer an economic reading of the star and an examination of the ways in which the veteran actor has sought to, and in many cases, succeeded in extending his celebrity status in a contemporary global digital media marketplace. It will consider two aspects of Stallone’s stardom that illustrate his continued relevance on a global stage. The chapter will first consider the ways in which the star can be seen to be harnessing the power of social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook to publicise new projects and to capitalise on earlier screen successes, and extend his brand into new and unexpected arenas. It will examine how what might on the surface appear to be the futile attempts of an ageing star to retain relevance in a global media marketplace, is quickly revealed to be the more complex movements of a vital and relevant star. Secondly, the chapter will examine the star’s recent economic success in the Chinese film market, and will consider how, as Hollywood is trying to make inroads into the most profitable film market in the world, the unlikely solution might come, not from big budget sci-fi extravaganzas like *Star Wars*, but in the form of an action star from the 1980s.

**SYLVESTER STALLONE AND THE ECONOMICS OF THE AGEING FILM ACTOR**

This article provides a means of reconsidering and re-evaluating the economic and cultural significance of the ageing celebrity in a global media marketplace. By moving away from the preconceptions associated with the ageing body and the deterioration of the established star image, towards a more dynamic cross-cultural economic and cultural assessment of the star and their value, it is then possible to challenge the dominant perception of redundancy that invariably accompanies the later careers of ageing stars. Using veteran action star Sylvester Stallone as a case study, this chapter will examine how cultural and economic assumptions regarding his age, continue to inform his perceived value on the global stage, despite these assertions having very little basis in fact.

Stallone’s lasting star image and value are largely derived from a cartoon-like image of masculinity that was constructed over thirty years ago, in the mid-1980s, and cemented with the success of *Rocky IV* and *Rambo First Blood Part II* (both 1985). As ageing and time have slowly moved Stallone further and further away from this idealised image, ideas of redundancy have increasingly been applied to him with the dominant Anglo-American perception increasingly being that Stallone is a star at the end of his career with very little contemporary cultural or economic value. However, while Stallone’s established image may be fading, he continues to enjoy a vitality and relevance shared by relatively few actors of his generation. Appraisals of Stallone’s value are typically tied to the perception of him as a film star epitomising what Susan Jefford’s called ‘hard bodied’ masculinity that was particular to American action films of the 1980s (1994). As age and time have moved Stallone further and further away from that ‘hard bodied’ ideal, and as the types of action film through which he had initially made his name have gradually fallen from favour, many have assumed that Stallone’s cultural and economic value were located in the past, the place that this image was crystallised. Throughout this period, the star has simultaneously enjoyed a varying degree of success, in the nostalgic re-imaginings of the action hero tropes that had made him successful (most notably in *The Expendables* and *Escape Plan* series). However, in the Anglo American marketplace, the endurance of his 80s action-star image has often worked to obscure the successes that the star was experiencing either through these new franchises, or in other arenas, or in other countries. While not as resonant or immediately obvious to an Anglo American audience, these successes clearly demonstrate relevance beyond the traditional understanding of the film star.

This chapter will explore two ways in which Stallone can be seen to be resisting enforced notions of redundancy through his continued commercial and cultural viability. Firstly, through a consideration of his social media use, I will explore how Stallone is using digital platforms to reinforce and extend his public persona, beyond the confines of his traditional action film star status. Then I will examine the importance of the Chinese film market, to his continued economic vitality outside of Hollywood. These discussions are foregrounded by an exploration of the ways in which ideas of redundancy, age and expiration have been applied to Stallone and an examination of the ways in which he has culturally and economically resisted redundancy, harnessing and incorporating these ideas into a vital contemporary brand that continues to have resonance in a global media landscape.

‘**THE PREEMINENT GERI-ACTION STAR’**

Unsurprisingly, for an actor whose persona has been so defined by a particular period, Stallone has been inextricably linked to notions of youthful masculinity. How he negotiates the realities of ageing, the impact this has on the roles available to him, and his ability to endure the physical requirements of these roles has been the subject of much interest, with ageing and redundancy becoming central themes of work that takes Stallone as a subject of study.

*The Guardian* film critic Charlie Lyne suggested that Stallone was the leading exponent of the ‘geriaction’ film, an emergent sub-genre through which Hollywood was recycling long forgotten stars in leading roles in contemporary action films. Lyne argued that ‘the star vehicles that helped elevate [them] to godlike levels of celebrity ha[d] all but disappeared’ and in the ‘absence of a new generation of gun-toting, explosion-happy brutes, old timers [were] getting more work than ever’ (2013: online). Lyne attributed the absence of a new generation of action stars to Hollywood’s increased reliance on big-budget special effects laden spectaculars, suggesting that this had led to a decline in the types of star that had previously defined the action genre. While Lyne was keen to champion the aged action stars, much of the popular reception to both the stars and the films was far less accepting. Rupert Hawksley of *The Telegraph*, framed discussion resolutely in terms of age in an article entitled ‘The Expendables 3 Cast: 850 Years Old’ (2014), in which he points to what he believes to be the cast’s various personal and professional redundancies, from failures at the box office to failed marriages, all material was grist for the mill in a review that took a sardonically barbed look at the ageing action stars.[[1]](#footnote-1) Framing discussion in similarly terms, Matt Singer suggested that Stallone was the leading exponent of what he called ‘viagra cinema’ - ‘movies designed to showcase the aging male frame as it performs unnatural but remarkable physical feats’ (Singer 2011: online), while Justin Chang of *Variety* called the *Expendables 3* (2014) the ‘latest and longest showcase for Sylvester Stallone and other aging slabs of B-movie beef’ (Chang, 2014 online). Even Sylvester Stallone himself was forced to concede that his advancing years would mean that any future reprisal of the Rocky character would see him ‘battling arthritis and that’s about it.’(Abbitt 2014, online).

