

“You Ought to Stop Trying Because You Had Too Many Birthdays?”—The Making of an Aged Hero in *Rocky Balboa*

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with one of Hollywood’s most popular (sport) action heroes, Rocky Balboa, who, after thirty years of screen history, increasingly has to face the obstacles of age in the last installment of the franchise. Although cultural assumptions seem to contradict the combination of aging and sports hero, the article claims that the athletic protagonist Rocky Balboa is actually perceived as a true American action hero by the depiction of his progressed age as a motivation to once again “go the distance.” The article focuses on the aspects of work and the aging male body and it aims to show how the Rocky series has always dealt with the issue of male aging.

KEYWORDS: age/aging; Rocky Balboa; boxing; work; male body

Introduction

When in 2006 Sylvester Stallone announced to release a sixth and presumably last Rocky movie—written and directed by himself—critics as well as countless studio bosses advised him not to do so, because at sixty they did not picture him as a “magnet for young moviegoers” (Weiner). Before the movie was released, audiences laughed at the trailers and critics ridiculed the project as a joke, as they seemed to watch, according to Philippa Gates, “a vanity play to make an aging star feel vital and relevant to a new generation,” and they named it a ridiculous attempt to live up to former successes. However, Gates goes on, “because the film was not about trying to defy or ignore age, but instead the hero’s struggle with feeling outdated and undervalued, critics and audiences admitted that the film was good” (288).

Rocky Balboa follows the same formula the series is known for and has set a strong, if “not real” and “exaggerated” (Woodward 125) example for the whole boxing film genre: the former working-class Italian-American underdog from Philadelphia is getting a chance to fight against an acclaimed heavyweight champion, an opportunity that, in turn, will give him the chance to prove who he really is: a fighter who never gives up. *Rocky Balboa* returns to the saga’s narrative tradition in many ways, and so does Rocky’s motivation for yet another

comeback in boxing: the sports channel ESPN broadcasts a series of imagined “Then vs. Now” matches in which a past boxing champion fights against a contemporary champion in a computer simulation. The program is fed with information about the “real” boxer, and so, in the “cartoon match,” as Rocky calls it, Rocky “The Italian Stallion” Balboa vs. Mason “The Line” Dixon, the current heavyweight champion, the Rocky avatar comes off as winner. This computer simulation provokes greedy promoters to offer Rocky and Dixon a real boxing match, a media event accompanied by debates on Rocky’s advanced age that allegedly will prevent him from standing up to the challenge.¹

The doubts as well as the negative and reserved undertone in some reviews Gates refers to might also be an echo of Western culture’s devaluation of aging that is reflected in various media outlets by staging (old) age as amusing or as a problem (Basting 5). In this article I regard the Rocky hexalogy and especially *Rocky Balboa* as a positive age narrative, focusing on an aging American hero who in each film increasingly faces the obstacles of age, and who, especially in *Rocky Balboa*, openly fights ageism and age discrimination depriving him of life chances and personal freedom with regard to career choices. Furthermore, as action and sports films, the Rocky series focuses on a visibly strong and active male protagonist whose engagement in the boxing sport allows him to become a “body spectacular” (Tasker, *SB* 2). Thirty years after the first installment of the Rocky series, *Rocky Balboa* clearly shows the signs of age on Rocky’s/Stallone’s body, so therefore I claim that the revelation of his aged body is as much staged as a spectacle as is Rocky’s disciplining of or working on it and its engagement in the violent action of the final boxing fight. The Rocky hexalogy attempts, thus, to be an escapist action adventure from the real world—where age is often addressed as a problem—into a “bigger than life” (Tasker, *BTL* 195) world, where age is acknowledged as a driving force behind the hero’s personal struggle to “go the distance.”²

The Working Hero

On closer examination the Rocky hexalogy can be read as a series of age narratives. All previous five films, too, deal in some way with the aspect of age/aging and Rocky’s

¹ One can easily draw a connection between Sylvester Stallone and his alter ego Rocky Balboa here, the first facing similar allegations after announcing the production of another Rocky movie.

