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*Spectacular Action: Rambo and the Popular Pleasures of Pain**

WILLIAM WARNER

After the shoving around America took in the world of the 70s . . . finally the giant said, "Wait a minute, I'm big and strong, but I haven't done anything that's *that* atrocious."
Sylvester Stallone, in interview (*Newsweek*; October 23, 1985, p. 62)

Boy, I'm glad I saw *Rambo* last night. Now I'll know what to do next time.
President Ronald Reagan, July 1985, before welcoming freed hostages from the TWA flight held in Lebanon (*Sunday London Times*, July 7, 1985)

How is it that American film audiences in the late seventies and early eighties found pleasure in entering the World of the Hero—a bracing new cinematic realm of extravagant courage and literal violence where modern skepticism of the hero could be magically suspended? How does one understand the relationship between these new detours in the history of pleasure, the developing technology of the action film, and ideologically fraught debates about "America's position in the world"? What articulations of culture and film technique made the production and consumption of the hero's spectacular action one of the most characteristic impulses of a decade? Among those films constructed around a new literalization of the heroic—from *Star Wars* (1977) to *Robocop* (1987), from *Excalibur* (1981) to *Aliens* (1986)—no films caused a greater scandal to critics than *First Blood* (1982) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). Here the action-adventure genre seemed to strive for a preposterously direct political address. The story of John Rambo, and the film's refiguration of the Vietnam War, not only develop an interpretation of America's Vietnam defeat as a betrayal of the soldier by his nation, it also indulges an openly compensatory scenario. For many critics the popularity of Rambo seemed to involve an inflection of taste and style in entertainment which, by the way it exalted America over her adversaries, produced a fictional analogue to Reagan's strident nationalism and military buildup. Executed with a deadly seriousness of posture, these films seemed to beg for the deflating critical mockery they received. But rebukes offered by a broad spectrum of critics to this "return of the hero" did little to check this swerve in popular taste. For critics and commentators, the most vexing scandal of these films was the fact that they were consumed by vast numbers, with evident pleasure. If there were ever to be an instance of the "bad popular," Rambo seemed to be it.

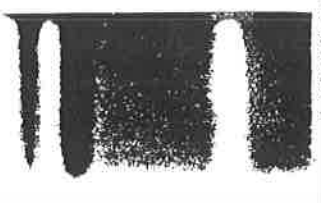
In this essay I will interpret the popularity of the Rambo films by exploring the following thesis. In the late seventies and early eighties the rise of the hero film offered audiences a pleasurable way to work upon an insistent historical problem—the perceived

decline of American power both in relation to other nations, as well as a recent, fondly remembered past. When this issue is given particularly explicit political inflection in the Rambo films, the critical condemnation of *Rambo* as Reaganism-in-film diagnosed the films' wishful and tendentious reinterpretation of the Vietnam War. But this critique obscured several aspects of Rambo's successful address to its popular audience. The appeal of these films depends upon subjecting hero and audience to a certain masochistic scenario—the pleasure of intensely felt pain, and crippling incapacity, as it is written into the action, and onto the body of the hero. Secondly, each film supports the natural virtue of the hero through a display of technology's magic. Finally, each film wins the audience an anti-therapeutic relief from confining subjectivity by releasing it into a vertiginous cinematic experience of spectacular action. It is precisely what most offended critics about the Rambo films—their implausible blending of fantasy and "history"—that gives these films special usefulness for reading the switch point between politics and entertainment, between debate in the public sphere about "the state of the nation" and the pleasures of summer action on the silver screen.

Remembering Vietnam, Rescuing America

The Rambo films are shaped to intervene in what might be called "the Vietnam Debate": that broad and dispersed interpretive joust, or conversation in culture, about the meaning of the Vietnam War, especially as this, the "first war America ever lost," seemed from the vantage point of the early eighties to mark the beginning of the decline in American power. This "debate" was given new impetus and focus by the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979–1980) and Ronald Reagan's election (1980). The many different forms of cultural work on and around Vietnam and the vet in the early 1980s suggest that the war's trauma was far from dissipated, its wound still open and in need of the kind of suturing that can only be done with words and representations.[1]

How did *First Blood* and *Rambo* intervene in the "Vietnam Debate"? The Rambo films are founded upon the assumption that a beloved object was lost in Vietnam—men who died, American honor, and, with the war, America's position of post-World War II pre-eminence. How might film scenarios be devised that would redress this loss? First there must be an interpretation of the war's losses that allows rage to be justified, locates blame in a restricted way, and devises some plausible action that will afford a new chance to recover what has been lost. Rambo is the ordinary Vietnam vet who, in his self-doubts and potential greatness, personifies America. He is justified in his rage, because America's fighting men have been in various ways betrayed—they were never allowed to fight to win; they were not supported at home; as returned vets they were called "Babykillers." Who is responsible for the loss of American honor? Blame is located in those liberal bureaucrats, and thin-blooded Americans who have wasted American strength, and squandered America's proper position of priority in the world. It is they who are also responsible for a suppression of "the fact" that there are still POWs alive in Vietnam. The Rambo films' magical solution to the riddle of American decline hinges upon a new remembering of war and nation: how one remembers "the War" turns out to have everything to do with how one can re-member American strength. One must join and heal by finding and returning the lost "parts" of the nation. But in such a "rescue mission" the question of who is essential and expendable comes to the fore. When asked by his Vietnamese female guide Co Bao, why he, Rambo, was chosen for this mission, Rambo explains his presence on the mission by saying that, for those in power, he is "expendable." When pressed by Co Bao to explain this word, Rambo describes someone invited to a party, who fails to come, and is never missed. Later in



the film, when they are parting, her loving rejoinder is: "Rambo, you are *not* expendable." And this is the crux of the film's explicit discursive project: not only to reclaim the American vet as not expendable, but further, to discover that what Rambo is and represents (pride, strength, will) is precisely that which is most indispensable for America today.

