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Mr. Schnitzelicious, the Muscle Man:  
Somatic Empathy and Imaginary Self-Extension  
in Arnold Schwarzenegger's Hard-Body Movies<sup>1</sup>

*[H]e's got more bulges than a tube sock stuffed with light bulbs.*

*Mr. Schwarzenegger looks overdressed even when he is undressed, but then there is no way he can unzip that overdeveloped physique and slip into something more comfortable.*

1. Introduction

The main thesis of this essay is rather straightforward. A crucial pleasure of watching an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie derives from the possibility of partaking in the actor's muscular strength. Thanks to a process late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and psychology dubbed *Einfühlung*—I will also speak of somatic empathy—the viewer can experience a specific type of bodily pleasure based on a reflexive, prereflective inner participation and feeling-with Schwarzenegger's powerful actions on the screen. To be sure, in contrast to watching Schwarzenegger on the stage at a Mr. Olympia contest, for example, the process of *Einfühlung* in the movie theater is (a) mediated by the sound-supported moving images of the film and (b) can be intensified but also undermined by certain aesthetic strategies. Moreover, in a Hollywood movie like *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) or *The Terminator* (1984), we see Schwarzenegger playing a fictional character. This fact has additional consequences in terms of aesthetic pleasure, since we participate not only with Schwarzenegger's performing body via somatic empathy, but also with his fictional character through imaginary role-play.

<sup>1</sup> I borrow the hilarious term "Mr. Schnitzelicious" from Rita Kempley's review of *Total Recall*.

Certainly, a star like Schwarzenegger may serve multiple sociological and psychological functions for audiences. Hence it would be blatantly reductive to stipulate bodily pleasure as the only function. Then again, star studies have a tendency to underestimate (or even ignore) the bodily pleasures of aesthetic experiences like watching *Predator* (1987) or *The Running Man* (1987). My essay begins with a simple observation: Until he began to play ironically with the display of his body during the second phase of his acting career (see Michael Butter's essay in this volume), Arnold Schwarzenegger eagerly displayed his muscular body *in action*. In the early to mid-1980s, a Schwarzenegger movie without his muscles in action would have been comparable to a horror movie without fear or a porn film without sex. In the words of *Washington Post* critic Desson Howe, Schwarzenegger films were about "Big Boys Banging Biceps" (Howe, "The Running Man").<sup>2</sup>

But why? In terms of the neo-formalist dichotomy between narration and spectacle, action scenes and scenes with a display of Schwarzenegger's muscular prowess can hardly be located on the narrative end. Since the viewer knows beforehand that Schwarzenegger's body will prove its superiority, there are no substantial questions answered or problems solved. The information we receive is minimal and redundant. Action film specialist Yvonne Tasker even observes a dysfunctionality in narrative terms: "As one critic commented, these 'baroque muscles' are [...] 'largely, non-functional decoration.' They do not relate to the active function that the hero is called to perform, indeed can be seen as positively disabling" (78). Is this so? If we take into account the viewer's somatic empathy, Schwarzenegger's muscular actions clearly

<sup>2</sup> The argument of this essay is certainly valid for other hard-body action performers like Sylvester Stallone, Jean-Claude van Damme, Dolph Lundgren, Bruce Willis, or Steven Seagal. However, as the most successful and best-paid action star of the 1980s, Schwarzenegger is a particularly pertinent case study. Two possible causes that might have contributed to his success can be deduced from my essay. First, Schwarzenegger was the performer with the most impressive physique. Empathizing somatically with him therefore may have been particularly pleasurable for some viewers. Second, the extra-filmic knowledge about Schwarzenegger's extremely successful bodybuilding career—a "proof" of the "authenticity" of his muscular strength—may have contributed additionally to the viewer's enjoyment of his films.

have a function for the audience (even if they might be excessive on a narrative level). They are the basis for our inner participation and feeling with his body. Only because Schwarzenegger displays such massive muscularity can critics like Howe speculate that it is "the musclebound action that his fans presumably enjoy" (Howe, "Total Recall").

In this essay I will proceed in four steps. First, I clarify what I mean by somatic empathy, the technical term that designates the viewer's bodily participation in the character's action. The second part is devoted to aesthetic strategies that help to intensify the viewer's somatic empathy in Schwarzenegger's so-called "hard-body" movies of the 1980s. Third, I list a number of reasons why viewers might *not* enjoy partaking in Schwarzenegger's body and even experience displeasure. And fourth, I situate the process of somatic empathy within the wider concept of imaginary self-extension that allows the viewer a pleasurable role-play and transcendence of his or her own identity.

## 2. Pleasurable Somatic Empathy (or, Positive *Einfihlung*)

During the last fifteen years or so important theoretical developments have changed the field of film studies. The once prevailing ocular-centric model derived from semiotics and psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on considerations of visual representation and the application of structures of meaning, has gradually been replaced. More somatic approaches such as phenomenology and Deleuzian theory have entered the arena. Consequently, notions such as event, aisthesis, experience, synaesthesia, and empathy replaced terms like representation, sign, identification and desire. As film phenomenologists have aptly demonstrated, the notion of representation is too distanced, too static, too sterile, and too strongly focused on vision to account for the pleasure our bodies experience in certain filmic moments. To a considerable degree, the cinema addresses the other senses as well; it brings into play the lived-body (the *Leib*) as whole.