² To “go the distance” is Rocky’s often articulated need and motivation in *Rocky* (1976).

comeback to the boxing ring. In the first movie *Rocky* (John Avildsen, 1976) the protagonist Rocky Balboa is already thirty years of age when he gets the chance to fight against the incumbent and undefeated heavyweight champion Apollo Creed. In the film, Rocky is a former promising and now “waste of life” hobby boxer, as his coach Mickey calls him, who starts his training for a professional (show) fight at an unusual if not unlikely age. This fantasy of successfully competing with the world heavyweight champion sets the Rocky series actually in motion. Moreover, although Creed and Balboa might be of the same age, they should be years apart in terms of their physical abilities with regard to professional training and fighting experience. But the movie tells otherwise: by avid training, his compassion as a fighter and his urge to “go the distance” and to show he is not, in Coach Mickey’s words, “just another bum from the neighborhood,” Rocky manages to build up his body and boxing techniques to achieve a draw in the match with Apollo Creed. This “Rocky fantasy” as I want to call it here, resembles what Lisa Purse calls a “narrative of becoming” in action cinema, articulating “the protagonist’s physical and emotional trajectory towards achieving full occupation of the heroic action body” while an audience is watching the process (Purse 33). Therefore, the very first Rocky film is not only about a working-class man, but also about – in the world of sports – an aged man who, by dedication and self-reliance, pure willpower and compassion, is able to compete with an active professional athlete who has been in training for many years. The first Rocky movie introduces in various ways the age narrative indicated in the prequels and what shall become a major issue in *Rocky Balboa* thirty years later.

In boxing, the aspects of sport, work, and masculinity are closely intertwined. Boxing became a legitimate and major sport in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century and was seen as “the ultimate test of manliness,” a “heralded triumph of the simple, hard-working man” (Kimmel, “Boxing” 98). President and amateur boxer Theodore Roosevelt celebrated the sport a “manly sport” to revitalize American manhood and a good example for a “strenuous life” (Kimmel, *Manhood in America* 139). The connection between the “manly art” (Gorn qtd. in Kimmel, “Boxing” 98) of boxing, work and masculinity is obvious, or as Joyce Carol Oates puts it: “Boxing is for men, and is about men, and is men” (72). Sports films in general present a utopian narrative typical for American cinema: ideal masculinity is presented through a heroic male individual who overcomes obstacles and achieves success through

determination, self-reliance, and hard work (Baker 49). The connection of work and boxing is also made in language. Historian Elliot Gorn has shown how expressions of labor have found their way into the language of the boxing working-class male subcultures: combatants “went to work” in the “profession of boxing,” where training became a “work-out” and the boxers “made good work” of one another (Gorn qtd. in Kimmel, “Boxing” 98).

The Rocky hexalogy as a series of age narratives alludes to the connection of work and masculine identity threatened by Rocky’s impending retirement from the boxing sport. The narratives create various obstacles that make it impossible for Rocky to retire or he will be deprived of his masculine identity and male pride that is connected to the boxing sport. A lengthy discussion of the previous films is necessary to fully understand and appreciate the well thought through last Rocky film, *Rocky Balboa*: in *Rocky II* (Sylvester Stallone, 1979) his devastating financial situation and his inability to succeed in other careers³ or even keep a job in the meat packing industry have him accept Apollo Creed’s offer for a rematch to earn money, but soon his motives to compete additionally reveal his (self-) assumed anxiety to lose his identity as a fighter and as a man. In industrial societies, Rushing and Winfield (839) argue, work results in achievement, control, and success, and if these “hallmarks of masculinity” that society only allows to be enacted at work vanish, men could feel deprived of their masculine identity. Rocky fears: “I think I become a nobody again . . . I’m a fighter . . . don’t ask me to stop being a man!”⁴ The public announcement of Rocky’s retirement in *Rocky III* (Sylvester Stallone, 1983) is then also depicted as a threat to his strong masculine identity when Rocky’s contender Clubber Lang blames him for having only fought “set-ups” and not being a “real man,” an allegation that shakes Rocky’s male warrior pride, especially when he learns that his “false” fights were arranged by an overprotective father figure – his coach Mickey – and about the mechanisms of a boxing industry that seeks financial successes, and not real challenges. So, despite the fortune he already made with boxing, Rocky decides he “can’t retire knowing all this,” and he returns to the boxing ring once more.