The scenario of the rescue mission allows America and Rambo one more chance in Vietnam. The rescue mission is a central feature of major Vietnam War films like *Deerhunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). But while these two films, and *Platoon* (1986), make Vietnam the site for a moral test, and the "return" an action fraught with soul-searching and liberal guilt, *Rambo* follows a very different path. *First Blood*'s account of John Rambo's unfair persecution by a small town in the Pacific Northwest, and his delayed but explosive war against the town and its sheriff, allow the negative ideas about the Vietnam vet (as haunted, "crazy," a social cripple) to be assumed and transvalued, until they become sources of his uncanny strength. When *First Blood* turned out to be one of the surprise film hits of 1982, having as Stallone put it, "triggered long-suppressed emotions," Stallone and James Cameron developed a script which would take Rambo back to Vietnam for the sort of rescue mission that *Uncommon Valor* (1983) and Chuck Norris's *Missing in Action* (1984) used with such popular success. Inserted in this rescue scenario, John Rambo loses most of his internal paralysis, and his fighting ability, no longer a dangerous anachronism, becomes useful to the nation.

The familiarity and tenacity of the idea of living MIAs should not obscure what is odd and symptomatic about this notion. Neither the clandestine efforts of Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot, nor the congressional fact-finding mission sent to Vietnam at the beginning of the Carter administration succeeded in finding *even one* of the 2,500 MIAs. Nor have any shown up since. Instead, the idea that there are American POWs still alive in Vietnam must be understood as a popular fiction, only slightly less fantastic than belief in UFOs. This fiction expresses a will to believe that there are betrayed American soldiers still alive, still suffering, awaiting rescue. To refuse to believe in these lost American souls is to become complicit in the theft of American strength. In *Rambo*, the MIAs that Rambo locates and rescues are withered, diseased, and fading. Closer to the gaunt denizens of a TB ward than the robust bands who execute the prison escapes in World War II films, these POWs are the visual antithesis to Rambo's muscled vigor. While Rambo provides the resolve and fire power for escape, they provide the unambiguous moral vindication for the mission of their rescuer. Together, as agent and alibis of the rescue, they provide the mysterious supplements needed to complete the puzzle of American strength. By film's end, the history of American failure in Vietnam seems to be overwritten by a fable of America's restored greatness.

By the time *Rambo* was released in June of 1985, reconsiderations of the Vietnam War had become entangled with a debate about America's proper posture in the world. The vehement critical condemnation of *Rambo* made the film's central male character one of the condensation points for the struggle of interpretations around the Vietnam War, Reaganism, and the question of American strength. Some critics disputed the outlandish reversals of fact necessary to fabricate Rambo's story. Tom O'Brien points out one: it was the Vietcong, not Americans, who fought like Rambo, using "primitive technology and expertise in jungle warfare"—"American methodology was hi-tech and high altitude" (*Commonweal*, June 21, 1985). But for liberal critics the distortion of history was more pervasive: *Rambo* converted what should be the object of regret and lessons learned into the site for a certain nostalgic revisionary heroism—a memory of the band of brothers now gone. What *Rambo* contests is a settled liberal interpretation of the war as "tragic" and "unjust." By glorifying battle in Vietnam, *Rambo* renews the

old debate about the war, but on a puzzling new ground of popular culture, where it is not exactly the war, but "Rambo," as figure of the Vietnam vet, who is vindicated. Prospectively, *Rambo*'s popularity, as it seems to justify Reagan's aggressive policy in Central America in the early eighties, may be a menacing harbinger of new foreign military adventures. Marxist and feminist criticism has focused upon the pathology of Rambo's aggressive individualism, his compensatory masculinity, and the fascist resonances of the film's association of Rambo with nature.[2]

For the broad spectrum of critics to the left of Reagan, the phenomenon of Rambo's popularity evidences the profound gulf which had opened between them and audiences ready for blatantly heroic fare with a strong Reaganite cast. The films seemed to construct a subject position—one which is Western, white, and male—which hails spectators to an ethos for being in the world which, echoing Stuart Hall's description of Thatcherism, might be called "Reaganism": it values isolated self-assertion, competitive zeal, chauvinist Americanism, and the use of force.[3] By reading Rambo as a filmic expression of Reaganism, an approach used repeatedly by film critics and cultural and political commentators and even at moments by Ronald Reagan and Sylvester Stallone themselves, film hero and President become each other's latent cultural truth. This reading uses the popularity of Reaganism to gloss, explain, and (for many commentators) discredit the popularity of Rambo. In a complementary fashion, Rambo becomes the dream-fantasy in film, the "truth" of Reaganism, now blatantly exposed as in various ways mendacious. This double critique of Rambo and Reagan had a paradoxical effect within the political culture of the mid-1980s: it helped Rambo become a generally recognized cultural icon. It is this critical condemnation of Rambo, almost as much as the film itself, as both unfold around certain contested cultural terms (Vietnam, the vet, patriotism, America's proper role in the world), which allows Rambo to emerge as a cultural icon in the mid-1980s. Thus Rambo as a cultural icon includes the idealized filmic projection, and its scathing critique, condensed in one image. Even for those who refused to become consumers of these films, Rambo, as an icon of the masculine, the primitive, and the heroic, becomes the site of a (bad) truth about American culture in the eighties. The political-allegorical reading of Rambo not only filters the film's audience of left intellectuals and academics, it also obscures, by pathologizing, the sources of the film's popularity. The Rambo films—organized as they are around the experience of American failure—produce their pleasures . . . through pain.

