**Action Hero vs. Tragic Hero:**
***First Blood*, Cultural Criticism, and Schelling's Theory of Tragedy**

Balázs Sánta

***HJEAS***

*"Oh man, is anybody winning?"*
(Hal Shaper, "It's a Long Road")

We live in an era of the popular classic: contemporary subjects are getting reinterpreted from classical perspectives borrowed from the history of ideas. Many critics have studied contemporary popular film-cycles, such as *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter*.[1] These inquiries of popular movies, besides calling attention to the relevance of philosophy and aesthetics, offer new interpretations, or reformulate already existing ones in contemporary fashion and language. I explore such a popular classic, *First Blood* (1982), directed by Ted Kotcheff, and the theme of violence on the screen in this spirit, treating the work from the perspective of German idealism and two of its major figures, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854) and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805).

*First Blood*, based on David Morrell's novel of the same title, features a fictive but still iconic Vietnam veteran's lonely armed struggle for freedom.[2] Its success is due, among others, to actor and co-screenwriter Sylvester Stallone's performance as John Rambo, a former Green Beret (a member of the US Army Special Forces). Critics have deemed the ensuing sequels on the average "shoot-'em-up, one-man-against-the-world action flicks" (Snider), and the major blockbuster second part "a testosterone-and-adrenaline cocktail that struck a chord with Cold War weary movie-goers" (Berardinelli). As Nusair contends, the latter started a line of "increasingly cartoonish follow-ups," helping to create the image of the serialized action hero intended for endless consumption. The story has so far culminated in the fourth installment, *John Rambo* (2008).[3] I argue, however, that in *First Blood*, the presentation of the protagonist falls closer to the image of the classic tragic hero than the cartoonish figure of the sequels.

Due to the movie's prestigious place in the thematic history of American cinema,[4] Rambo's iconic status in popular culture, and his seminal role in the creation of Hollywood's mainstream heterosexual white male, *First Blood* seems to be an over-researched topic. Most interpretations adopting a cultural studies approach, however, have their interests outside the dramatic structure of the film. They are concerned with the protagonist's story as a

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reflection of US history, cultural memory, or culture politics, and pay little attention to the construction of the dramatic character of Rambo.

While German idealism may seem anachronistic as an all-encompassing framework for a post-Vietnam War movie, there are certain thematic and structural points of intersection between the film and this critical context. This approach explores the relevance of Schelling's and Schiller's ideas for the study of masculine heroes in cinema. By doing so, the paper also broadens the reception of *First Blood* and remolds the concept of popular cinema. Rather than concentrating on strictly filmic devices, this analysis serves more of a study on narrative structure (cf. Holmlund, "Masculinity," and Jeffords). I contend that the psychological, moral, and social elements of the veteran experience can be fruitfully related to the claims Schelling and Schiller make about the tragic hero.

The veteran experience is an essential part of cultural memory in the United States. Every November 11, called "Armistice Day" until 1954, and Veterans Day later, is dedicated to honoring the sacrifice of soldiers since the end of World War I. As Zsolt Győri, in a different context, observed about the cinematic representations of the Great War, the visibility of veterans has both therapeutic and cultural functions, for instance, in bringing a facet of history stained with violence closer to the public through memories of the soldiers and their drama (160). He argues that the veteran, converted into a consumer product, becomes "a myth, an idealized national hero" (Győri 162), even an idol to look up to, especially in popular filmmaking. The image of the veteran, typically a male having passed the test of physical survival, is also culturally engendered to suggest a dominantly male experience.

The heroic depiction of survival indeed emphasizes masculine virtues, as Chris Holmlund observes in his volume dedicated exclusively to Stallone: "as screenwriter and performer [of *First Blood*], he helped launch a new kind of 'hard boy' action hero and re-established traditional values, promoting a rugged, macho individualism that was nevertheless in tune with the times' emphasis on fitness and vigilante defense" ("Introduction" 2). Rambo's figure as action hero has become a consumer product, and found its way into iconic status and commercial success within a cultural context that put increasing significance on the glorification of masculine charisma.