³ He tries out for a TV commercial, but is unable to memorize the words and pronounce them properly for the camera.

⁴ Rocky to his wife Adrian in *Rocky II*.

The series also creates another scenario: in *Rocky IV* (Sylvester Stallone, 1985), often discussed for its Cold War content, first Apollo Creed and later Rocky are challenged by Soviet Ivan Drago for a show fight in Las Vegas and Moscow. The age issue unfolds in the binary oppositions of “East vs. West, age vs. youth,” as the boxing fight between Soviet Ivan Drago and Apollo Creed and later Rocky Balboa is announced. Whereas Soviet contender Ivan Drago is advertised as a “look into the future” of boxing, Apollo Creed and Rocky face deriding ageist remarks from Drago’s management such as “has-beens,” “old man,” “he is over the hill,” and “a joke.” Apollo Creed takes on the challenge to fight Drago (“Red Star vs. Old Glory”) mostly because he feels unfit for retirement,⁵ but he is killed by the 261 pounds heavy Soviet champion, so that Rocky feels the urge to avenge him in a rematch. Drago’s manager provocatively mimics Cold War agitation: “But perhaps this simple defeat of this so-called champion will be a perfect example of how pathetically weak your society has become!” Due to the aforementioned ongoing negative allusions to Apollo’s and Rocky’s age, this statement of a “pathetically weak society” is certainly connected to the two aging boxers representing – at least to Drago’s management – American society as a whole. Susan Jeffords who discusses the 1980s Hollywood muscle action heroes as “hard bodies,” representing in her opinion Ronald Reagan’s domestic and international politics, talks about the “hard body as a national emblem” (36),⁶ a label also suiting Rocky in this film since he represents the American national body as a whole when he stands toe-to-toe with Drago. Therefore, the Cold War revenge movie defined and discussed by Vincent Canby and Tony Shaw (267) is complemented by the age component in *Rocky IV*; his decision to finally fight Drago is motivated by both avenging the death of his friend Apollo Creed and defending his country, attempting to prove the Soviet’s allegations of American weakness signified by Rocky’s age wrong. Read in this way, again, Rocky just cannot retire and reject the challenge, because his personal desire to take revenge is mixed with the obligation to defend his country’s reputation actively in a Cold War. Rocky even refers to himself as a warrior when he justifies his decision to fight Drago to his wife: “I’m a fighter. That’s the way I’m made . . .

⁵ Apollo Creed already lectures Rocky in part II about his anxious view on retirement: “It’s crazy how people just care about you in that ring, when you’re bleedin’, but once you step out, you’re ancient history.”

⁶ Jeffords here writes about Stallone’s other alter ego, John Rambo.

We can't change what we are."⁷ Rocky's simple answer to Adrian's objection is as Hollywood American as it can be: "I just gotta do what I gotta do."⁸

In the badly received *Rocky V* (John Avildsen, 1990), however, this hero has fallen from grace after having officially retired as a professional boxer due to serious injuries. He turns down a sleazy promoter's proposal for another comeback "to dump this loser image," as the promoter calls it, which Rocky has since it is his wife Adrian who has become the breadwinner of the Balboa family. Being a "civilized" warrior, Rocky has become "domesticated" and mourns: "I feel like an invalid already." Because he has to "be around boxing,"⁹ Rocky reopens Mickey's gym after the coach has died in *Rocky III*. The narrative implies here that Rocky's age and the accompanying injuries of a life in boxing let him become a teacher and mentor for the next generation of American boxers who want to be influenced by himself and his boxing style, exemplified by the characters of Tommy Gunn and Rocky's son Robert. Therefore, Rocky's next "rite of passage" (Moody 6) is becoming a teacher, allowing him to stay actively involved in the boxing business and in training. This is also a perfect opportunity to escape the confinement of home and family.