The Pleasures of Pains; or Unsutured Scars on a White Male Body

Rambo is one of a series of films of the late seventies and early eighties which took up an old theme of American film and culture—the individual's struggle against an unjust system—and gave that scenario a distinct new turn. The protagonist did not challenge the system by teaming up with an ambiguous woman to solve a crime (as in *film noir*), or organizing the good ranchers against the Boss who owns the whole town (as in some Westerns). Now the System—sometimes a state, sometimes a corporation—is given extraordinary new powers of surveillance and control of the individual. The protagonist, almost entirely cut off from others, endures the most insidious forms of manipulation and pain, reaches into the primordial levels of the self, and emerges as a hero with powers sufficient to fight the System to the point of its catastrophe. In *Rollerball* (1975), *Alien* (1979), *Bladerunner* (1982), *Aliens* (1986), and *Robocop* (1987) the hero becomes the culture's last chance to save the personal and the human from engulfment in a

perverse system of manipulative consumer gratification and corporate control. The hero arrives to cleanse this dystopic system by destroying it.

Rambo, like many hero films of the early eighties, develops a version of the fable of self and system which dichotomizes fictional space into two positions. The self, often associated with nature and the erotic, becomes the locus for the expression of every positive human value, most especially "freedom." Opposite the self is the System, which in its colorless, mechanical operations, is anathematized as a faceless monster using its insidious powers to bend all human effort to its own service. In their consideration of *Rollerball* (1975), Ryan and Kellner (1988) find this dichotomizing to be the film's essential ideological gesture, by which "no middle ground is allowed . . . anything that departs from the ideal of pure individual freedom (corporations, but also socialism) is by implication lumped under domination" (p. 256). But before we dub this narrative scenario "ideological," and thus in some sense simply false, it is worth attempting to understand the popular appeal of this fable of self and system in films and political culture of the late seventies and early eighties. Such a fiction no doubt has deep roots in American populist paranoia about global conspiracy. But the popular appeal of this fable may also express legitimate disenchantment with an aspect of the modern world that Foucault's work has exhaustively detailed—the diffuseness of power as it inheres in the bureaucracies and discursive formations of modern systems for shaping power and knowledge.[4] Rambo becomes the populist warrior fighting those systems. Thus his climactic act in *Rambo* is the machine-gunning of the "wolf-den" computer systems used to guide his reconnaissance operation. By destroying, or interrupting, the operation of the system, the audience is left at the end of a film with a freeze frame image of Rambo as a nuclear subject, a self etched against a landscape where no supporting social network seems necessary.

In the Rambo films the exchanges of self and system are given the insistently Oedipal configuration of a struggle between overbearing fathers and a defiant son. But here the "father's" authority is linked to the state, and even the "son's" rebellion finds ways to reassert US military pre-eminence in Asia. Thus, when Col. Trautman enters in *First Blood* his first words to Teasle are, "God didn't make Rambo; . . . I made him . . . I recruited him, I trained him, I commanded him for three years in Vietnam. I say that makes him mine." Rambo's public dimension means that those film tropes that are revived from Westerns—both the rugged individualism of the cowboy, the stealth and life in nature of the Indian—are now articulated with the most centralized activity of the modern state, the fighting of war.

Within this fictive restaging of America's Vietnam involvements, the plot suspense of *Rambo* pivots upon a personal drama, meant to allegorize the struggle of every modern person who would remember their freedom: a contest between the system's agenda for the self and the self's attempt to manipulate the system to his own ends. Upon arrival at base camp in Thailand, Rambo is instructed to avoid "the blood and guts routine," to let "technology do most of the work," and "try to forget the war." In these ways Rambo is programmed by Murdock and Trautman as an instrument in the sophisticated war-fighting apparatus. But this process is complicated by two countermovements to Rambo's ostensible mission. Rambo has a personal agenda: the will to remember—"If I'm alive, [the war's] still alive isn't it?"; he assumes responsibility for America's "missing in action" and invites the heroic test in hopes that this time "we get to win." But so too does the system have another agenda than the announced one. Murdock has secretly planned the mission so Rambo will not find and rescue, but instead will confirm the absence of living MIAs.

While the explicit ideological address of the Rambo films helps win their "reality effect," the moral alibi for their consuming violence comes from the display of the hero's suffering. Within the films, two ideas are developed about loss in Vietnam. Both emphasize the cruel sadistic sources of this pain and loss: "we were unfairly beaten in Vietnam, and experienced loss"; "others were responsible for that loss, and they should now be punished." Between these two ideas—one about the past and one about the future, but each emphasizing that blame and punishment lies elsewhere—there is a third idea which is never allowed to reach consciousness in the Rambo films, but nonetheless motivates and informs the narrative diegesis: "I am responsible for the losses (in Vietnam), and I should be beaten." Rambo's unconscious guilt leads him to accept masochistic positions which bring pain and humiliation as punishment for failure. Thus Rambo's adventures start in both films with an act which invites pain. After he is given a ride out of town from Sheriff Teasle, Rambo turns back into town, where he is arrested, tortured, escapes, etc. In *Rambo,* after weighing the advantages of prison ("[I've] seen worse"; "In here I know where I stand"), Rambo accepts the mission although Trautman has warned him that the "risk factor is very high." Rambo's unconscious guilt for failing in Vietnam is deflected away from consciousness, but it motivates that defiant and risky behavior which repeatedly throws Rambo into the position to receive punishment for failing. The Rambo films also enccurage audience guilt for American failure to remain unconscious; in place of guilt, Rambo models an alternative posture for Americans—that of being wronged and righteous.

How might one explain Rambo's rage against the self? Because of the discrepancy between a valued ideal of himself (I'm a winner, the best, on top . . .) and what "the war" made him (. . . a loser, no longer the best, in decline), Rambo suffers anxiety, and a withering self-judgment. Within the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, Freud (1963b) postulates that the self's judgment against the self develops when the ego comes under the attack of the superego. The superego confronts the self with ego-ideals—monuments to that epoch when the father and mother were objects of libidinal attachment—which now transmit certain qualities of the early parents: "their power, their severity, their tendency to watch over and to punish. . . . The superego . . . can become harsh, cruel and inexorable against the ego which is in its charge" (pp. 197–98). In *First Blood* and *Rambo,* pain becomes the occasion for pleasure through an encounter with figures of "the father"—but not the mother (more on this below). In each film that father is bifurcated into "good" and "bad" fathers, so each becomes emblematic of public aspects of America. In both films Colonel Trautman is that "good father," who knows, loves, and believes in Rambo. He not only claims the role as Rambo's "maker," he also insists he's "the closest thing to family" Rambo has. Trautman embodies those old-fashioned American qualities of selfless loyalty and service expressed in the Special Forces "Baker Troop" Trautman led. Crisp and noble in his appearance and manner, Colonel Trautman's formality and precision of address articulates the military with an expression of moral authority.