The *Rambo* films of the 1980s are, no doubt, the products of a then-prevalent Hollywood tendency to make the white male body, as Susan Jeffords asserts, a conspicuous spectacle in its own right:

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> Throughout this period, the male body—principally the white male body—became increasingly a vehicle of display—of musculature, of beauty, of physical feats, and of a gritty toughness. External spectacle—weaponry, explosions, infernos, crashes, high-speed chases, ostentatious luxuries—offered companion evidence of both the sufficiency and the volatility of this display. That externality itself confirmed that the outer parameters of the male body were to be the focus of audience attention, desire, and politics. (245)[5]

Viewed in this context, the externalities of the era (muscles, weapons, and scanty one-syllable words for speech) provide fertile ground for gender criticism informed by psychoanalysis. In "Masculinity as Multiple Masquerade," Holmlund takes two films from Stallone's filmography and weaves his analysis into the complexities of Joan Riviere's, Jacques Lacan's, and Mary Ann Doane's writing on masquerade, desire, and femininity. He adroitly applies the arguments of these authors to the case of masculinity, showing that the conspicuous visual display of virility is, in fact, a masquerade consciously enacted in front of a heterosexual male audience.

Jeffords tracks a conversion of the 1980s' male spectacle to a more internalized and emotionally mature masculinity of fathers in the 1990s by investigating the differences between *Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). She notes that the first episodes of such emblematic franchises as *Die Hard*, *Lethal Weapon*, and *Rambo* had, if only in passing, alluded to spiritual complexities beneath the solid bodies. Rambo's final "impassioned outburst" at the end of the film, for example, although "largely unintelligible" and held in check by the preceding scenes of explosions and fighting, does reveal something of the protagonist's emotional and mental depths. Jeffords remains unconvinced, however, about the scene's overall significance, claiming that the film focuses more on the externalization of these emotions than on "violent and destructive actions" (246).

While the truth of such interpretations should not go unacknowledged, the predominance of masculinity-oriented readings should by no means delegitimize other approaches to the film. Yet, it seems as though the corporality of Rambo's image constructed by the prevailing regime in popular culture has pushed to the background the more abstract and immaterial components of this image. The same is true for violence, the "demasculinization" of which renders legible the symbolic expression of the immutable struggle which constitutes an inseparable part of the universal human condition. The differentiation between the violence of the tragic hero

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and that of the action hero—along with the parasitic dependence of the latter on the former—reveals the assertive cultural logic of mainstream cinema and its insistence on a consumable image. Analyzing *First Blood* as a tragedy on screen according to the logic of German idealism, addresses the film as a vehicle for ideas, patterns, and themes that supersede the image of its protagonist as only an object of consumer society. In order to present the arguments for this view, first some background for the framework of the analysis is in place.

A central assumption of modern thought, especially at times of peril, such as armed conflict, is that human existence is tainted by an underlying paradox between being free to make moral decisions, on the one hand, and being constrained regarding the outcome of our choices, on the other. This empirical contradiction is usually expressed as a tension between free will and necessity or fate. Schelling's work on transcendental philosophy and aesthetics was inspired partly by this paradox. His philosophy evolved from the 1790s through the early 1800s, at a time when Europe saw an eruption of ideas—of freedom, and of the necessity to reassess old social hierarchies—put into violent action. The French Revolution and its resonance throughout the Old Continent, followed by the Napoleonic Wars, gave birth to systems of thought and politics now considered to be foundational to modernity. It was amid such historical circumstances that Schelling devised his system of thought with a focus on human knowledge, freedom, and existence.[6]