Moreover, the movie – as does its sequel *Rocky Balboa* – contains numerous sequences from the previous movie and thereby looks back in time, so to speak. One returning character in these flashbacks is Rocky's coach Mickey Goldmill, *the* aged character of the Rocky films, and thus *the* visual embodiment of age throughout all movies, even beyond his death in *Rocky III*. "Mick" is the gym owner ("Mighty Mick's Boxing," "The Bucket of Blood") and Rocky's coach, mentor, employer and paternal surrogate. His physical appearance is characterized by wrinkled skin, white hair and, in terms of sport and the display of physical action, his body is never really in motion: despite being a boxing coach and manager, Mick never presents his boxing abilities. Despite the lack of active physical motion, seventy year old Mick inherits male agency by what he represents: a witness and bearer of the (Jewish)

⁷ The film's rhetoric also alludes to a war-like atmosphere rather unlikely in any real boxing scenario that aims at entertaining its audience. Right before the final fight against Drago Rocky proclaims: "To beat me, he's gonna have to kill me. And to kill me, he's gonna have the heart to stand in front of me. And to do that, he's gotta be willin' to die himself."

⁸ With regard to *the* American film genre, the western, Lee Clark Mitchell (159) calls this phrase a "tired cliché" to express "true" American masculine identity.

⁹ All quotations are taken from *Rocky V*.

American boxing tradition and history, and a motivating father figure to as well as a true believer in Rocky, which establishes a tradition of its own throughout the thirty years covered in the Rocky hexalogy. It is he whose words echo through the whole franchise: “There are no can’t’s!”¹⁰ he loudly exclaims, also in Rocky’s memories, motivating him to try and “go the distance.”

In the fifth installment, Rocky becomes Mickey’s successor, passing on an established form of training and thus a legacy connecting generations of boxers signified by Mickey’s and Rocky’s look of age. Robert E. Yahnke describes the cinematic representation of “elders as mentors” as the depiction of a “significant role in the young person’s emotional and social development,” enabling a “strong intergenerational bond” (61) as well as passing on a certain tradition significant for both, individual development and cultural tradition.¹¹ Joyce Carol Oates observes the intense preoccupation with its own history, legacy and homage to a gallery of heroes (108). Rocky himself signifies a tradition and a tribute to history in its own right: the *Rocky* series pays tribute not only to real-life boxers such as Muhammad Ali and Chuck Wepner. The character Rocky Balboa provides a reference to the 1950s boxers Rocky Graziano¹² and especially to Rocky Marciano. As Aaron Baker recalls, these boxers share a first name, but also an Italian-American (Roman-Catholic) background and a slugger boxing style (Baker 130). Rocky has a picture of Marciano on his wall in *Rocky*, and Mickey points out: “You move like him, and you got the heart he did.” Moreover, the *Rocky* narratives, producer Kevin King tells in an interview released in the DVD’s bonus material, are influenced by real fights, especially Chuck Wepner vs. Muhammad Ali (*Rocky*) and George Foreman vs. Michael Moorer (*Rocky Balboa*) in which “a guy [Foreman] that age [could] not only compete, but win.” The narrative of the sixth installment, *Rocky Balboa*, mirrors this as well: at age sixty, he is making a living out of his own former career by entertaining dinner guests at his restaurant “Adrian’s,” named after his dead wife, with stories from his boxing

¹⁰ Quote taken from *Rocky III*.

¹¹ Jeffords also analyzes the depiction of the aged father as crucial for the development of the hard body hero in the Indiana Jones and Rambo series. Other very famous aged blockbuster characters fitting this description are Obi Wan Kenobi from *Star Wars* or Gandalf from *Lord of the Rings*.

¹² His autobiography *Somebody Up There Likes Me* was successfully adapted to the screen and won two Academy Awards (Best Art Direction, Best Cinematography). The character Graziano was played by Paul Newman.

past. His new profession now is self-marketing and storytelling, and the audience—in the movie as well as in front of the screen—does not seem to get tired of Rocky's life story. The film's title also indicates this nostalgia: in contrast to its prequels, the sixth film of the series is not a numeral sequel, but bears the hero's full name, similar to an (auto-) biography looking back at someone's past and present.