Opposite Colonel Trautman in both films are the bad fathers—each a symptomatic embodiment of what America has become after the catastrophe of Vietnam. Rambo's opponent in *First Blood* is Sheriff Teasle, a descendant of the corrupt redneck sheriffs of sixties film and culture. Sloppy and imprecise in his swagger, Teasle wears a genial smirk as he surveys "his town," guarding its peace with patriarchal presumption. After giving Rambo an unrequested ride out of town ("we don't want people like you around here"), he offers "friendly advice" ("get a hair cut," "take a bath," "get rid of that army jacket"), and then drives off with a final, ironic, "Have a nice day." When Rambo, here positioned rather paradoxically as both vet and longhaired hippy, disobeys, Teasle be-

comes livid. Teasle's persecution of Rambo is intensely personal, even demonic: "I wanted to kill that kid . . . so much I could taste it." By contrast Murdock, who runs Rambo's mission into Vietnam from Thailand, and then orders the extraction helicopter to desert him, has none of Teasle's animus toward Rambo. As the calculating, and entirely cynical bureaucrat, he has no military discipline: he sweats like a pig, constantly complains of the heat, and even drinks out of a glass. As the duplicitous organization man, Murdock combines an absence of moral principle with a streak of sadism. To Murdock the lost POWs are described not as "men" but "ghosts," and when Rambo violates his orders by rescuing a POW, he becomes expendable.

Although both films stage a struggle between "good" and "bad" fathers on how to "handle" John Rambo, there is enough evidence of the complicity between these rival fathers to suggest that they are in fact two sides of one father. In *First Blood,* Trautman is willing to talk to Rambo by radio, though he knows this will help Teasle get a "fix" on Rambo's forest hideaway. After Rambo's apparent "death," they share a drink and some tough manly talk at the country western bar in town. In *Rambo,* Murdock deflects Trautman's indignation at the betrayal of Rambo at the pickup point by accusing him of suspecting the mission's secret goal all along: "Don't act so innocent, Colonel. You had your suspicions, and if you suspected then, you're sort of an accessory, aren't you?"

Both fathers provide a rich vein of pain to gratify the hero's masochism. Trautman's demand that "Johnny" be good allows Rambo to be "bad," to transgress Trautman's injunctions to "give yourself in" and "forget the war." When Rambo is tortured in Teasle's prison, when Murdock aborts the pickup, and so leaves Rambo to suffer Oriental and Russian tortures, Teasle and Murdock have provided the occasions for the most literal bodily pain. These physical tortures are explicitly presented as a repetition of wounds still unsutured from his prison camp tortures during the war. Thus, at four points in Rambo's brutal processing at the police station in *First Blood,* there are crosscut flashbacks to scenes of Rambo's torture in Vietnam: slop is thrown down into his cage/cell, he is hoisted up and hung crucifix-style, then cut in the side with an enormous knife. Suspended before the spectator's eye, the vulnerability and sensitivity of Rambo's body gets added emphasis from a soundtrack which allows us to hear every ugh, grunt, moan, and scream that comes from Rambo. *Rambo* magnifies the scenes of Rambo's torture so they become outlandish in their extremity—Rambo deserted by his own rescue helicopter, Rambo suspended in a pool of leech-infested slime, Rambo upon an electric rack, Rambo being tortured with his own knife (Figure 1). In these scenes, every possible filmic device—vivid colors, extreme close-up, abrupt sounds, caricatured villains—is used to overcome the distance between Rambo's body and those who administer his suffering. The torture scenes produce the effect of a perfect complementarity of positions, with the relay of gazes closing the S and M circuit.

The hallucinatory vividness of Rambo's torture results from the elaboration of a social and political allegory which is always also intrapsychic and fantasmatic. The persecuting other emerges as much from within as outside the self; the other is always an agent of the father. Because they are shaped by the remorseless demands of an (introjected) father, Rambo's denuding, humiliation, and repeated "castration" become the occasions for a masochistic pleasure that "leans up against," and is nourished by the other's sadistic pleasure. Later in the action, when Rambo controls the instruments of power, the other's pain will augment Rambo's pleasure.

What is the rhetoric of this spectacle—and its intended effect upon the audience—as shaped by Rambo's masochistic role, and the film's representation of that role? The narrative interpolates the audience on the "side" of Rambo—the masochist/victim/

FIGURE 1. Rambo being tortured with his own knife.

hero—but the camera also implicates us in the sadistic position, watching Rambo from the position of his tormenters. Compelled to oscillate between these two positions, the display of Rambo's sufferings seems calculated to produce in its audience a certain disturbing proximity and fascinated unease. In an essay entitled "Masochism and Male Subjectivity," Kaja Silverman (1988) speculates upon the power of the "male masochist's" "self-exposure" to unsettle, by laying bare, the violence which undergirds the social contract. The passage helps us explicate several registers of Rambo's "complaint" to the audience:

> [The male masochist] acts out in an insistent and exaggerated way the basic conditions of cultural subjectivity, conditions that are normally disavowed; he loudly proclaims that his meaning comes to him from the Other, prostrates himself before the Gaze even as he solicits it, exhibits his castration for all to see, and revels in the sacrificial basis of the social contract. The male masochist magnifies the losses and division upon which cultural identity is based, refusing to be sutured or recompensed. In short, he radiates a negativity inimical to the social order. (p. 51)

By assuming the position of the male masochist, by assenting to his own torture, Rambo provokes the social judgment that he is somehow "crazy." Crippled with this "madness"—an anger and insanity that scandalizes the social order—the tortured hero escapes to the forest alone and comparatively weak; but he returns with astonishing strength.

