Angela Ndalianis, "Muscles, Hybrids and New Bad Futures", *World Art*, vol.1, no.1, 1994, pp.76-81. (ISSN 1321-0505).

Since Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone made their respective debuts onto the cinematic screen the muscle phenomenon has become a dominant factor in the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. Muscle, in all its hard and sweaty glory, has found a market especially in the big budget extravaganzas whose narratives centre around the spectacle of the built bodies of male stars such as Schwarzenegger, Stallone, Lundgren, Van Damme, Snipes and Seagal, and the more padded forms of actors such as Bruce Willis and Mel Gibson.

This new brand of cinema whilst harking back in part to an American tradition of genre cinema (the Western, Detective films, War Films etc.) appears to owe more to genres that emerged outside America: the Italian `gladiator' pictures of the 1950s and 1960s which retold the adventures of Hercules and other mythic heroes via the forms of bodybuilding stars such as Steve Reeves and Reg Park; and the martial arts action films popularized by Hong Kong Cinema and which found a very profitable market in the West - and which also saw the migration of the genre into American cinema starring a series of martial arts experts including Chuck Norris, Bruce Lee and Jean-Claude van Damme. Both genres revealed an unabashed display of the spectacle of action and the spectacle of the male body in action. The camera found any excuse to unapolegetically caress the bodies of the stars with pans, tracks and close-ups of various fragmented body parts in ways that always denoted strength, agility and power.

The success of Schwarzenegger and Stallone was instrumental in bringing about a reworking of these `male body' films onto a grander big budget scale. Their impact has not only meant that actors have had to increasingly find their way into gyms in order to pump their bodies but that the success of action cinema - from cop films, to Vietnam War films (a la Rambo), to science fiction films - has revealed a marked shift away from narratives which owe their dues to a literary tradition towards narratives which primarily tell their stories across the visual spectacle and ritualized display of the choreographed bodies in violent motion.

Whilst action cinema in general is concerned with the glorification of the male spectacle, the science fiction brand of action cinema takes this spectacle one step further. Taking its cue from Ridley Scott's *Alien* in 1978 and James Cameron's *The Terminator* in 1984, sci-fi has increasingly manifested a concern with the thematics underlying the gender implications of the pumped up bodies of both men and women (and their cyborg counterparts). Schwarzenegger's first endeavour into sci-fi in *The Terminator*, followed by *The Running Man*, *Predator*, *Total Recall* and *Terminator 2* has had an impact on the articulation of these muscular forms.

In *You Tarzan*, Joe Fischer cites a quote from Sam Goldwyn of MGM. The discussion of Clark Gable can easily be transferred to the persona that Schwarzenegger projects on the screen as a construction of a particular type of masculinity: "When a person like Robert Montgomery comes on screen you know he's got balls. When

Clark Gable comes on, you can hear them clanking together." If we apply this to Schwarzenegger and couple it with Fred Glass' assertion that “Schwarzenegger's body...both functionally and as an iconic signifier, may be understood as a swollen penis, throbbing his way through the receptive material of the narrative", then the mind boggles. Combining the physique of Schwarzenegger (and the connotations implied by his stamp of excessive masculinity) with the active - in the physical and narrative sense - heroines Ripley and Sarah Connor, contemporary sci-fi has delivered a barrage of films that not only obsessively reworked *Alien* and *The Terminator* (most evident in the latter through numerous film title clones, *Retaliator, Eliminators, Exterminator, Alienator*) but added muscle into the genre.

If `balls' are culturally assigned signifiers of power, strength and control, then many women in sci-fi films possess them. Contemporary sci-fi was one of the major instigators of the recent trend in mainstream cinema towards the so-called `masculinization' of female protagonists. Sarah Connor in the first *Terminator* film, and especially Ripley in the *Aliens* trilogy unsettled the narrative conventions of big budget cinema by occupying a narrative role traditionally assigned to male characters. This trend has also made itself felt in films like *Thelma and Louise*, Blue *Steel*, and *Silence of the Lambs* where female leads are placed at the centre of male dominated genres. The shift is best exemplified by the video promo for *L.A.Bounty*, [directed by Worth Keeler, 1985], a film about a female version of Dirty Harry - complete with one-liners: "Sybil Danning was a Playboy centrefold, now instead of baring ass, she's kicking it".