Although he has successfully retired from the boxing ring and has become a businessman, Rocky feels he still has some unfinished business to do and "some stuff in the basement" bugging him, as he tells his brother-in-law Paulie, who accuses him of living in the past. But boxing and his past are "all [he's] got," he says, and so Rocky's desire for yet another comeback arises after he watches the virtual match on ESPN and listens to a commentator's judgment: "I think Balboa was completely overrated," words that Rocky takes as an insult on his life achievements and his identity as a (former) fighter. What follows is an age narrative mainly characterized by verbal debates on the aspect of aging and freedom of choice. Rocky's attempt to return to the ring is initially contended at a hearing in front of the boxing commission that denies his license without further explanation, except that they are "looking out for [his] interests." Age discrimination is imminent, since Rocky has passed all required physical tests. In this court-like scene, Rocky acts as a lawyer pleading for his own right by referring to every (American) man's right for the pursuit of happiness¹³: "My point is I'm pursuing something and nobody seems too happy about it!" Then Rocky declares: "If you're willin' to go through the battling to get to where you wanna get, who's got the right to stop you? Nobody! It's your right to listen to your gut!" With regard to his proven abilities to accomplish the job, I read this scene as Rocky's attempt to argue in favor of a time of retirement determined by personal choice, instead of a fixed chronological age that has not been changed for over 150 years or a presumed physical state associated with that number. Making a reference to the Declaration of Independence – and not the Bill of Rights –

¹³ Rocky incorrectly names the Bill of Rights as the source putting forward the idea of the Pursuit of Happiness as an American fundamental right instead of the Declaration of Independence ("that legal paper they wrote down that street" as he calls it) signed and proclaimed in the city Philadelphia, where the series is also set. Especially the last film renders homage to Philadelphia, and by claiming his fundamental rights here Rocky also draws significance to his plea through this strong reference to America's history of independence and his hometown.

highlights this point since aging is often perceived as loss of control and independence when personal choices are disregarded. Of course, the commission licenses him.

At first, Rocky's son Robert also opposes his father's attempt to return to the ring, mainly because, in his perception, Rocky's fame has always overshadowed Robert's life; he is not where he wants to be and blames his father for it. Rocky lectures his son:

“The world . . . [is] a very mean and nasty place . . . it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. It's not about how hard you hit, but about how hard you can get it. It's about . . . how much you can take and keep movin' forward. That's how winnin' is done!”

In this lecture and the summation above Rocky alludes to his self-recognition as a fighter, but his statement also sums up his struggling in an eventful but also troubled life full of fights of all kinds. Reading this as the narrative's motivation, Philippa Gates assumes: “The film is as much about personal growth as it is about a fight,” and she goes on: “By offering Rocky as a struggling human being rather than an indestructible hero, Stallone also brought a new respect for himself as an actor and director because he seemed to be simultaneously acknowledging his own age and his own failings” (281). The verbal debates and Rocky's statements on life, aging and life choices add up to the warrior rhetoric the Rocky series is famous for, only here they are also a fight with words in a saga in which the central conflict is always resolved in a final physical box fight. Rocky, who in *Rocky* believes he wasn't “born with much brain”¹⁴ and is thus destined to manual work shows heroic agency through argumentation and advice, achievements and talents he, as it can be assumed, has acquired through life experience. Therefore, his advanced age has enabled him to another “narrative of becoming.”

The Aging Body

The aspect of work is, as indicated, strongly connected to Rocky's body and therefore also conveys meaning in the series. The connection is reflected in the choice of letting the hexalogy unfold in the arena of the boxing sport, for which Rocky's body, his tool in his work

¹⁴ He tells this to his then-girlfriend (and later wife) Adrian.