What allows this reversal in Rambo's position? In reflecting upon his chances to survive his mission, Rambo intones to his guide Co Bao, "To survive war, you've got to become war." For the masochist hero "becoming war" means bringing the war that rages inside out, and changing the direction and object of his aggression from self to other, so he can assume the sadistic position. "Becoming war," Rambo can prevail in

the chase (which guarantees the hero's freedom), the hunt (where hunter becomes the hunted), and in those duels with a demonized other (which certifies the hero's greater virtue). But "becoming war" means more: it means Rambo becomes a kind of terrorist—as destructively cataclysmic to the whole established order as a terrorist might dream of being. In *First Blood* Rambo spreads catastrophe from town members to the whole town: citizens scatter as he escapes the prison; his victory over the police in the forest results in the establishing of a "base camp" on the forest's edge with the familiar elements of disaster—ambulances and newsmen, helicopters and the national guard. Finally, after he blows up a huge gasoline depot upon his return to town, we watch the blaze reflected on the shocked faces of the police station personnel. Sheriff Teasle announces a "police emergency" of the sort reminiscent of the disaster films of the 1950s. In *Rambo* there is an even more relentless, and still more implausible, expansion of disaster: from the Vietnamese soldiers he immolates in the brush, to those he blows up on the bridge; to the prisoner camp he destroys and liberates; and finally, in Rambo's return to base camp and its computer center. Every battle generates larger and larger explosions, and each explosion is shot in such a way that Rambo seems to turn his enemies, as if by magic, into nothing. These explosions figure the catastrophe Rambo would control and deliver to some more quiet end. Just as the scenes of torture demonstrated a fantasmatic exaggeration of self-punishment, so these scenes of destruction realize a child's fantasy of total control, of effortless mastery of every conceivable impediment to the self.

In both films the final cascade of spectacular action achieves its "liberation effect" by oscillating from a passive, "feminine" masochistic position to an active, "masculine" sadistic one. Now Rambo can channel all his righteous, vengeful fury into an attack upon the enemy. Rambo's triumph climaxes with Rambo's (symbolic) "killing" of the bad father. As if the spell of the S and M double-bind were suddenly broken, Rambo goes from being a murderous destroyer to a tearful confessor of sorrows. In *First Blood* the silent hero suddenly speaks—of his memories of the war, of his sense of being wronged, of his present failures. In this intensification of the subject position of the hero, the audience is positioned with Trautman as the receiver of the hero's direct address. This final therapeutic exchange attempts to suture a certain ideological meaning to Rambo's actions. Rambo's violence is motivated by America's betrayal of the memory of the men of Baker Troop, now gone, or the demand for love founded in patriotism that closes *Rambo:* "We just want our country to love us, as much as we love it." But there is an excessiveness, an unreserved expenditure about these final spectacles of violence which cannot be contained or alibied by the hero's final speech.

The Manichean division of the Rambo films between polarities of self and system, son and father depends upon a suppression of the woman. This marginalizing of the woman is more than a question of topic (stories of war and male physical prowess) or film genre (the action-adventure films' address to a male audience). As we have seen, the film constructs itself through a set of reversible exchanges between sadistic and masochistic positions, where both positions are coded as male. In this homoerotic bonding between Rambo and his opponents there is strong identification across lines of race and nation. Thus while interrogating Rambo on the rack, the Russian Col. Podovsk says, "To me, you are a comrade similar to myself just opposed by a matter of fate." What is "missing in (this) action," or at least severely displaced, is the woman, the mother, the sister. The woman's position is suppressed because it is not the site of guilt, anger, or masochistic pleasure. But precisely because she is *not* the locus of these ambivalent feelings, it is she who must be recruited to offer indispensable support to the narrative of the male hero. Thus it is Co Bao, the only female character in the two Rambo films, who can step in, from outside the male-male dyad, to save Rambo. Functioning in the

role of the "good native," Co Bao is the Vietnamese guide who meets Rambo in the jungle, and leads him to the prison camp. Rambo is guarded from any initial sentimental entanglements with this sisterly fellow orphan of the war by the sheer resolve with which he pursues his mission. But after she returns to the prison camp, disguised as a whore, and makes possible Rambo's escape, he thanks her. Co Bao acts on her dream of "going to America" with a request: "You take me with you, Rambo?" He agrees, and kisses her. She smiles and says, "You make good choice, Rambo," then steps into a hail of bullets (Figure 2). Rambo's kiss is fatal, because any special entanglement with another, especially a woman, would imperil his isolation, and complicate rather than motivate a subject position able to orchestrate the spectacular action of the film's finale. But in this final battle, Rambo carries a trace of the (erased) female role—in the form of Co Bao's green jade "lucky charm."

Spectacular Action, or the Hero and the Machine

When *Rambo* turned out to be a popular success in the early summer of 1985, that popularity was attributed by a broad range of critics to the excellence of its technological development of the action-adventure genre. For liberal critics the effectiveness of its bracing and inventive spectacularizing of action—conceived as a separable feature of film style—made the film's ideology all the more dangerously seductive. But I do not think one should disengage ideology and cinematic form. My study of the Rambo films and their various forms of appeal for their audience suggests an important symbiosis between

FIGURE 2. Rambo holding the dying Co Bao.

ideology and technology in the development of the action-adventure film in the late seventies and early eighties.