This emphasis on age above all else has permeated academic scholarship. Ellexis Boyle and Sean Brayton (2012), Philippa Gates (2010), Yvonne Tasker (2014), and Glen Donnar (2016) have all contributed to a growing body of work that has interrogated what ageing might mean for a star whose earlier career was so reliant on his star status as muscular spectacle, assessing how he has acknowledged, negotiated and occasionally managed to move past the obstacles that the reality of ageing might represent. Donnar’s work in particular persuasively argues that rather than superficially append earlier conceptions of Stallone’s identity, Stallone’s return as the preeminent geri-action star is revealing of the ways in which his identity has always been reliant on notions of redundancy and ageing. Donnar suggests that Stallones’s ‘defining characters and action star image insistently resist – and now seek to disavow – redundancy, age, and expiration’, suggesting that ‘his star image is nonetheless integrally founded and dependent on each’ (2016: 256).

While Donnar’s assessment illustrates the importance of ideas of redundancy to Stallone’s characters, demonstrating how these ideas contribute to Stallone’s established star image, there is a conflation between actor and performance that does not fully acknowledge the ways in which Stallone himself, is reliant on similar ideas of redundancy, and consequently, the value of these narratives to the star outside of the characters that he has portrayed.

Indeed, this conflation between onscreen role and off screen identity is present in much of the work that considers Stallone as an ageing star. It is there implicitly in Philippa Gates’ exploration of the mutable representation of (ageing) masculinity from the 1980s up until the present day, in which she observes that ‘critics drew a parallel between Stallone’s flagging career and Rocky’s attempt to resurrect his own glory days and assumed that the film would be a restoration of the hard-bodied hero wholesale’ suggesting that Stallone garnered ‘a new respect for himself as an actor and director because he seemed to be simultaneously acknowledging his own age and his own failings’ (2017: 281). It is there explicitly in Boyle and Brayton’s chapter which a maps ideas of masculinity, physical labour, and ageing onto the economic recession of 2008, and which mirrors Donnar’s theme of redundancy through an exploration of ‘expendability’. In this, expendability is equated with the ageing body, and Stallone’s body is found inauthentic when considered alongside the ‘authentic masculine virility and physical competence’ of his sporting co-stars (2015:481). Only Yvonne Tasker clearly separates actor from performance in a chapter that locates the labour of Stallone in his preparation for later roles, as a reflection of the fictional struggle presented on screen, interrogating the inherent contradiction in coverage that emphases ageing and simultaneously prioritises health and authenticity while promoting artifice and spectacle (2014).

 While almost all Anglo-American readings of Stallone foreground ageing as a problem that cannot be traversed, recent success in China suggests that this perception is not universal. It is difficult to determine, especially without falling into reductive cultural stereotypes, whether there is a cultural specificity to these responses to ageing that allows Stallone to appear vital and relevant in an Asian context, while simultaneously reporting him as redundant and obsolete in an Anglo-American context. In her work on Jackie Chan, Chris Holmlund suggests that while ‘the impact of globalisation is changing things, […] some in Asia still imagine ageing as a transition, marked by “family positions and associated responsibilities and activities”’ (2010:108). This sense of ageing as a transition can be seen in the later work of Chan, which Holmlund observes, increasingly sees him cast as an elder statesman, which allows him to negotiate the realities of ageing. Certainly, with 8 films either currently in production or announced, much can be read from Chan’s resistance to redundancy, and it is clear from the roles that he is choosing that the star is aware that his established image is in flux. However, and while there are many comparisons that can be drawn between Chan and Stallone, not least because they have both successfully performed the roles of writer, producer, actor, director, choreographer and stuntman (a comparison that Chan himself has made). At 64, Chan is better understood as an actor in late middle-age, while at 72, Stallone has officially entered old age, a fact that only serves to reinforce imposed ideas of redundancy.

**THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF REDUNDANCY**

How redundancy is defined has a huge bearing on how it is measured but also in what conclusions are drawn from the perception of it. For Donnar, redundancy implies ‘being *in excess,* no longer being needed or useful’, suggesting that ‘to be, or be made, redundant is to be marked as unnecessary and superfluous, and deprived of one’s job and associated worth’ (2016:249). As part of this exploration, Donnar observes that ‘Stallone’s action star persona is iconically defined by his characters’ various perceived cultural, economic, and professional redundancies, including their subsequent resistance’ (2016:250). This redundancy has always been a central component in the placement of the film star and the discursive mobilisation of this idea of redundancy is at the heart of Stallone’s screen persona. This simple idea sees him repeatedly cast as the underdog throughout his career from his earliest successes, embodying characters like Rocky and Rambo right up to the present day.