Increasingly, however, it's sci-fi that's crossing gender boundaries even further through a display of bodies in excess via an array of muscular male and female bodies, hypergendered cyborg bodies and monstrous alien bodies. The exaggerated gender traits and excessive forms of the genre have found a niche in the subgenre that Fred Glass has categorized as the "New Bad Future", a sub genre that explores thematics centering around corrupt social structures controlled by Big Corporations who misuse technology and science. The social dilemma posed by the plots revolves and resolves itself around the clash of bodies - human, cyborg or alien bodies - in action. Central to this clash is the threat and fear of loss of human identity as a result of the abuse of technology by the powers that be. Part of this dilemma is played out across the body of the cyborg (for example in *Robocop* and *Blade Runner* the cyborg and replicants are seen as struggling to attain a human identity, an identity that the humans themselves appear to have lost), but the threat of the loss of human identity has also extended itself to the blurring of gender distinctions.

Where *The Terminator* ended with the Sarah Connor character slipping on a terminator-like pair of sunglasses, in *Terminator 2* James Cameron extended this doubling of characters further by having Linda Hamilton pack on a reduced version of Schwarzenneger's physique. Even before *Terminator 2, Alienator* [dir: Fred Olen Ray, 1989] - a film which reworks many scenes from *The Terminator* - saw Teagan, ex-World Wrestling Federation wrestler and ex-manager of Randy Savage, playing the alien cyborg who hunts down a fugitive to the planet earth. Currently in

production is the sci-fi film *Endangered Species*, and according to the latest details the film will star the five time Ms.Olympia Cory Everson as both the human lead and an alien, as well as Sharon Bruneau, IFBB bodybuilder, as a bad alien. Where in the 1970s the former Miss Universe beauty queen Linda Carter was cast as Wonder Woman for the television series, in the 1980s and 1990s casting agents are turning to female body builders and wrestlers. Bodybuilding culture has started to infiltrate the movies, and in the case of New Bad Future science fiction it's had an impact on the logistics of the genre.

The tendency in genre criticism has been towards boxing in, classifying and categorizing a system that appears to be hermetically sealed. The genre process, however, is a dynamic one and films don't only draw exclusively from films of their own genre system. From the beginning of film history, genres, while retaining key motifs, themes, settings, character types etc., have also depended heavily on drawing on a body of characteristics that dominate in other genres. But with contemporary mainstream cinema, this cross-generic development is far more prominant and far more self conscious, and science fiction is a classic example of this hybrid nature of genre. Many contemporary sci-fi films add to the generic vocabulary of science fiction by incorporating other genres or media. *Total Recall* borrowed extensively from action films, the western and film noir, *Blade Runner* from film noir and the detective genre, *Robocop* from comics, the western and the cop film with sequels written by the comic book writer Frank Miller, *The Terminator* from horror, film noir, detective films, and the Western, *Cyborg* from martial arts, the western, and action, and *Roboforce* from Japanese cartoons such as `Gigantor' and `Astroboy'.

The New Bad Future films reveal the interchange that occurs from a number of sources including film genres, other media and the star system. In short, what's involved is a complex and dynamic interchange and an assimilation of sources drawn from other areas external to the generic space, sources that emphasize the fluidity of the defining boundaries. The reasoning behind the dominance of muscular female and male protagonists has had a great deal to do with the influence of Schwarzenegger's presence in the genre - and the body building culture he brought with him - as well as the interchange with the comic book tradition of superheroes.

The interchange between comics and science fiction cinema has existed since the inception of comic books in the 1930s. Films and film serials have turned to the comic book tradition for inspiration (the *Batman* serials, films and television show, the *Buck Rodgers* - the first sf comic, `29 - and *Flash Gordon* serials), and comic versions of movies were also released during that earlier period (*Destination Moon*, *Man from Planet X*). The recent active female roles of science fiction cinema was nothing new to the comics of the 30s and 40s which featured numerous adventure comics with female heroines such as Black Cat, Phantom Lady, Supergirl, Wonderwoman, Sheena Queen of the Jungle, and Tiger Girl. However, science fiction comics were the most consistent in the portrayal of more `gutsy' female characters, not only in the range of characters present in *Buck Rodgers* and *Flash*

Gordon, but also in comics like *Gale Allen and the Girl Squadron, Mysta of the Moon* and *Futura*. Compared to the cinema of the 30s - 50s, comics were miles ahead in their portrayal of assertive, active independent types. The combination of muscles and huge breasts of recent comic characters like Silver Sable and Donna Matrix are now finding their look-alikes in the cinema.