In his essays upon the development of deep focus cinematography in the 1940s, Jean-Louis Comolli (1980) insists that changes in film practice do not result from an inevitable development of technology, nor from the inventive genius of certain film artists who fashion newly available technologies to their ideas. Instead, Comolli brings the history of film into relationship with a broader and more heterogenous factor—the mobile cultural history of the film audience. In his account of film mimesis, certain techniques of filmmaking become ways, at particular historical junctures, for the spectator to both encourage the analogy between the film image and the realized spectacle, and then disavow what is arbitrary and mendacious in that analogy:

> The spectacle is always a game, requiring the spectator's participation not as "passive," as "alienated" consumers, but as players, accomplices, masters of the game even if they are also what is at stake. . . . Different in this to ideological and political representations, spectatorial representations declare their existence as simulacrum and, on the contractual basis, invite the spectator to *use* the simulacrum to fool him or herself. Never "passive," the spectator works. But that work is not only a work of deciphering, reading, elaboration of signs. . . . it is to maintain—if the spectacle, its play makes it possible—the mechanism of disavowal at its highest level of intensity. (p. 140)

What are the ideological interpellations, the pleasurable recognitions, which allowed spectators to disavow the rather blatantly fictional analogy between Rambo and the Vietnam vet, between Rambo's return to Vietnam and that war the country experienced for over a decade, between Rambo's victories and America's failures? In this essay, I have been tracing two actions and effects of the Rambo films. One might be described as diegetic: "refight" the War and win by way of the popular fiction of still imprisoned MIAs. The other is intrapsychic: accept a masochistic position of torture, pain, and humiliation as punishment for loss; then, through a sudden reversal, achieve the pleasures of a sadistic position of utter mastery. But there is a third "action" of the Rambo films as well: the move from an embodied, bound, limited subjectivity to a subject position which is abstract, disembodied, general, empty, and therefore open. In this third action, *Rambo* becomes the site of moving spectacle itself. Here, awash in sensation, the diegetic serves as stage set, the intrapsychic as mental set for a series of increasingly big production numbers, each louder, brighter, and busier than the last. This third and ultimately final action and effect of the Rambo films might be represented as a perverse detour away from any "real" political or psychic object, where "repression . . . is, at bottom, an attempt at flight" (Freud, 1958, p. 133). It certainly leaves behind the haggle about vets as well as the "drag" of the Oedipal configuration, with its doubled and divided paternity. The sheer intensity of explosions, motion, and illusory sound around (you are there) the filmic presence allows the audience to disavow, by seeming to pass beyond, the implausibility of the film's founding analogies. The seat in the theater, in a film designed to profit from the current technological difference between TV and cinema, becomes like the seat in an electronic—auditory, visual, kinesthetic—roller coaster. This is the Rambo film's final gift to its audience: a victorious helicopter ride home to base camp becomes, like Luke Skywalker's defeat of the Death Star in *Star Wars*, an emblem of liberation. On this ride everything depends upon the mobility of the hero, his control of his own visibility, and his ability to destroy anything that stands in his way.

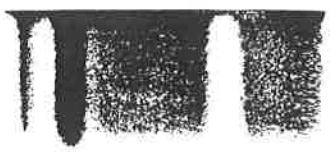
How do the Rambo films arrive at this final ride? Rambo's instantiation as "superhero" both furthers and depends upon a new development of the cinematic apparatus. Rambo's heroic invincibility allows a spectator to pass through the cascades of violence,

the vertiginous motion, the catastrophic explosions of the films' *finales*. The new American hero motivates the development of film practices which, taken together, produce a new film style: wide-screen and Dolby sound; special effects, stunt-routines, and aerial photography; and, perhaps most crucially, editing techniques where rapid multiple cuts become a cinematic analogue to the represented action, and a variety of tricks are used to startle. The ensemble of these techniques allows these films to develop, market, and sell a cinematic experience of excitement, motion, and literal violence.

Rambo's function—as the subject position which carries its spectator through this spectacular action—depends upon sustaining a contradictory relation to the machine. We have noted the way the Rambo films exalt the hero as natural instrument over the machine as technological instrument of a nefarious system. In both films he escapes danger by moving, in an exhilarating regress, deeper and deeper into nature. Rich green forests and thick jungles do not impede but rather frame his swift passage. Rambo's magically sustaining relation to nature restores power and makes possible his triumphant return. This valuation of nature over the machine mobilizes a whole series of affiliated oppositions: feeling over calculation, body over things, innocent nakedness over uniform dress, virtue over corruption, and so on. Since all that Rambo opposes comes to be characterized as anti-nature, these films demonize technology. But although Rambo repeatedly subverts or surpasses the machine from the side of nature, the forest, instinct, and the mind, he is also aligned with the machine. Continually relying upon machines (motorcycles and trucks, helicopters and guns), the action sequences give Rambo's action a repetitively mechanical aspect, and Trautman calls Rambo "a pure fighting machine." In an earlier draft of the film script this phrase was different: Trautman tells Murdock, "After his last tour in Nam, Rambo came back more of a machine than a man." When Rambo's body is unfurled in shiny nakedness, a fetishized disrobing of muscle and pistons, it stands for a natural machine, a mechanical human. "Rambo," the character and film-image, is always already on the way to becoming the robot-like action figure that sold so well in the Christmas season. The ambiguity of Rambo's relationship to the machine gets emphasis in the montage sequence in which he prepares for his mission. A series of cross-cuts show Rambo sharpening his knife, the plane being prepared, Rambo loading bullets, a technician scanning a screen, Rambo sheathing his knife, a jet engine firing, and so on. This sequence fetishizes two bodies of power: the technical body of modern weaponry and Rambo's natural body, armed. The editing represents these two bodies as both opposed and complementary.