In his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), Schelling articulated a system that would later inform his treatise of the philosophy of art, "the true organon of philosophy" (14). He sets up an opposition between nature and freedom, the former characterized by a (metaphysical) unconscious, while the latter, by the conscious mind. These two he views as identical in, what he calls, the "absolute" or "the primordial self" (221). Schelling's notion of the unconscious may be associated in tragedy with ("blind") fate, while the conscious mind with that of the tragic hero. As he argues in *System of Transcendental Idealism*, these two are essentially identical. Necessity ("the objective") is a set of outward limitations on the tragic hero's will ("the subjective"). The peak of tragedy will turn out to be the recognition that these two elements are, in fact, two sides of the same coin—the absolute self. According to Schelling, tragedy's purifying effect is brought forth by this recognition, that the hero's own aspirations (what ought to happen) and necessity (what actually happens) ultimately collide, and are reconciled as two aspects of the same primordial intention of a metaphysical being. This is what, as Schelling maintains in *The Philosophy of Art*, tragedy as a particular

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kind of verbal art explores. "The essence of *tragedy* is . . . an actual and objective conflict between freedom in the subject on the one hand, and necessity on the other" (251).

In order to set necessity up against freedom, Schelling asserts, misfortune must be imposed on the tragic hero—more specifically, an adversity inflicted on the protagonist who, in the past, was fortunate and held in high esteem: "[t]he subject of tragedy is a person who is exceptional as regards neither virtue nor justice, and who does not fall into misfortune as a result of wickedness or crime, but rather as a result of *error*" (*Philosophy* 252).[7] The hero falls due to the tragic error or transgression he commits, which will ultimately lead to the encounter between his free will and necessity. In addition, Schelling draws an important distinction between ancient and modern tragedy. While in the former it is the arbitrary and indifferent will of the gods that embody the power of fate, this function is taken up either by a more personal deity in the Christian era (as in the plays of Calderón), or history (as in Shakespeare). Rambo's story belongs to the latter category.

The veteran coming home to find nowhere to settle down and build life anew after the war has to confront the binding necessity of the law (however unjustly applied by a small-town sheriff), with the only means he has to his advantage: violence (his tragic error). By unleashing it on the community long lulled into peace, he is forced to commit the same kind of transgression Schelling speaks of, and to enter a conflict—reminiscent of what is present both in classical Greek drama, as well as in Shakespeare's plays—that will escalate into a quasi-archetypical story of challenging fate.

For my argument, the central element of Schelling's theory is how free will and necessity come to terms with each other in *First Blood* and give rise to the tragic hero in Rambo's character. In a situation where "fate itself makes the guilty person into a transgressor," Schelling explains, the transgressing protagonist—in spite of being a plaything of destiny, which would otherwise serve an ethical excuse—must be punished, "precisely *in order* to show the triumph of freedom" (*Philosophy* 253). In classical drama, the tragic hero is born as the protagonist chooses to "atone voluntarily for this guilt—guilt imposed by fate itself" (Schelling, *Philosophy* 253), so that necessity may be overcome at the same time as the person is overcome by necessity. As Schelling concludes, "[t]his is the most sublime idea and the greatest victory of freedom: voluntarily to bear the punishment for an unavoidable transgression in order to manifest [one's] freedom precisely in the loss of that freedom, and to perish amid a declaration of free will" (*Philosophy* 254).

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The paradox constituting the essence of tragedy for Schelling is that the hero gives up his freedom *out of free will*—in other words, surrenders it to fate in a gesture that, paradoxically, vindicates freedom precisely this way. What makes a tragic hero and grants him the grandeur of the sublime is that he suffers to lose freedom only to gain it, much like what Rambo commits himself to when, after using violence, he finally gives himself up to the law, the only option for him to abandon his haunting role as a man of war.