Alongside this screen image, similar ideas of redundancy have been articulated throughout Stallone’s career outside of the filmic text. This extra-filmic (cf. Thomas 2012) persona positioned Stallone *himself* as an underdog and outsider and, in doing so, mirrored much of the appeal of his on-screen persona. Narratives around the star foreground battles with studios in which he was consistently overlooked on account of the way he looked, the way he talked and, to a lesser extent, his advancing age (even as early as 1976 and with his breakthrough role of *Rocky*). These narratives are frequently distilled into a David and Goliath tale in which Stallone becomes the literal embodiment of the American Dream. A rags to riches story that sees him born into poverty in the charity ward of a Hell’s Kitchen hospital. After a difficult childhood, Stallone now an unsuccessful adult is unable to support his family and is forced to sell his wife’s jewellery, his dog, and then sleeps in a bus station for weeks at a time, before finally finding success when he sells the script of *Rocky* to United Artists. He is then forced to fight the studio to ensure that he isn’t overlooked for the role, when the studio want to hire a more established actor. Only then, through sheer strength of will and determination does he finally achieve the success that had eluded him for all of his life. Of course, the majority of this narrative is either embellished or a complete fabrication but, nevertheless, it is essential in constructing Stallone as the underdog in his own story, and providing a narrative that runs parallel with that of his most famous creation, Rocky Balboa.

More recently, Stallone’s embodiment of the underdog character has been recycled in promotions for his return to the characters of Rocky and Rambo, promotions that emphasise the perceived redundancies associated with Stallone’s age. In interviews that closely mirror those conducted on Stallone’s entry into film in 1976 with *Rocky*, the star discusses the contemporary struggles he experienced in his efforts to revisit his two most successful franchises, with studios not convinced that an audience would be prepared to watch a geriatric action star lumber across the screen in Rambo and Rocky’s return (DVD extras *Rocky Balboa* [2006]). Again, this narrative details his struggles against the studio (now MGM) but, this time, rather than emphasise any other perceived redundancies, the reasons were singularly tied to his age and to the redundancies associated with that age. Through this story, Stallone is able to invoke the earlier underdog narrative by presenting himself again as an actor who is unable to convince the studios to back his project. While his wealth and star status prevent his portrayal as an economic underdog, his advanced years ensure that he is understood as an ideological underdog, restoring any doubt about his ability to embody these characters by portraying himself as the literal embodiment of the struggles that the characters face. Through this mobilisation, Stallone can be seen to be repurposing the negative connotations traditionally associated with ageing, by incorporating them into an already established underdog narrative. The repetition of this underdog narrative, not only fortifies the links between the star and the performance, but it crucially reinforces the sense that Stallone himself is a motivational and aspirational figure and helps him sidestep some of the criticisms that might be levied against him due to his advancing years. However, while Stallone’s application of the ageing narrative can be seen as a positive affirmation of the earlier underdog myth, as already illustrated, much of the secondary media coverage still continues to foreground the negative associations of age.

While one of these narratives celebrates Stallone’s achievements, and the other denigrates Stallone’s achievements, both employ a narrative of redundancy which when combined, contribute to the dominant perception that Stallone’s advancing years have marked him out as redundant. They instil a sense that Stallone is an actor who belongs to a different generation of filmmakers and to another moment in film history. It casts him as an aged action star from the 20th Century, an analogue era that has little economic value in a digital marketplace that is dominated by younger, more attractive, and more muscular men. In the primary narrative, as told by Stallone, the studio and its promoters, Stallone acknowledges his age as an obstacle that he must overcome - forced to convince studios that had invested heavily in his earlier career that both he, and what he represents, is still a viable commodity and that there is still an audience for his films. In this narrative, and to return to Donnar’s definition, Stallone is marked by the studio as ‘unnecessary and superfluous’, and since he is ‘no longer […] needed or useful’, he has effectively been marked as culturally, economically, and professionally redundant (Donnar). By fighting back against this redundancy, Stallone is able to draw parallels between this and earlier struggles present in his own history and in doing so, he is able to reinforce the underdog associations that have always been central to his screen persona – effectively casting himself as an off-screen underdog in a behind-the-scenes production story of one man’s struggle to win.

In the secondary narrative as told by journalistic media and critical commentary, Stallone’s age is frequently presented as an obstacle that he can never overcome; that both he, and what he represents, is no longer a viable commodity and that there is no longer an audience for these films. In this narrative, Stallone is marked by the media as ‘unnecessary and superfluous’, and since he is ‘no longer […] needed or useful’, he has been deemed to be culturally, economically, and professionally redundant. The sum of these two narratives, the primary and secondary narratives (and indeed to some degree, reinforced by academic studies that have foregrounded ageing masculinity), is an image of a fading action star who is increasingly devalued, clearly redundant and who has very little value in a global media marketplace. However, as convenient as this narrative is, and in spite of Stallone himself harnessing the power of the narrative of redundancy to reinforce his underdog brand, it simply is not true. For the remainder of the chapter, I will present two ways in which we can measure Stallone’s resistance to the various imposed cultural, economic, and professional redundancies, outside of ageing masculinity, through an examination of his presence on social media and his continued relevance in the international marketplace.