as a boxer, is put on display in the ring and in training. “Boxing is highly visual,” Kath Woodward declares, and “the sport offers opportunities for the display and performance of masculinities that are both visual and visible” (91). Therefore, boxing fights always require an audience, and there cannot be any heroic stories told in boxing if nobody is watching (Woodward 91ff). Moreover, the boxing ring frames two opponents that are mutually perceived as an “Other” (Oates 12), a binary opposition that translates easily to a Hollywood screen. Kath Woodward points out the significance of “visible difference” in the boxing film (142): Rocky and all his challengers differ in skin color, height, nationality, weight, and in case of *Rocky Balboa*, in race and age, underlining Rocky’s underdog status that has previously only been discussed in terms of class and race (Woodward 143). However, apart from his predecessors, Mason Dixon is not depicted as a young African-American “bad guy,” but as a tragic young athlete who has distanced himself from boxing as a spectacular sport of endurance and who is seduced by a money craving boxing industry that, in Oates’s opinion, trains its athletes to win their matches by quick knockouts (49). Visible difference here is also created by Rocky presenting his style of boxing as hard and enduring work that has been received as genuinely working class, and not in terms of modern professionalism that has always been depicted in the Rocky franchise as untrustworthy and devious.

From the beginning, Rocky’s body is connected to his career and life choices, and it becomes, therefore, the crucial element for Rocky’s economic survival, his emotional well-being, and his identity as a man. However, the aforementioned physical impairments Rocky experiences throughout the series repeatedly jeopardize his boxing career. Rocky suffers from a severe eye injury in *Rocky II* that threatens to put his blossoming boxing career to an end, forcing him to find other sources of income. But there are also injuries directly connected to age: due to constant heavy punches to the head in the final matches in *Rocky III* and *IV*, Rocky shows typical symptoms of the “boxer disease” or “punch-drunk syndrome” in *Rocky V*. One is easily reminded of similar injuries in real-life boxers such as Muhammad Ali. “*Dementia pugilistica*” (Gould 5) occurs in boxers and other athletes who suffer concussions due to repeated blows to the head. The condition manifests itself as dementia, memory loss, tremors and lack of bodily coordination. It may cause speech problems and has been discussed in connection with Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease, both known as age-related illnesses. These finally force Rocky to retire as an active boxer and become a coach.

In *Rocky Balboa*, these injuries and physical impairments from the past are addressed as a major obstacle that Rocky has to face, as I will show in the following.

Rocky's masculine agency strongly depends on his identity as fighting worker in a double sense—fighting for economic survival and as a boxer—but it also relies on the look and performance of his body. With regard to boxing Joyce Carol Oates assumes that “just as a boxer is his body, a man's masculinity is his use of the body” (72). “Muscularity,” meaning visible power, Richard Dyer writes, “is a key term in appraising men's bodies [...]. Muscularity is the sign of power—natural, achieved, phallic” (Dyer qtd. in Holmlund 19). The built bodies such as the action hero's body, however, are not “natural,” Chris Holmlund contradicts, “but clearly the products of individual obsession, created with great effort in the gym.” For the latter, these bodies are associated with the superhuman and “with heroes and heroines, gods and goddesses” (Holmlund 18).

When Rocky finally gets his boxing license, one of the key elements of every Rocky film takes place: the disciplining and preparation of the boxer's body. These sequences in every film of the series can be read as Stallone's way of “disciplining away” physical signs of age working as another “anti-aging nostrum” in a youth-glorifying society that denies aging by covering up the “stigma” of age, as Muriel Gillick claims (3). But rather than reading Rocky's training as “disciplining away” symptoms of age, I prefer looking at Rocky's physical appearance as a “body narrative” that tells his life story as much as the oral stories and paraphernalia do in his restaurant. As in all previous movies, Rocky's body needs to be improved in order to meet a required standard – the above mentioned “narrative of becoming.” Further, Thomas Morsch claims that the action hero's body cannot maintain its “natural” state but has to be re-created through hard work (53) since trained and treated muscles, Thomas Küpper adds, are the “natural” form of male strength (45). Both regard Rocky's aged body as a signifier that tells his life story of a long career in boxing and in training, a body that has been worked on and treated to become an action hero, and that has actually made him an icon so much celebrated in the last film. Here, again, a “narrative of becoming” can be witnessed, when Rocky prepares his body for the final match in each film.