In his treatise, "On the Sublime" (1801), Schiller contends that there are two ways a human being may assert freedom in the face of opposition or violence: "when man opposes violence with violence, when he as nature rules over nature; or ideally, when he steps out of nature and so, in regard to himself, annihilates the concept of violence." Schiller calls the first option "physical culture," a masculine strategy well-illustrated by Stallone's films in general. It often happens, however, that fate brings such a plight on the human soul that it is incapable of vindicating free will through violence and is left with the second option: "to annul altogether a relation, which is so disadvantageous to him and to annihilate as a concept the violence, which he must in fact suffer" (Schiller). Schiller expects essentially the same of the tragic hero as Schelling, that is, voluntary subjugation to the powers of destruction or fate. Asserting morality's ideal independence from the world of actual phenomena ascribes to the hero a "frame of mind" Schiller calls sublime, while the aesthetic cultivation of the moral ennoblement of such a hero is identified as "moral culture." Because of the way *First Blood* portrays its hero as an agent of violence, Rambo wins our respect initially by prevailing in "physical culture." Eventually, however, the protagonist fully qualifies as a tragic hero by annihilating violence in a moral sense.

The film's structure is defined by three twists in the protagonist's attitude toward his situation. Soon after the opening scenes establish the physical as well as the spiritual setting for the film, Rambo bears grievances of spiritual defacement when the town sheriff, acting dubiously on the duty of peacekeeping, orders him out of town. Rambo's initial civil resistance marks an awakening need for liberty and self-assertion in the face of state power practiced excessively and unjustly. His arrest and the ensuing injustices suffered at the police station prompt a shift in the story: undue violence suffered is superseded by apparently justified violence effected on the self-conceited officers. As the story continues, violence becomes the central issue and spectacle of the film, which is coupled with a verbal-spiritual act of detachment from the norm: the veteran even refuses the orders of his former

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commander-in-chief to give himself up, and thus faces society's challenge to subjective freedom.

The film's stunning display of fighting skills and physical abilities, the matter of the second structural part of the story, has come to be associated with Rambo's figure due to Stallone's notorious appearances in the sequels. It also establishes the physical culture Schiller speaks of in relation to one kind of the sublime. While this informs the cult of the action hero image, the final turn toward moral culture in the eventual denial of violence will contribute to the development of the tragic hero. At the dramatic peak of the story, Rambo's one-time superior orders him again to lay down his weapon. The order softens into a pledge at the sight of the desperate warrior, who is dramatically transformed into a victim of fate. By refusing further violence and consenting to being vanquished, the role of the protagonist seems to shift again from an agent of brutal but awe-inspiring power to a victim of legal but repressive police measures. Yet, this act of self-effacement does not mean a return to the role of the passive sufferer. This is, rather, the veteran's ascent to the status of the tragic hero, vindicating, as Schelling would have it, free will by the paradox of a deliberate surrender to the objective necessity of fate. (The sublime qualities of Rambo's figure, however, got absorbed in most of the sequels and their reception by the power of masculine culture in consumer society, like physical prowess, martial dexterity, and endurance. In short, the tragic hero has been assimilated and consumed by the action hero.)

In order to get a deeper insight into the processes sketched above, let us observe more closely how the film unfolds. In the opening scene, Rambo is walking down an empty road. Learning about the death of his friend, Delmare, he feels bitterly alone, an experience thoroughly different from the one he was used to as a soldier among his comrades. He wishes to consolidate the past by coming to terms with his traumas, but hearing about his friend's death—an event representing, *pars pro toto*, the passing away of all human ties to his past—undermines the veteran's chances for communal relief. Delmare's death from cancer caused by Agent Orange, a chemical used by the US in Vietnam, brings the horrors of war painfully close.

Rambo's experiences are representative of Vietnam veterans in general. As historian George Herring puts it,

> Those Americans who fought in the war were the primary victims of the nation's desire to forget. . . . Vietnam veterans by the miracles of the jet age were whisked home virtually overnight to a nation that was hostile to the war or indifferent to their plight. Some were made to feel the guilt for the

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> nation's moral transgressions; others, responsibility for its failure. Most simply met silence. (274)

The silence Herring mentions can be associated with the bitter silence of the woman Rambo meets at Delmare's place (his mother perhaps), but, in its proper context, it evidently refers to the indifference, even hostility, toward veterans that people untouched by the horrors of war felt. In fact, ex-Vietnam soldiers, many of whom "lost interest in working and had trouble keeping jobs" (Barr 91), were regarded with suspicion. When Teasle, the small-town sheriff (played by Brian Dennehy), sees Rambo from his car, wandering down the road in a green coat with a US flag sewn onto it, he immediately acts on stereotypes. "Y' know, wearin' that flag 'n' that jacket . . . lookin' at the way you do . . . you're askin' for trouble aroun' here, friend" (*First Blood*). This attitude contributes to the unfolding of necessity in the movie. Teasle treats Rambo with suspicion and malice, literally driving him out of the town ironically named Hope, offending the man's dignity and challenging his fighter's spirit.