**ANALOGUE ACTOR / DIGITAL CELEBRITY**

As already illustrated, ideas of Stallone’s redundancy have been greatly exaggerated often for comedic effect and at the expense of the star. Even Donnar’s otherwise astute assessment of the centrality of the underdog myth to the star is muddied in a dismissive conclusion. Here, he not only suggests that ‘as Stallone and 1980s action subgenre he represents a move inexorably towards exhaustion and a conjoined “use-by” date, his now concealed action body admitting the inevitable redundancy of an undeniably ageing star body intimately aligned with generic “muscularity”’ but also concludes that perhaps the star should not go on (2016:256). In February of 2018, it seemed as if that moment had come when a post began circulating on Facebook claiming that after a prolonged battle, Sylvester Stallone had finally succumbed to the ravages of prostate cancer. Photographs accompanied the post and appeared to show the veteran actor with a withdrawn face, the weight loss typically associated with effects of the disease, and with the thinning hair that you would expect of someone undergoing chemotherapy treatment. The news was of course a hoax, and Stallone himself quickly took to Twitter to dispel the rumours saying ‘please ignore this stupidity… Alive and well and happy and healthy… Still punching!’

However, and in spite of the rumours of his death, for anyone familiar with Stallone’s online presence, there can be no mistaking his continued vitality. Far removed from the image of an aged action star eeking out the tail-end of his career in increasingly bombastic B-movie sequels, Stallone is a celebrity who has truly embraced the possibilities afforded to him by the development of social media and has ably moved from analogue actor into the realm of digital celebrity. He has an official Facebook page in his own name with 6,244,814 followers, in an account that has been active since December 20th 2016. He has an official Twitter account, @theSlyStallone, with 2,797,878 of followers, an account that has been active since August 2010, and he has an Instagram account, officiallyslystallone, with 6,041,523, an account that has been active since the 25th of March 2015, the last day of filming the Rocky spinoff *Creed* (2016).

Web magazine *Complex* praised Stallone as the ‘low key champion of Instagram’ (Khal, 2017 online). The piece celebrated the balance that he achieves between "real life" Stallone, at ease with his family and friends, and promotional Stallone, giving people an insight into his forthcoming projects, going on to suggest that ‘Stallone's [social media] prowess should be seen as a highwater mark for other celebrities to achieve’, concluding that due to advancing years ‘he's more than likely run out of fucks to give’ and that it ‘might just be that he's genuinely as awesome as many of us assumed he was, and he now has a social media platform that can showcase this to the world’.

As attractive as this idea might be, P. David Marshall suggests that what is often understood simply as using social media might be better understood as a mediated form of presentation of the self, encompassing the personal and interpersonal, or what he terms ‘presentational media’(2010). He suggests that through this ‘presentational media’, ‘what is constructed via Facebook but equally through Twitter is a construction of character for a kind of ritual of the performance of the self. It is highly conscious of a potential audience as much as it is a careful preening and production’ (2010, 40). Similarly, in an analysis of the modes of performance available on a platforms like Twitter, Sarah Thomas observes that some celebrities ‘revel in achieving levels of “authenticity”, “ordinariness” and “closeness”, while others don’t. Some tweets obscure the performative practices of celebrity and self-presentation, while others display it. Some tweets emphasise the object-product status of celebrities, and others downplay the need for consumerism. Some tweets strive towards interactivity, while others favour a broadcast model. (2014:243).

Broadly speaking, Stallone’s use of ‘presentational media’ appears to be practicing the ‘authenticity, ordinariness and closeness’ that Thomas speaks of. He regularly posts pictures and videos of his family and his pets. Clips of him and his brother Frank, joking around, and what appear to be personal family moments. He posts motivational quotes about the power of determination and achieving your dreams, and often uses the image of Rocky to illustrate memes that are clearly designed to inspire and motivate people, all the while reinforcing a sense that he is someone who never gave up on his dreams. Alongside this, he will often post clips to fitness related programmes, or clips to videos of him working out, either historically, in preparation for particular roles, or as part of his current day-today routine. When his posts do relate to his films, they tend to be in the form of behind-the-scenes images and videos that provide a further window into his life and, in doing so, make these previously private moments publically accessible to his community of online followers.