Instead of giving in to illness and the assumed limits the aging process brings along, and therefore giving up on his dream, Rocky starts working on his body. Gallagher, writing about

action figures, states: “The triumph of masculinity occurs only when the screen male exhibits mastery over his own body. . . . The films subject their heroes to ritual or conventional obstacles that, once overcome, demonstrate the fantasy omnipotence of the action hero” (Gallagher 56). Injuries, Ian Wellard goes on, are read as signs of weakness to the athletes and barriers to them, stopping them from being able to assert or display their masculinity to its full extent. Therefore, he resumes, “the general response to injury and pain [is] to ignore or carry on” in order to overcome the feeling of incapacity that would often render athletes as “less male” (15). However, Rocky does not “overcome” the aging process, but he acknowledges his physical impairments and works with or around them. Stallone’s (body) image as a “muscle hero” is based on the endurance of immense suffering (Weingarten 199), and so to “carry on” and to endure whatever happens to Rocky’s body is a main trait of the character and a steady element of his concept of masculinity. Therefore, in response to Rocky’s physical disadvantages, his Coach Duke suggests in *Rocky Balboa*:

“To beat this guy, you need speed. You don’t have it. And your knees can’t take the poundin’, so hard runnin’ is out. And you got arthritis in your neck and you’ve got calcium deposits on most of your joints, so sparrin’ is out. So what we’ll be callin’ on is good old-fashioned blunt-force trauma. Horsepower, heavy-duty, cast-iron, pile-drivin’ punches that will have to hurt so much they’ll rattle his ancestors!”

Ian Wellard with references to Young, White, and Mcteer, describes sport injuries as “battle scars” and as evidence of masculine performance (Wellard 15) that in Rocky’s/Stallone’s case refer to a life that focused on the making of a certain masculine body, thereby acknowledging his age and reveling in what Küpper calls “body nostalgia” (314). Facing the obstacles of age, Küpper goes on, the aged boxer signifies “the real” and “authentic,” expressed in flesh, blood, and scars (46). Therefore, I would call it an “age spectacular” that Rocky presents to the waiting audience when he takes off the bathrobe before his fight against Mason Dixon in *Rocky Balboa*, confronting the spectators with the sight of his trained,¹⁵ but nevertheless unmistakably aged body that is hardly seen on the big screen. Being in a boxing ring, a public arena of spectacular contest, I read Rocky’s performance as a

¹⁵ “This guy is showing up in shape,” one of the commentators observes.

statement challenging not only Mason Dixon, but certainly contesting the spectators' attitudes towards an aging boxer.

Rocky's ability to endure emotionally and physically is also transferred into the boxing ring. Almost all¹⁶ of his final fights last for the entire ten or fifteen rounds, an "incredible" achievement as one commentator announces. Endurance and resilience, as the above quote indicates, is associated with harsh physical violence in all Rocky films. Zucker and Babich consider the violence in the boxing ring seen and performed in the Rocky films as exaggerated, brutal and bloodthirsty with "fighters taking more punches than any sane referee would allow" (126). This observation also entails two additional components: picking up on the idea of the boxer as warrior, Susanne Weingarten mentions the interesting fact that with the increase of Rocky's chronological age, his punches in the last round of the final boxing fight increase as well (202).¹⁷ Moreover, Rocky's physique is transitioned from a boxer's body in *Rocky II* to the body of a bodybuilder in *Rocky III* (Weingarten 185). The sport of boxing itself organizes its fighters in classes defined by their weight, and not by their age. As Joyce Carol Oates puts it, the "boxer is his body [and] the body is . . . a certain weight" (5). She also submits that "the heavyweight champion is the most dangerous man on earth: the most feared, the most manly" (72). Chris Holmlund in her analysis of the aging Clint Eastwood states that the older the hero, the bigger his gun (Holmlund 146). The same can be said about Rocky's body: in *Rocky Balboa*, Rocky enters the ring with 217 pounds—twenty pounds more than the heavyweight class requires as a minimum (Oates 5) and more than he weighed in the first film.¹⁸ The public weighing of the two boxing contenders can be viewed as a kind of pre-match of their strength since it already indicates the superior boxer. Mason Dixon only outweighs Rocky by four pounds, indicating that Rocky can keep up with the younger boxer.