Teasle sees Rambo in predefined terms, labeling him with a stock identity at first glance, which the protagonist will eventually accept in response to the hostility of society expressed in terms of law-enforcement.[8] The man's misinterpreted wandering or drifting apparently annoys the sheriff and deepens his suspicion. The protagonist will indeed embrace this "drifter identity" by acting out the role of the run-away transgressor. His alienation from society will grow stronger by succumbing to what Schelling would call the "objective necessity of fate"—he practically admits to being an outlaw.

Rambo's first act of conscious resistance is to head back to town, ignoring the sheriff's "advice." His initial refusal to answer Teasle's questions, but eventual consent to being arrested, however, underpins his intention to keep his peace. Most police officers in the film behave as antagonistically as Teasle, especially Art Galt (Jack Starrett), the head deputy and Teasle's close friend, who grows irritated at Rambo's silent refusal to cooperate. Rambo's silence and, apparently, the fact that he served as a soldier ignite the officer's inclination to bully him, which explodes into downright sadism. Galt hits him on the back with his truncheon and kicks him on the ground, and then amuses himself by having Rambo "cleaned up" using a hosepipe.

The most threatening police procedure designed to adjust the veteran to social norms would be to shave him with a razor. The sight of the razor reminds Rambo of the knife he was tortured with in Vietnam, and brings

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back traumatic memories of his captivity. This is the point at which he can no longer suppress his instinct to hit back and breaks out. The flashbacks of the pain he had to endure in the war shatter his self-control in a moment, and he instinctively uses violence against the violators of his freedom.

Necessity as an ingrained drive of the hero now takes the concrete form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The recognition of having lost his former elite team of fighters and friends, complemented by his PTSD, serve as constitutive elements in Rambo's reaction to what happens to him. His flashbacks may be seen as tokens of fate, inasmuch as fate is assumed to be at work in his having had to live through the war, and now in having to re-live it once more. Teasle and his team threaten to rob Rambo of the only possessions he has left after Vietnam: peace and liberty. He realizes that in order to salvage the latter, he must sacrifice the former. Mounting the fight to assert his self-determination, he silently watches a frugal period of unlikely armistice slip away. Consenting without a word to abandon civility (although ever sparing the lives of his adversaries), he returns in mind, as well as in action, to Vietnam: he is repossessed by physical culture, and the action hero is thus (re)born.

While most policemen are hostile to Rambo, there is one exception, Mitch (David Caruso), a young officer of presumably lower rank, who is not inclined to treat Rambo as an underdog. He disapproves of the prisoner's maltreatment and, at one point, addresses him as "partner," one of the few expressions with connotations of respect and empathy that are in sharp contrast with Teasle's ironic "friend," and Galt's provocative "soldier." Mitch is also the only person who shows signs of genuine admiration for the former Green Beret upon overhearing the radio conversation between police headquarters and the pursuit team set to hunt down Rambo in the woods. With an amazed smile, he acknowledges Rambo's qualities: "I knew there was *something* about that guy!" (*First Blood*; emphasis added). This "something"—as the film has already illustrated by this point—is Rambo's superior combat skills, the attraction/appeal viewers seek and enjoy in action cinema and which, similarly to Mitch, they approve with respect.