His presence on Twitter is particularly interesting in this regard: a platform defined by the brevity of its 140 character limitation, a restriction which Stallone side-steps by posting little more than a title or description, followed by a URL that links through to his Instagram account and to content that he has uploaded there. In this way he is able to bypass the limitations of the platform and rather than present himself through status updates that can often appear matter-of-fact or impersonal, he can present himself in short video clips that document his day-today activity and that crucially cast him as narrator. As much of this content is either personal family videos or historical moments from behind-the-scenes, it feels removed from any explicit commercial motivation and, instead, can be seen to function as a kind of digital photo album filled with nostalgic remembrances and captured interactions with his family. This is essential in constructing a sense that this is authentic, that between the pictures of his pets, and his family, and the faded photos from his school days, that Stallone’s social media use is the same as ours and, crucially, that this isn’t a performance; that it is not, as P. David Marshall suggested 'highly conscious of a potential audience’ and ‘a careful preening and production’ but, instead, that he embodies the ordinary, the authentic and the close. Of course it is a performance, and it not only is it illustrative of P. David Marshall’s conceit but it also demonstrates Richard Dyer’s foundational principle of the star as a paradox constructed by a sense of them as both ordinary (like us), and extraordinary (unlike us and therefore special)(cf. Dyer, 1979). What is especially attractive and perhaps surprising about Stallone’s use of this ‘presentational media’, is the regularity with which it appears to embody the ordinary and, by contrast, the irregularity of moments where the register of the performance rises into that of the extraordinary and constructs him as the special film star and celebrity. Indeed, it is this quality that web magazine *Complex* responded to but, as appealing as this idea may be, it disguises the labour required from this kind of presentational media, and crucially ignores the value of these behind-the-scenes posts in the reconfiguration of Stallone as the figurehead of a diverse digital family brand. Work of this kind is incredibly valuable because, while it serves to reinforce Stallone’s established brand, it simultaneously has a value to the burgeoning careers of his daughters, Sophia, Sistine and Scarlett, and appends and diversifies Stallone’s brand.

The early stages of this diversification are perhaps best illustrated in a post from Stallone from June 9th 2017. Here, Stallone documented his family’s attendance and involvement in the Golden Globes awards ceremony, where he was presenting the award for Best Motion Picture with his *Rocky* co-star Carl Weathers. His daughters were also there is a professional capacity, collectively sharing the unfortunately titled ‘Miss Golden Globes,’ a longstanding role in which the person or persons named are given the honour of handing out the trophies and escorting the guests on and off the stage. Despite the apparent menial nature of the role, competition is incredibly fierce, with the evening perceived to be a kind of debutante’s ball from which the children of prominent celebrities can launch their careers. That day Stallone posted seven Tweets, six of which were linked to his Instagram account, and four of which featured his family. Two were videos of the group traveling to the awards. In the first, he joked about the failure of his 1983 film *Rhinestone*, while, in the second, he addressed the camera saying:

we are on our way to the Golden Globes to see our daughters actually go out and earn a living, because we’re actually tired of working and we’ve got to get the girls off the farm and into the big city so that they can knock the ball out of the park and find me a rocking chair so I can just drift off into obscurity (Stallone, Instagram, 2017).

Though clearly joking, this video also clearly reiterates the familiar narrative of Stallone’s redundancy, and it emphasises the careers of his daughters, with an understanding that the evening would be a hugely significant night for them. It reinforces a sense that Stallone’s star is fading and, in an interview following that evening (and what proved to be a massive success for the family), Sistine told WMagazine that her dad had said, ‘This is your moment. Mine is over, and I want it to be about you. Take every experience that you go through and remember it because it will go by so quickly.’ He also told her to ‘cherish every moment of it.”(McCarthy 2017 online).

As already established, these ideas of redundancy have always been central to Stallone’s brand and it would be a mistake to take the ideas at face value, irrespective of the source, especially since Sistine’s early successes are explicitly reliant upon Stallone’s continued viability and celebrity status, as well as the strategic positioning of the family via social media and the tabloid press. In the same interview Sistine said "I think social media is the perfect way to promote yourself, I think right now people see [me and my sisters] as a unit, which is fine, but it is about having your own voice, and luckily we have social media to do that. I think that by expressing our own personalities, we will differentiate ourselves” (ibid).

The daughters were later interviewed by *The Hollywood Reporter* about the significance of the evening for them and asked to speculate on what effect the event could have on their future. Scarlett, only 15 at the time, said ‘I'm only in junior high, so I don't really know what to expect in the future’, while the eldest daughter, Sophia, suggested that, ‘I want to be an entrepreneur and run my own fashion and makeup line. I think today it's all about digital and social media, and so being recognized is a huge asset. Like, Kylie Jenner Lip Kit is blowing up. So getting my face out there is a big part of it’. Meanwhile, the middle child, Sistine, said, ‘…My mother is a model. I have dreamed about being a model since I was a little girl’ (Abramovitch, 2017 online). In the same interview for WMagazine, Sistine suggested that their appearance at the Golden Globes had completely changed their lives, generating ‘a lot of positive feedback’ and that ‘after that, the jobs kept coming for us’ (McCarthy 2017 online). Indeed, Sophia’s indication that her future plans are evocative of Kylie Jenner’s model for success aligns the family explicitly with the Kardashian dynasty and, in doing so, mirrors how the family are increasingly being discursively constructed in the popular press. However, while the differentiation through social media is beginning to happen, the sense of them as a constructed unit is reinforced considerably in their early interactions and in the visibility of their strategic use of social media. For instance, all three of the daughters joined Twitter on the same day, the 4th of January 2017, 5 days before their debut at the Golden Globes. Indeed, they all retweeted the same post as their first interaction, including an image of them with the host Jimmy Kimmel. Alongside this, Stallone has Tweeted from his own account stating that:

I would LOVE all of my incredible fans to start following my wonderful daughters , who I am proud of ..... @sistinestallone @sophiastallone @scarletstallone ...1 MILLION followers is the goal , you can do it ! YO, WE WOULD NOT BE HERE WITHOUT YOUR SUPPORT! Go For It! THANKS , Sly

The success of these interactions is self-evident in the increased visibility of the family, through magazine shoots and television interviews. Sistine’s modelling career is increasingly prominent and her attendance at the Met Gala attests to the ways in which the family are increasingly positioning themselves as socialites at the centre of celebrity culture. This has led many to speculate on the family taking on the mantle of the Kardassians, as the next celebrity family at the centre of a reality TV show, and certainly their collective use of social media to reinforce the brand is demonstrative of steps in that direction (cf. *TMZ*, Dolak).

While web magazine *Complex* may wish to accept Stallone as the ‘low key champion of Instagram’, it would be a mistake to assume that these interactions are accidental, unconsidered or even authentic. These are adept constructions that revel in ‘authenticity’, ‘ordinariness’ and ‘closeness’, that reinforce ideas central to the Stallone brand but that simultaneously allow for a diversification that can include and position his daughters. This is illustrative of the deliberate and strategic ways in which the family members are using these platforms to position, promote and extend their brand.

**LOCAL HERO / GLOBAL FILM STAR**

While the increased prominence of Stallone’s family may help to reinforce the ideas of redundancy that are central to his brand, a series of domestic box-office disasters have only served to reinforce the sense that this redundancy has a basis in fact. The year 1985 is often seen as the peak of Stallone’s commercial appeal for American audiences. *Rambo: First Blood Part II* grossed $27,251,854 over its 5-day Thanksgiving opening weekend, going on to earn a domestic gross of $150,415,432. To put this into context, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* had the highest grossing opening weekend of 1985, becoming the highest grossing R Rated film of that year and, at that point, the second highest-grossing R-rated film ever, coming only behind *The Exorcist* (1973). It was the second most successful film released in North America in 1985, coming only behind *Back to the Future* ($210,609,762) and beating out Stallone’s other major box office success of the year, *Rocky IV* ($127,873,716). *Rocky IV,* released on Memorial Day weekend, was the second highest grossing opening weekend of that year and the second most successful PG Rated film of 1985. This is without question the height of Stallone’s domestic appeal.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, as impressive as the domestic takings of $150,415,432 were, it only provides part of the picture, accounting for only just over half of the film’s worldwide gross of $300.4 million. The other half (49.9%) was generated from overseas sales. While this almost even split between domestic and foreign box office is illustrative of the global appeal of Stallone, the character and the film at that moment in time, it is also a relative anomaly in the career of a star who, despite being held up as an American icon, has otherwise long been reliant on his films’ success in the international marketplace. By way of comparison, *Rocky IV* (1985), the fourth outing for the character and the most profitable film in the series, would make slightly more than *Rambo: First Blood Part II* globally at $300.5 million. However, only 42.6 % of that came from the domestic marketplace, with the remaining of 57.4 % coming from the international market, and this is indicative of a broader trend that is visible throughout Stallone’s career. Other than with a handful of films, and outside of his signature characters of Rocky Balboa and John J. Rambo, his work is rarely considered to have performed well domestically but, nevertheless, continues to yield high results internationally.

This disparity has become so pronounced in recent years that films such as the ensemble action sequel *The Expendables 3* (2014) or *Escape Plan* (2013), which cast Stallone opposite Schwarzenegger, were both considered critical and commercial flops after failing to find a domestic audience and recoup their production costs at the US box office. The poor reception the United States was mirrored in the United Kingdom, a territory that has traditionally been a stronghold for Stallone. However, despite the dominant perception of both of these films as box office failures, the American market only accounts for 20% of the lifetime box office gross of each film, and both films would become profitable in the international marketplace. With this in mind, it is clear that neither the UK or the US market functions as an accurate barometer of Stallone’s continued commercial success. The Anglo-American marketplace only accounts for around a fifth of Stallone’s recent box office success. So in order to understand Stallone’s continued viability in a global media marketplace, it is necessary to look beyond the Anglo-American hegemony. Indeed, Stallone’s appeal and career trajectory in the dominant homogenous western marketplace, has often served to disguise the continued viability of the star in other markets,ignoring eighty percent of the gross generated worldwide. With loyal fan bases in Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and even in Russia, where his earlier films were distributed illegally, the international market has always been an important part in the success of Sylvester Stallone. However, to provide a means by which we might measure the pivotal role the international marketplace is continuing to play in Stallone’s current success, it is necessary to consider Stallone’s appeal, outside of the shadow of Hollywood, in Asia and the hugely prosperous Chinese marketplace.