Rambo's double relationship to technology—as its opponent, and as its highest realization—gains expression in the ambiguous double function of Rambo's knife. As too primitive and lowly to be a high-tech weapon, this comically enlarged signifier of potency becomes Rambo's Excalibur—a magic fighting instrument which denotes his invulnerability. But this is no ordinary knife. Because it has a compass, it can direct him; a needle and thread in its butt allow him to suture his own wounds; its specially serrated edge can cut barbed wire; and because it is always at his side, it is a weapon of last resort which repeatedly saves him. In defeat, it is taken from him and wielded against him by his tormentors (Figure 1). He retrieves it while escaping from both police station and prison camp. Rambo's knife is the technological supplement, the inscription of civilized technique and tool-making within the body of the natural warrior. It is the one indispensable object that allows him to confront his enemies naked. Without this tool he could not be the natural hero that defeats the high-tech weaponry arrayed against him.

Rambo's ambiguous relationship to the machine is not a simple contradiction. It points to the constitutive relationship between "Rambo" and the cinematic apparatus



which supports spectacular action that can never be simply "his." The basic two-part shift in the action we traced above through both films—from masochistic to sadistic positions—depends upon a corresponding shift in the function of the camera: from what might be called a hostile or sadistic camera, to a camera which displays the hero's power magically. In the early scenes of *First Blood,* the camera objectifies Rambo in two ways: we watch from Rambo's perspective as various hostile agents attack him; we also watch from the persecutor's side, as Rambo receives the abuse hurled at him from "our" position. An oscillation between both these uses of the camera are at work during Rambo's processing in the cell block. Thus for example, the camera pans down the fire hose in the police station to Rambo's naked writhing body; later we watch as a razor is brought in extreme close-up toward Rambo's face (the spectator's position). In both films the "sadistic" camera isolates, fixes, and arrests Rambo. Under its eye he is incapable of agency or motion. Once Rambo flashes into motion, once he escapes to forest or jungle, a new relationship between hero and camera, and, through the camera, to audience, prevails. The hunt sequences in natural settings draw the cinematic apparatus into the wake of Rambo's ingenuity and skill: Rambo seems to emerge from nature, overthrowing his opponents, by controlling his visibility. When the police track Rambo through the gloomy Northwestern forest, each is shot full length, isolated and anxious. Suddenly the underbrush at a policeman's feet moves up . . . becoming brush tied to Rambo's back, who now swiftly stabs his pursuer. Later, a low angle shot pans upward as another policeman passes the black silhouette of a tall tree stump . . . which becomes Rambo jumping down on his prey. In these moments, camera work and editing operate in complicity with Rambo to allow him to emerge from nature with a suddenness and surprise which assure victory. In *Rambo* we are shown a Russian pursuer frozen in a stealthy position against a large indistinct mud-bank, . . . when suddenly there is a rack focus from the Russian's face to the mud-bank, in which we see a single blinking eye. Rambo's arm emerges out of the mud-bank to take down his astonished pursuer (Figure 3).

When Rambo engages in a more open battle, the cinematic apparatus gives him the fabled power to return from death. When his mine-shaft is blown up, or his boat explodes, after a huge canister is dropped on him, or his copter takes a huge blast . . . ; in all these moments, Rambo's life is charmed—not only by his heroic position as it is defined in the script, but most especially by what the film shows and conceals. Momentarily enveloped by catastrophe, Rambo emerges repeatedly, etched in silhouette against a wall of fire which cannot consume him (Figure 4). It is only through the operation of this intricate cinematic machine that Rambo, the natural hero, the hero-as-nature can disavow two machines that enable him: within the film narrative, the state's military apparatus, and "beneath" the film, the cinematic one. In other words, Rambo's "naturalness" helps obscure the cinematic support which produces Rambo's mastery of the spectacular action that unfolds about him, and realizes so much of the cinematic pleasure for the film's spectator.

As the "superhero" becomes the positional standpoint for vertiginous, accelerating action, "he" becomes empty of content. These films may begin developing the protagonist's singular, embodied, memory-fraught subject position, and this motivates the "action" of the film's finale; but as subject and spectator enter into vertiginous cinematic motion, there is a rupture with any link to a specific narrative problem or figured human subjectivity. This is why Comolli's game metaphor is so useful for understanding the popularity of the action-adventure films like *First Blood* and *Rambo.* The Rambo films "work" for American teenagers and children who have little or no knowledge or interest in its Reaganist statement. *Rambo*'s spectacular action seems, too, to have worked in

FIGURE 3. Rambo emerging from a mud bank to defeat his pursuer.

FIGURE 4. Rambo eluding the explosion that would engulf him.

tandem with its heroic masculinity in making it extraordinarily popular from Iceland to Yugoslavia to Lebanon.[5] Within the initial context or problem the films develop—of anxiety about American loss (of strength, of the pleasures of mastery, of pre-eminence)—the solution is the audience's acceptance of our "natural" place in a machine—the cinematic action-adventure illusion of being in flight, in the cockpit of a helicopter, turning all adversaries, as if by magic, into nothing. This is the final reward for the film's masochistic heroism, its technological, *non*-psychic way of turning pain into pleasure, so pain becomes nothing more than the prelude to the vivid illusion of motion.

In this essay I have carried out three critical passes in an effort to understand how the different actions of the Rambo films succeed in working with—thinking and disavowing, representing and revising, evading and playing with—a sense of American decline and failure. This is done first with a revisionary political fantasy; then, through a morally charged drama of masochistic suffering, and justified vengeance; and finally, through the rhythm of a spectacular game ride that allows a "forgetting" of politics, affect, and any confining subject position. Rambo's "success" in working out the cultural problem of American decline depends in part upon the articulation together of these three partially contradictory "actions"—one political/ideological, the second psychological, the third techno-cinematic. But the tensions between different strata of the Rambo films is not merely the result of a "divided subject," the overdetermination of these film texts, or the constitutive tensions between the conceptual and metaphorical terms (like "masculinity," "America," "betrayal," or "rescue") used to suture together differences—though these all play a part in unsettling the cohesion of the Rambo films they weave. My tri-part reading also suggests that these popular films are opened in meaning by the way they "touch" culture at different sites, where cultural work and struggle goes forward on common ideas, in different and competing ways.