Although in Schiller's notion of the sublime, the ability to defeat agents of physical repression is seen as inferior to the true sublimity of being able to succumb to them, physical culture now serves to establish the hero's "high esteem" from which he will eventually fall. Still, this high esteem, achieved by means of physical violence—what might be termed the *mortally* sublime—cannot be confused with that arising from the hero's eventual

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refusal to put his abilities to his own advantage as a display of the *morally* sublime.

Traumatic memories of Vietnam prompt the protagonist to repossess his mastery of physical culture and deliver mayhem to the town of Hope. Vietnam is literally unleashed *in* Hope, but also *with* hope: for, despite his display of finesse and outstanding tactics, Rambo's true desire is to leave the warzone behind for good. He resists bloodshed as long as he can without risking his life, and even tells Teasle that he spared his pursuers, although he could easily have killed them one by one. (Art Galt's fatal fall from a chopper is only an indirect consequence of desperate self-defense.) This kind of "merciful violence" already displays qualities of the morally sublime and the associated attitude of self-denial insofar as Rambo, a killing machine, as Teasle and his former commander later identify him, deliberately refuses to pursue violence to its ultimate limit.

Colonel Trautman (Richard Crenna), the Green Beret's former commander in the war, links Rambo to physical culture as well. He makes a dramatic first appearance when Teasle frustratedly exclaims in front of his fellow policemen, "Whatever possessed God in heaven to make a man like Rambo?" Unexpectedly, a remote voice, that of Trautman's, answers him: "God didn't make Rambo. [All turn to look at the newcomer.] *I* made him. I recruited him. I trained him. I commanded him for three years in Vietnam. I'd say that makes him mine." This sharp exchange between Teasle and the Colonel forms an extremely powerful metaphor of both the soldier's position within American society and the veteran's status in the post-Vietnam era.

Analyzing the same dialogue, Josephine Nock-Hee Park describes the Green Beret as "a slave, an automaton programmed to kill" (163), while Steven Johnston identifies him as the product of patriotic culture, one that values self-sacrifice above everything: "Rambo came to life on the graves of his uniformed predecessors, ready to follow them to their sacred destination six feet under at Arlington" (79). In either event, Rambo appears to lack free will and to be fully consumed by necessity and destiny; furthermore, he is believed to serve malevolent supernatural powers: allusions to hell and the "maker" of Rambo ("*I* made him"—"Who the *hell* are you?") suggest that the protagonist represents a force of evil and is, consequently, already fallen from the outset. Given his extraordinary skills in combat and at infiltration, he certainly is a fearful specimen of physical culture.

The fact that Trautman presents his apprentice in terms of a well-designed killing machine and himself as an infallible engineer is marked by his confidence in being able to predict what Rambo is going to do under

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specific circumstances. Not only does he agree when Teasle calls Rambo one of his "machines," and his "psycho," but he actually encourages that view when he describes the Green Beret's skills at killing. Furthermore, the Colonel is surprised that almost all of the officers are still alive. He advises Teasle to allow the fugitive to escape from the woods, where the police keep him surrounded, and arrest him somewhere in the country, after he has calmed down. Although his assessment appears accurate about Rambo's capabilities, even Trautman is mistaken: Rambo is not a malfunctioning killing machine, but someone on the threshold of achieving self-consciousness and gaining the agency of free will.

Rambo's eventual transformation from action hero into tragic hero, his willing surrender to fate, and simultaneous repossession of free will is underlined by Trautman's gradual change of attitude toward his creation. Whereas the Colonel identifies the revengeful police force that has surrounded the building in the last scene as the obstacle to victory, admitting another defeat in practical warfare, is not the real issue for the veteran. In the last instance when Trautman speaks as his superior and hopes to vindicate authority, he orders Rambo to stop while repeating, "it's over, Johnny. It's over!" (*First Blood*). In reply, Rambo, who has kept silent for most of the film, delivers a burst of speech, the importance of which has been denied due to its virtual unintelligibility (Jeffords 246). Here is my attempt to capture it.