Hollywood has long sought a foothold in the usually impenetrable Chinese film market, a desire that has only been reinforced since the results for the box office gross for the first quarter of 2018 were made available and that saw China take the lead for the first time in history, far outstripping North America and Canada’s return of $2.89 billion by a comfortable $800 million (Schmid 2018, online). However, opportunities available to Hollywood studios hoping to capitalise on China’s lucrative market have historically been limited by a quota system that restricts the number of foreign films allowed into the marketplace. Introduced in 1994 and known as *fenzhang pian,* or “shared revenue movies”, the system not only restricts the amount of American films released into the market,[[3]](#footnote-3) but also controls when the film will be released, usually preventing foreign films from being released during peak cinema-going periods. Alongside this, the system also routinely insists on cuts to content that it deems unsuitable for public consumption, drawing further condemnation from critics in the United States. Despite the many apparent limitations imposed by this quota system, the lure of the potential for profit in the Chinese film market has left Hollywood’s big six (Walt Disney, Warner Bros, Paramount, Fox, Sony, and Universal) clambering over themselves in an attempt to tap into the lucrative market.

The mandate governing this quota suggested that these imports ‘reflect the finest global cultural achievements and represent the latest artistic and technological accomplishments in contemporary world cinema’ (Papish 2017 online). However, on implementation, this system has leant toward big budget spectaculars like *Furious 7* (2015) (the seventh instalment in Vin Diesel’s *Fast and the Furious* franchise), which went on to become China’s highest ever grossing import film, and turned what would have numbered in millions of dollars in profits, into over a billion dollars in profit. The preference for this type of film in China mirrors the appeal of Chinese film in the international marketplace, where dialogue is often secondary to spectacle, something that can be seen in the Anglo-American success of Chinese exports like Jet Li’s *Hero* (2002). However, the success of big budget popcorn movies like the *Fast and the Furious* franchise has left many concerned that the demand in China for this type of film is reshaping the American industry for the worse (cf. Frater, Sen & McArdle, Robinson).

Something that is surely adding to that concern is that alongside this primary system of importation exists a secondary means by which it is possible to import films into China, *Maiduan pian*, or the *pi pian* model, otherwise known as flat fee or buy-out films. Significantly, and as with the “shared revenue movies”, the majority of films released through this system also tend to be examples of genre cinema. This system allows Chinese distributors to buy a limited number of American films outright for a one-off fee and, as with the Shared-Revenue system, is similarly restricted in number, allowing fifty-one films released in this way in 2016, a figure up from thirty-three in 2014, and twenty-eight in 2015. The system is usually reserved for films produced (outside of the Big Six) on a smaller budget and allows Chinese distributors to negotiate a one-off flat fee with American producers in exchange for local distribution rights. Historically, these buy-out fees have rarely exceeded $6 million, for which the American producer receives a flat fee, with the Chinese distributor retaining all of the Chinese revenue after any costs have been incurred in the distribution. Though many have criticised the system, in a market defined by rampant piracy, this has at least allowed American producers to recoup some of the production costs of the film or to offset the revenue they would otherwise lose to pirated DVDs or illegal downloads.

It was through this buy-out system that in 2010, local distributors E Stars paid Nu-Image/Millennium 3.4 million yuan (approx. $470,000) for the Chinese rights to Stallone’s action thriller *The Expendables.* When the film performed beyond all expectation, going on to gross 216 million yuan (approx. $33,824,520.00), Los Angeles-based Chinese-owned film studio Le Vision Pictures agreed to co-finance the sequels *The Expendables 2* (2012), and *The Expendables 3* (2014) and, in doing so, secured the Chinese distribution deal. Though the dominant western perception of these films is one of both critical and commercial failure, particularly *Part 3*, which is seen to have been hindered by its PG-13 rating, the films were a runaway success in China, going on to gross $53,090,000 and $72,870,000 respectively.[[4]](#footnote-4) The third instalment was so effectively marketed, with appearances from co-star Jason Statham, that in its first week alone it received 231,836 screenings and 6.29 million admissions (Coonan 2014).

What is perhaps most significant in all of this, in a discussion of Stallone’s perceived redundancy, is the ways in which these later films - from *Rocky Balboa* (2006) onwards - are reported on in the Chinese press. Generally speaking, Anglo-American coverage tends to emphasise how poorly the films have performed, while the Asian-centric coverage typically emphasises how well the films have performed. The disparity is so pronounced that while many were speculating on the end of the franchise, and by extension the end of Stallone’s revival, others were reporting on the ways in which ‘a Sylvester Stallone film unlocked the door to [the] Chinese [film] market for smaller films’ (Tsui, 2017 online). While *Variety*’s steady stream of criticism that *The Expendables* series was a ‘muscle-bound meathead extravaganza,’ a ‘blissfully cretinous endeavor’ (Chang, 2012 online) and an ‘increasingly expendable action franchise’ (Chang, 2014 online), film producer Steven Paul of SP International Pictures reported that Nu Image/Millenium had already signed a deal (on behalf of SSXH Bejing and Max Screen Film Distribution), securing investment in a fourth film, along with Chinese distribution rights. Paul told *Variety* that, ‘what seems to work in their favour in China is that these movies are good old-fashioned shoot ’em up entertainment’ (Johnson, 2015 online).