The cinema's borrowing of these comic book superheroes and superheroines has become more overt in science fiction over the last decade. Schwarzenegger's physique has realized the superhero body, and more recently the exaggerated gender traits of comic and sci-fi characters alike have been heightened even further. The mountainous pecs and biceps that Schwarzenegger introduced into the genre have now become almost staple iconographic components, finding their way into films and comics alike. Not only have comic heroes taken up gym memberships to enhance their sizes, but the same holds for the sci-fi heroes. If actors don't have the real muscles, then they can build them by donning cyborg metallic bodies. *Robocop* - directed by Paul Verhoeven [1987] who would direct Schwarzenegger in *Total Recall* in 1990 - saw Peter Weller garbed in a body of titanium armour complete with Schwarzeneggeresque contours. Similarly, *Aliens*, directed by James Cameron [1986] saw Ripley putting on a loader at the end of the film as a tongue in cheek reference to a reversal of the endoskeletal form divorced of flesh that the Terminator display after his walk through fire.

Even in the films where Schwarzenegger isn't a cyborg, his body carries with it cyborg connotations. Through its colossal form, as human, he defines the human through excess. In *Predator*, *Running Man, Total Recall* - as well as his non-sci-fi ventures - he's always constructed as occupying a space somewhere beyond the human; no matter what tests of strength he is put through, the spectator is always comforted by the fact that he'll survive because he is Schwarzenegger. Like a cyborg, he has those superhuman qualities that set him apart from everyone else. His super muscular and seemingly indestructible physique and the cyborg thematics that his body has helped define have had a lasting effect on the film and comic world alike - not only the science fiction comics but even the more traditional superheroes like Superman (who after his death - and subsequent rebirth - reappeared in four forms, one of which was the `Pretender' cyborg Superman whose form owed a great deal to the Terminator style cyborg), and Batman/Bruce Wayne (who, after having a literally back breaking experience at the hands of Bane - who in true bodybuilding tradition took a form of steroids called Venom to enhance his strength - was replaced by Jean Paul Valley who upmarketed Batman by `high-teching' the bat-costume with attachments that emphasized a more massive, cyborg-like physique). In turn, this cyborg imagery has found its way back into body building culture; not only is there rarely an issue of *Flex*, *Muscle and Fitness* or *Muscular Development* that goes by without featuring a story on the big guy, but the magazines are filled with ads for body building products such as `Cybergenics' - guaranteed to pack on the mass for that quality body.

Muscle is in, and it's BIG. So much so, in fact, that Stallone's new and more massive look for *Demolition Man* warranted a nude classical pose on the cover of *Vanity*

Fair. Why has contemporary cinema become so obsessed with muscle, and why does the audience keep coming back for more? Muscle in our society has always been associated with strength, power and the masculine. Though even in this case there are certain levels of muscular acceptability. In male body building, this excess of muscle moves beyond the masculine and becomes hypermasculine by exaggerating the codes and signs that are normally associated with masculinity. The codes that construct the masculine are thrust to the surface and what we're left with are signs that many people interpret as unnatural and grotesque, verging on parody of the masculine ideal. Through its very excess, it questions the boundaries that construct gender - typified in bodybuilding through the reference to pectorals as tits.

With female body building, these social constructs are disrupted even further. The association of women with muscles problematizes conventional notions of what constitutes femininity and as with male body building what's made obvious is the questioning of the `norms' that define gender (male bodybuilding through exaggeration of masculine signs, and female bodybuilding through opposition in the donning of attributes (muscles) traditionally associated with the masculine). What female bodybuilding does is to contest and refuse to be contained by traditional representations of women and femininity (despite the IFBB's attempts to do otherwise). This potential for rupturing preconceived gender boundaries lies on the surface of many science fiction films - and more recently has migrated into other genres (for example, Cory Everson's appearance as the tough bad femme in *Double Impact*).

In the wake of Schwarzenegger and the New Bad Future film in general, science fiction has extended the notion of loss of human identity to include a collapse, or at least a loosening up of the boundaries that define sexual identity. What is becoming evident is that where most mainstream genres have, until recently, strayed away from gender depictions that diverge from the norm, sci-fi films are beginning quite consciously to unsettle the distinctions between masculine and feminine activities: both in terms of the more active roles played by the female protagonists, and in the refusal to accept traditional associations of femininity with the soft and the passive that's associated with the `weaker sex'. Furthermore, the muscle phenomenon has forced a revision of spectatorship theories that dichotomize gender roles into active male and passive female in that these new action bodies contain elements of both - the activity itself is a part of the spectacle of display.