> Nothing is over! Nothing! You just don't turn it off! It wasn't my war. You asked me, I didn't ask you—and let do what the hell to do to win! But somebody wouldn't let us win! And I come back to the world . . . an' I see all those maggots at the airport . . . protested me, spittin' . . . called me baby killer an' all kinds of bowl crap! Who are they to protest me, huh? Who are they? Unless they've been me—I've been there—and know what the hell they're yellin' about!

Trautman fails to appease the veteran, as there is no way to cool the anger and pain that physical culture and the action hero image have covered up during the rest of the film. The ensuing "it was a bad time for everyone" sounds as the last cheap commonplace to pacify an infuriated Rambo.

> TRAUTMAN. It was a bad time for everyone, Rambo; but it's all past now—
> RAMBO. For you! For me to be alive is nothin'! In the field we had a code of honor—you watch my back, I watch yours. Back here there's nothin'! . . . Back there I could fly a gunship. I could drive a tank. I was in charge of

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> million-dollar equipment. . . . Back here I can't even hold a job for ten dollars! [Throws machine gun away, breaking window.] (*First Blood*)

These words do not eliminate Rambo's frustration, only signal the willful disposal of his warrior persona—underscored by throwing the gun away—and, with it, his compulsion to use brute force.

Although these lines have been termed "clichés recycled as formula" (Ebert), I maintain that the reference to the brotherhood of Vietnam veterans is merely one of several possible starting points from which to build an analysis. In its dénouement, the film features a hero on and beyond the extreme limits of frustration in the face of social indifference toward the veteran experience. Suddenly, we see a moved Trautman, his chin quivering slightly, revealing compassion that has been denied the exasperated veteran all through the film. His squatting down to the broken man and letting Rambo take his hand reveals that it is only through *sympathy*, in its ancient sense of *suffering together*, that one may salvage dignity after facing the fate of inexcusable and irreparable distortions caused by war. This change of attitude from an indifferent posture of suggestive knowledge to acknowledging sympathetic respect represents Trautman's homage to Rambo as a man of others' war.

The ending features the sharpest distinction between Morrell's novel and the film. In the former, Rambo is executed by Trautman. The original ending of the film would have been the same (see Haflideson, Berardinelli), but the fate of Stallone's Rambo was eventually altered. The reason for this might be that such an ending, according to the filmmakers, would have been "too dark," since "the audience had made too much of an emotional investment in the main character's survival for him to be eliminated, especially at the hands of Trautman" (Berardinelli). Although producers at the time were not intent on planning sequels, sparing the protagonist turned out to be a profitable idea. A less materialistic motivation for the altered ending, however, may be found in the hero's final vociferations and emotional collapse, with its moving agony that anticipate the pathos of the last scene, showing Rambo cuffed up, followed by a sympathetic Trautman. This scene suggests martyrdom that is analogous with the hero of modern tragedy for the ultimate vindication of free will. The movie's title song, performed by Dan Hill, slowly captures the attention of the audience in the final scene, together with the last cut to Rambo's indifferent expression.

The story of Rambo, as told in *First Blood*, is punctuated with the blows of fate. The loneliness felt at the absence of former comrades prepares

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the way for hostile blows in the home country. Pushed to the extremes by intolerance, Rambo is tragically forced into the role of the Vietnam soldier again. Though admiration for his skills is ensured early on through the effects of masculine physical culture that create a sense of mortal sublimity around him, his willingness to bear suffering helps us comprehend that which is heroically human in his character. The tragedy of Rambo appears to express a strange blend of freedom and fate, a dialectic that has been investigated by many in drama theory, yet explained by few in such detail and acuteness as Schelling and Schiller.