Here are some examples of the ways the Rambo films intersect with their cultural moments. *Rambo* offers a model and film analogue for Reagan administration media-

events in Grenada and Libya—where swift televisual military action was used to confirm American greatness with comparatively little cost to this country. When the Iran/Contra scandal brought the activities of Oliver North to light, there was a strong sense of "déjà vu." Over twenty columnists and political commentators drew the analogy between Rambo and North, each a "lone wolf" working within, and against the system to restore a squandered American greatness. Viewers of the Rambo films would not be surprised when President Reagan declared that "Ollie North is a real American hero." But the Rambo films did not become a prelude to American intervention in Nicaragua; instead they were used as a way to diagnose and contest American imperial claims in Latin America. When *First Blood* was at the top of the movie charts in November 1982, the nation dedicated a Vietnam Veterans Memorial which offered a dramatically different, markedly anti-heroic way to remember the Vietnam vet. Finally, coming as they did, between *Atari* and *Nintendo*, the Rambo films offered an analogue to the video game.

How is one to assess the cultural tendency of the Rambo films' representation of a male hero who is also somehow a victim? In the contest for social sway and political attention, representations of suffering produce a purchase on the national memory, media attention, and even the budget. Thus Rambo's histrionic display of his own suffering, no less than the "feminized masculinity" that Christopher Newfield (1989) describes, may be a kind of masquerade of weakness designed to assert the new (and all too old) prerogatives of the white American male. But the very extremity of Rambo's macho self-assertion may have another cultural tendency. Like the subversive effects of the fifties hyper femininity of Marilyn Monroe that Andrew Ross (1989a) describes in *No Respect*, the Rambo films may be part of a cultural fictionalizing of male macho that discredits any literal unreflected assumption of masculinity (p. 161). If to pose as ultra male comes to be understood as "acting like a Rambo," then it cannot any longer be what it might have seemed at one time—"being a (real) man."

After the Rambo films, the superhero has lived on, but has been inflected in new ways. In order to sustain the superhero as a plausible vehicle for entertainment pleasure, various changes have been worked: making heroism an adolescent fantasy and the effect of a piece of machinery *(Top Gun)*; making the superhero an ordinary guy inside a high tech body *(Robocop)*; placing the superhero in a narrative and film style derived from the comics *(Batman* and *Dick Tracy)*. There have been other, more subtly inflected ways to appropriate Rambo-style heroism. When *Aliens* appeared the year after *Rambo*, critics bemoaned the fact that the subtlety of the female lead character of Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien*— Ripley, science officer of the Nostromo, played by Sigourney Weaver—had apparently been transformed in imitation of Rambo. I suspect this simplifies the matter. When Ripley takes over leadership of the mission's struggle to survive the onslaught of the "aliens," Hicks, the head military officer, offers to "introduce [her] to a close personal friend of mine," his "M-41A 10mm pulse-rifle with a 30mm pump-action grenade launcher." After learning how to use the "pulse-rifle" she "indicates a stout TUBE underneath the slender pulse-rifle barrel. RIPLEY: What's this? HICKS: Well, that's the grenade launcher . . . you probably don't want to mess with that. RIPLEY: Look, you started this. Now show me everything. I can handle myself." Nothing seemed more risible about the Rambo films, posters, and studio stills than the hero's gloomy muscle-flexed posture while holding (a hugely enlarged) phallus (Figure 5). A studio still of Sigourney Weaver, shot during the filming of *Aliens*, suggests the pleasure she takes in the scandal of a woman's assumption of the Rambo-like weapon (Figure 6). This image may also suggest that by imitating Rambo with a difference—a tilted head, reposed hands, and an ironic smile—it might be possible to modify by displacing what

FIGURE 5. Rambo with his gun.

FIGURE 6. Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) of *Aliens* with her gun.

has been everywhere at issue with Rambo, Reaganism, and the fabulous cures for American strength—the somber metaphysics of the phallus.

NOTES

**Editors' Note* Warner's essay was written before the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf. Readers may note, however, the ways in which widespread popular support for the war among the American public parallels the multiple sources of popularity Warner identifies for the Rambo films: military, ideological, emotional, historical, cinematic, and technological. This is not, of course, to suggest that the war should be seen as a spectacle or an entertainment but rather that the war, like the Rambo films, touched deep wellsprings of emotion and represented, as Warner puts it, a complex blending of fantasy and history.

1. For a description of the cultural strife expressed around the planning and construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial see *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: To Heal a Nation*, Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow (1985), pp. 82–83.

2. For a spectrum of critical condemnation see, Stanley Kauffmann, *New Republic*, July 1, 1985, p.16; Michael Musto, "Bloody Awful," *Saturday Review*, July/August 1985, pp. 81–82; and Pauline Kael, *New Yorker*, p. 117. Marxist and feminist readings may be found in J. Hoberman (1988), "The Fascist Guns in the West"; Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner (1988), *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film;* p. 215; and Lee Edwards (1988), "The Labors of Psyche."

3. Throughout this essay I have relied upon Stuart Hall's important essays on "Thatcherism" to conceptualize "Reaganism." While this essay develops a brief working definition of Reaganism and the role of popular culture in its effective circulation, I have not attempted a systematic differentiation of these Anglo-American ideological siblings. See Hall (1979; 1985b; 1987a). For a bibliography of Stuart Hall's publications see Hall (1986c.)

4. For a discussion of the popular resistance to "technobureaucratic privilege and arrogance" see Andrew Ross's (1989a), *No Respect*, p. 231.

5. The archieves of the Academy of Motion Pictures chronicled *Rambo*'s popularity: one-seventh of Iceland's population saw the film in its first week; in Lebanon, *Rambo* was the most popular film in the country's history; in Yugoslavia, *Rambo* was the most popular film video rental.

6. The quotation from the screenplay of *Aliens* comes from the "Script City" version of the screenplay.