Rocky's pumped up body can be seen as a shield in the way Susanne Weingarten regards the hypermasculine body as protection or "somatic armor (somatische Panzerung)" (214) against any doubts about the muscular hero's masculinity and his abilities to take on a

¹⁶ With the exception of *Rocky V*, in which the final fight against Tommy Gunn is a street fight.

¹⁷ Weingarten cites Stallone's biographer J.D. Reed here who counted 35 punches in *Rocky*, 75 in *Rocky II* and 130 in *Rocky III*.

¹⁸ In comparison: Rocky's weight is announced as 201 pounds. in the first film.

challenge. In accordance with this, Richard Dyer writes: “A built body not only looks strong enough to fight off attack but its hard contours look like armor, as if it is permanently defended” (300). By pumping up the aging body, one could argue, the hero not only tries to prove his ability to control his body by pure willpower and discipline against the obstacles of time; the body itself becomes a physical shield against ageist assumptions and allegations¹⁹ as well as anticipated stereotypes of aged masculinity. In the end only the virtual match grants Rocky a true victory against Mason Dixon, but he endures again the entire ten rounds and draws with his contender. Ivo Ritzer therefore declares Rocky “a martyr of a nostalgic desire for authenticity” (314) since in the real fight it is not a virtual calculation of statistics based on a younger Rocky’s performance, but Rocky’s aged “hard body” that prevails in the contest of “then vs. now,” “will vs. skill,” “young vs. old” (Ritzer 313). After all, Rocky’s final match is not about winning, but about regaining male agency of a boxer whose credibility is questioned on the basis of his advanced age²⁰ and about witnessing a “narrative of becoming,” another making of an old hero.²¹

Conclusion

From the beginning, the Rocky series has been a sport action escapist fantasy, enabling a blue collar worker and amateur boxer of an unlikely age to compete in professional boxing matches, and each time the protagonist Rocky Balboa proves that through hard training and willpower anything – even winning – is possible. In addition to the numerous previous reviews and articles on the Rocky series and the Rocky Balboa character I have presented arguments in favor of reading the series – and especially *Rocky Balboa* – as a positive age narrative in which the protagonist’s advancing age adds to the other obstacles he has to face and to overcome or to circumvent in order to prevail. With Rocky’s advancing age addressed in the entire series, also ageism and age discrimination become central obstacles he is confronted with and that he combats in every movie’s final fight. “Fighters fight” is one of

¹⁹ The commentators dub him “Balboasaurus,” call him a “has been,” and the imminent match an “exhibition” and Rocky’s “last supper.”

²⁰ In Rocky’s own words, it is about fighting for a chance to “standin’ toe-to-toe saying, ‘I am.’”

²¹ One commentator announces: “I grew up watching this guy. I never thought I’d be calling one of his fights. This is unbelievable!”

the series' declared credos, and Rocky's several fights are an integral part of his biography that is covered in thirty years of Rocky history.

The franchise creates six scenarios that make it impossible for Rocky to retire. Either his economic status, attacks on his masculinity and boxing achievements in the past, or the fact that his country needs him let him give up on his retirement plans and return to the ring. Due to the strong connection of boxing, work, and male identity in the Rocky films one might imply that a Hollywood action hero cannot retire from his profession since that is the source of his heroism. Moreover, Rocky does not want to refrain from boxing since that is the work he does best and he identifies with. Therefore, when he engages verbally and physically in fights for his own rights, he shows agency through taking action, thereby enabling himself to another scenario of becoming. In addition, the series makes other positive references to age by highlighting the importance of old characters in the significance of their mentorship and their being bearers of tradition and legacy in the boxing sport to be passed on to a younger generation.

With regard to Foucault, Chris Holmlund claims that each time creates "the kind of body the current society needs," and she goes on: "Media analysts need to define what kind of body this is, or what kind of bodies are needed" (18). In regard to the actively debated demographic shift in Western societies the case of Rocky Balboa's heroic "narratives of becoming" might suggest a more positive view on age as a time of new chances and possibilities. "You ought to stop trying just because you had too many birthdays?" Certainly not.

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