Claiming that the figure of Rambo in *First Blood* has a place in the pantheon of Prometheus and Oedipus would probably strain an analogy too far. Classical Greek drama, after all, has many explicit references to a metaphysics that would be hard to associate with the universe of the Vietnam War, 1980s Hollywood, or Stallone's masculine cinema. Yet, Rambo's predicament and, especially, the film's structure feature elements germane to Schelling's framework of tragedy and Schiller's concept of the sublime. The analogies I proposed illuminate the philosophical bearings of the protagonist's violence, and reveal the framework in which the frustrating experience and identity politics of Vietnam veterans corresponds with the rich cultural representations of the tragic hero. Recontextualizing the protagonist's "blows of fate," however, in the latter context, does not weaken the film's cultural studies inspired readings; in fact, it suggests that the universal struggle between free will and necessity—ending in the paradox of mutual victory and defeat—is never a mere abstraction but enjoys a timeless and imminent significance for culture and identity politics.[9]

Eötvös Loránd University

**Notes**

The essay is dedicated to the memory of Professor Géza Kállay.

[1] Examples include Decker's *Star Wars and Philosophy*, Bassham and Bronson's *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, and Baggett and Klein's *Harry Potter and Philosophy*.

[2] I thank Dr. Zsolt Győri for sharing his ideas about *First Blood* with me.

[3] I suggest that the fourth movie is closer in its aesthetic qualities and thematic references to the first part.

[4] (Post-)war narratives from the 1970s display a number of tendencies, including portrayals of the war proper (*Go Tell the Spartans*, 1978; *Apocalypse Now*, 1979; *Streamers*, 1983; *Purple Hearts*, 1984); and of anti-war sentiments (*Hair*, 1979; *Return of the Secaucus 7*, 1980; *Hamburger Hill*, 1987). Returning to Vietnam to settle some unfinished business was another popular subject (*Uncommon Valor*, 1983; *Missing in Action*, 1984, also directed by Kotcheff; *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, 1985). A number of films offered an overarching treatment of the

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Vietnam phenomenon from recruitment or training to the war's aftermath (*The Deer Hunter*, 1978; *Birdy*, 1984; *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987). *First Blood*, featuring the trials and tribulations of a former commando soldier, belongs to the theme of exploring the veteran experience, along with films like *Heroe*s (1977), *Coming Home* (1978), and *The Exterminator* (1980).

[5] Jeffords's examples include, besides the first three Rambo movies, the Dirty Harry films with Clint Eastwood (1971, 1973, 1976, 1983, and 1988), Arnold Schwarzenegger's first Terminator movie (1984), and Bruce Willis as John McLane in *Die Hard* (1988). This Hollywood trend is often associated in politics with the ideology of conservative nationalism under the one-time actor Ronald Reagan's two terms as president (1981-1989).

[6] A roommate of Hegel and Hölderlin in his youth, Schelling turned from his initial interest in Christian theology to nature and what lay beyond. He sought to construct a metaphysical system that would link human reason—the guiding principle of the Enlightenment—with an absolute source of all being and knowledge other than reason—a central idea of Romanticism. In sum, Schelling's philosophy aims to explore "[t]he idea that the world is both objective and yet somehow subjective" (Bowie, *Introduction* 72), which presents the problem of "coming to terms with the ground of the subject's relationship to the object world" (Bowie, "Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Shelling"). Indeed, Schelling's *The Philosophy of Art* heavily relies on the author's concept of the relationship between the (finite) subject and an objective or absolute world (12, 16-19).

[7] Schelling shares this conviction with Aristotle, who first formulated the character of the tragic hero: "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves" (Aristotle XIII).

[8] Rambo is formally charged with the crime of vagrancy, "the offense of persons who are without visible means of support or domicile while able to work" ("Vagrancy Law").

[9] It is not mere critical improvidence that this link has remained unexplored, while more attention has been given to the character of Rambo as the archetypal macho warrior. The arguments here reveal the traumatic foundations of his violent virility that feed into both personal psychopathology and the discontent manifested by post-Vietnam War social frustration. What keeps the Rambo-legend alive is the ever-increasing doses of adrenalin his screen violence offers. Kotcheff's film reminds us that even legends came forth in flesh and blood, and that the cult of the action hero has its roots in the culture of tragic self-awareness: the universal warrior is a culturally maintained fantasy of the patriarchal-masculine order which is, in fact, in crisis.

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