So has science fiction taken on a truly liberating and political agenda? We can theorize about the connotative potential inherent in the presence of muscle in the cinema and we can, taking Donna Haraway's lead from her "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" - as many film critics on sci-fi cinema have done - explore the potential of cyborg bodies in order to construct, as Haraway puts it, a socialist-feminist culture which forsees "a utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender" and beyond patriarchy. However, such writings tend to impose their own theoretical paradigms onto the films' narratives, paradigms that have more to do with

theoretical discourse than the films themselves. Whilst films such as *The Terminator/2* and the *Aliens* trilogy are concerned with exploring issues of identity - or collapse of identity both on a human and gender level - in a futuristic world, in many ways many of the films are also more concerned with borrowing surface elements from films that have established successful formulas.

Vera Dika in *Games of Terror* discusses the stalker films, and the horror genre in general, as revealing a capacity for compulsive repetition. As the narrative and thematic components become established, the films reveal a greater tendency towards self reflexivity displaying an awareness of their own conventions and an awareness of the audience's awareness of those conventions. This also holds true for sci-fi in general and in the wake of Schwarzenegger's appearance in the genre, muscles - along with cyborgs, big bad corporations and active female leads - have become part of the repertoire of the genre's iconography. I tend to agree with Dika that the conventionalized elements of a genre become a part of a game, and the effects of the repetition and audience awareness of the rules make the game possible. The highly ritualized nature of these genres involves both a recognition of these rules, and an attempt to outdo the generic predecessor and, as Dika argues, the "appropriation begins a process that layers references and brings a kind of density or opacity to the films' representational surface". As with Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* trilogy, the meaning of the films often lies on the surface, revealing an awareness of the rules and conventions that comprise the genre, and signalling the audience's awareness of those rules and conventions. This explains why many of the films' narratives appear in reduced and economized form - they assume an understanding on the part of the spectator with regard to various elements including plot structure, iconography, character types and thematics based on a knowledge of other films in the genre.

Part of the game, then, comes from a recognition of the reworking of a previously successful formula whilst also adding features that bring new ideas into the genre and keep the audience on its toes. One of the most glaring example in the genre would have to be the Schwarzenegger effect. Numerous `New Bad Future' films are littered with references to his previous films as well as body culture - be it body building or wrestling. *Cyborg* borrows heavily from *The Terminator* (though van Damme's not as adept with the classic one-liners) and reveals a cast brimming over with female and male body builders alike - including Rolf Muller, World Body Building Champion in 1986. *Robot Jox* repeats the game show format of *Running Man. Running Man* itself is filled with body building and wrestling references (including Schwarzenegger wearing a World's Gym T-shirt) that have little to do with any `deeper' meanings embedded in the film's story: not only is the `Running Man' game show closely modelled on a series on wrestling matches straight out of WWF with Ben Richards / Schwarzenegger - the common man - fighting characters with names such as Buzzsaw, Subzero, Fireball, Captain Freedom and Dynamo, but the cast itself comprises of the wrestlers Jesse `the Body' Ventura and Professor Turo Tamaka, as well as the body builder Franco Columbu. *Universal Soldier* also mimicked the plot of *The Terminator*, luring the audience into a false sense of repetition compulsion, only to reveal at the end that the Lundgren and van Damme

characters - who were killed at the beginning of the film - were not really cyborgs, despite their video playback eye attachments, cold dispositions and numerous one-liners; as the good doctor explained, "they hyperaccelerated the body to make living out of dead tissue" then pumped them with memory loss serum as well as steroids for added strength.

Perhaps the play aspects to watching these films is best summed up by the character Harry Fonatana in *Eliminators* [directed by Peter Manoogian], who's drawn unwittingly into the `mad scientist creating cyborgs and making time machines to conquer ancient Rome' plot. When the reality of his secret trip through the jungle with female scientist Colonel Nora Hunter, one disfunctional cyborg and one ninja finally hits home, he blurts out:

> *Harry Fonatana:* "What is this, some kind of godamn comic book? We've got robots, cavemen, we've got kung fu. Well, that's it! I quit.....This is some kind of weird ass science fiction thing, right?"
>
> *Nora Hunter:* Right.

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