With *The Expendables* franchise among the most successful independent productions ever released in China, Chinese distributors have been scrambling to capitalise on the films’ success, with co-financing and co-production deals. It is clear that rumours of Stallone’s redundancy have been greatly exaggerated, with *The Expendables 4*, *Escape Plan 2: Hades*, *Escape Plan 3: Devil’s Station* in the pipeline. The projects are rumoured to be an all-female Expendables sequel, as well as a spin-off TV series, while Jet Lihas suggested thathis ‘Hollywood friends’ Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jason Statham as well as Angelina Jolie will join him a Chinese reality TV series,. While it is important to note that much of this is Nu Image/Millenium’s success, this achievement is nonetheless built upon the iconicity and continued commercial appeal of Sylvester Stallone. This appeal has elevated Nu Image/Millenium from the level of direct-to-video action film producers and made-for-TV action adventures to international blockbusters such as *Rambo* (2008), and *The Expendables* (2010-2019),. Indeed, Stallone has become so central to the global positioning of the company that at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018, Nu Image/Millenium were prioritising the sale of three productions above all else: the forthcoming attempt to reboot of the *Hellboy* franchise (2019) *The Expendables 4* (2019) and *Rambo V* (2019). Deadline announced that the company had negotiated an eight-figure deal with China’s second largest exhibitor, Dadi Film Distribution, in what is believed to constitute a co-financing deal between the American-based Nu Image/Millenium and China-based Dadi Distribution. However, this announcement comes on the back of a 100 million dollar on again/off again deal between Nu Image/Millenium Films and Beijing's Recon Group. On paper, the deal was intended to give the Recon group a 51% controlling stake in the company, with Recon effectively acting as silent partners facilitating Nu Image/Millenium’s prioritisation of the Chinese market, with Nu Image/Millenium retaining actual control. A deposit of $20 million was received by Nu Image/Millennium but it appears that the deal was derailed when President Trump began imposing sanctions on China in an effort to pressurise Bejing into making trade concessions with the US.[[5]](#footnote-5)

While the exact value and nature of this current deal with Dadi Film Distribution is yet to be publicly announced, it is clear that Stallone’s enduring popularity and the potential profitability of these films in China is a significant part of what is motivating Chinese companies to partner with the Millenium group. For Stallone, whether these deals result in actual co-productions or simply distribution deals is in many ways inconsequential. What is important, particularly amid rumours that Trump’s sanctions will force China to further restrict America’s quota system, is that these deals will ensure that he is one of the few western stars guaranteed box office releases in what is now the most financially prosperous film market in world (Schmid 2018, online).

**CONCLUSION**

Film stars that have achieved the status of Sylvester Stallone enjoy an iconicity rarely matched by other actors. However, with the plaudits, this iconicity fixes them to an indelible image of an iconic moment from their careers. For Jack Nicholson, it was his maniacal face pushed through the broken panel of a bathroom door, announcing “here’s Johnny”. For Marilyn Monroe, it was her posing over the updraft of a New York subway grate in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), while for Robert DeNiro it was standing in front of the mirror as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976) asking “you talking to me?” For Sylvester Stallone, meanwhile, there are two moments from 1985 that have become indelibly etched on the consciousness of the movie-going public. The first features the muscular shirtless figure of Rambo with a torn red headband and holding a rocket launcher, while the second is a victorious Rocky Balboa wrapped in the Star-Spangled Banner after defeating Ivan Drago and, with him, the threat of communism (this being, of course, the culmination of the narrative that began in 1976 in Philadelphia when Rocky first ran up the museum steps). While this iconicity is often indicative of a significant cultural resonance, it brings with it a refusal in popular culture to allow that iconic image to change. When it inevitably does change, any deviation is often seen as a failure on the part of the star to maintain the prescribed standard mapped out at that point of maximum exposure. A consequence of this perceived failure, and the emphasis placed upon the maintenance of an unachievable standard, is that successes in other areas are largely ignored. In the case of Stallone, the dominant narrative has favoured a simple story of redundancy and, as already explored, this is something that he himself has been happy to capitalise on and incorporate into his public image. However, by considering other aspects of his celebrity image, outside of the iconicity of the static image, it is possible to reconceptualise his ageing as a transition, marked by changing “family positions and associated responsibilities and activities”’ (Holmlund, 2010:108). With this transition comes movement into new media landscapes, be they virtual (like Stallone’s use of Twitter and Instagram) or geographic (like his successful move into the Chinese film market). Yet it is possible to dispense with readings that have historically foregrounded the fading of his hyper masculine ‘80s action star image and begin to acknowledge that, by any other measure, Stallone is very far from being redundant.

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1. Many of these discussions conflate actor and performance or use elements of each interchangeably to demonstrate the ways in which these actors are not meeting an arbitrarily imposed professional or personal standards. See below, for a discussion of the ways in which these extra-filmic elements are contributing to a particular construction of the star. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All figures Box Office Mojo [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From 1994-2002 the quota system allowed only 10 films per year, in 2002 following China’s incorporation into the World Trade Organisation (WTO), that figure rose to 20 films per year, and in 2012 that figure was increased again to 34 films per year) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Numbers from Boxofficemojo.com [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While I do not have time to address the implications of these trade concessions fully here, the impact of these upon the film industry will be complex, far reaching and are an ongoing concern for Hollywood. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)