If we approach the Schwarzenegger phenomenon exclusively via the question of representation, we would have a very limited point of view. We would be left with a perspective that tells us next to nothing about the viewer's experience. A negative example in this respect is Susan Jeffords' well-known book *Hard Bodies*, in which she studies represent-

tations of masculinity in the Reagan era. Jeffords calls Schwarzenegger "one of the hardest hard bodies of the 1980s" (141). But his hardness is never explored in more than a superficial fashion. Instead, throughout nearly the entire book, Jeffords argues in terms of narrative plots. But doesn't the notion "hard body" suggest precisely a haptic, bodily experience on the viewer's part? The problem is that semiotics and psychoanalysis consider the body not as a material entity in itself but as a linguistic or symbolic sign: it is written and spoken. But an action star like Schwarzenegger is not just a "text" that we can "read." His body does not simply "represent" something we can "criticize" or "deconstruct." Since we always also experience Schwarzenegger as a performing body that affects us, we should *describe* this experience before we "interpret" what his body "means." Elena del Río is apposite when she speaks of film as a "sensation-producing machine" and underscores "the awesome force" of its performing bodies (160, 2).

As part of the rediscovery of the viewer as a sensual being with an experiencing body, film scholars began to utilize a largely forgotten strand of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics, the *Einfühlungs-ästhetik*. During what some authors call "the golden age of empathy" philosophers, psychologists and art historians like Robert Vischer, Theodor Lipps, Karl Groos, and Heinrich Wölfflin argued that aesthetic experience depends on the viewer's inner participation and feeling with perceived subjects and objects.<sup>3</sup> In our context, this implies that when we watch Schwarzenegger on the screen he affects us through various forms of somatic empathy.

But how can we empathize somatically with Schwarzenegger in the first place? Isn't his body extremely different from the average viewer's body? It is muscular, lean, perfectly tanned, and of sculptural proportions that—depending on individual taste—may be reminiscent of ancient Greece, Michelangelo, or Arno Breker. Despite these differences, however, Schwarzenegger's body is, in a very significant way, similar to our own bodies. As human beings we all share the general conditions of embodied existence such as temporality, spatiality, intentionality, reflection, and reflexivity (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* 5).

<sup>3</sup> Even though it does not play a role in my essay, it is important to note that the inner participation of *Einfühlung* is not restricted to animate beings but goes for lifeless matter just as much as for the "film body" as a whole. The expression "golden age of empathy" comes from Pinotti (94).

Since the lived-body is our common existential ground of being in the world, we can understand other bodies through our own bodies (a fact that is true to a greater or lesser degree, as we shall see below). Hence somatic empathy is a reflexive, prereflective form of participation or feeling with others. It is a basic process that does not ask for higher cognitive hypothesis testing or inference-making, let alone hermeneutic interpretation. As such, the kind of basic empathy that I am dealing with (which I call *somatic* empathy) should be distinguished from more complex, active, voluntary, and cognitive forms.<sup>4</sup> Somatic empathy rests on the shared *embodied knowledge* of what it means to be and to have a body. As art historian Heinrich Wölfflin explained:

Als Menschen [...] mit einem Leibe, der uns kennen lehrt, was Schwere, Kontraktion, Kraft usw. ist, sammeln wir an uns die Erfahrungen, die uns erst die Zustände fremder Gestalten mitzuempfinden befähigen. [...] Wir haben Lasten getragen und erfahren, was Druck und Gegendruck ist, wir sind am Boden zusammengesunken, wenn wir der niederziehenden Schwere des eigenen Körpers keine Kraft mehr entgegensetzen konnten [...]. (qtd. in Wagner 71-72)

Neurophysiologists like Giacomo Rizzolatti therefore underscore the importance of "motor knowledge" for the anticipation of, as well as the implicit and prereflective understanding of, the actions of others. Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia even talk about a "dictionary of acts" that each individual possesses through learning successful actions and that regulates and controls our action abilities (56).<sup>5</sup> This holds not only for actual people present in the here and now, but also for fictional characters absent/present as sound-supported moving images.

Action movies remind us how important the viewer's motor system is in following a motion picture. When we follow actions (i.e., goal-directed movement) on the screen, we "move" and "act" ourselves, in a manner of speaking. As embodied viewers, we always to a certain

<sup>4</sup> These forms have acquired various names: "empathic emotion," "imaginative empathy," "reactive empathy," or "enactment empathy" (Tan 199), respectively. For the notion of somatic empathy, see also Morsch and Noll Brinckmann.

<sup>5</sup> The notions "motor knowledge" and "dictionary of acts" are my translations of the German expressions "motorisches Wissen" and "Wörterbuch der Akte."

degree “run,” “fight,” and “destroy” with Schwarzenegger and his characters. Watching Conan, the Terminator, or Dutch in *Predator* act evokes a reflexive inner tendency to act similarly ourselves. To be sure, we do not initiate an *effective* act; our imitation always remains a *potential* act. But this potential act nonetheless involves us bodily. Karl Groos argued that in moments of intense aesthetic pleasure we get the impression that an inner activity reproduces the perceived outer act (171). In this context, Groos also used the illuminating term “kinesthetic reproduction” (“kinästhetische Nacherzeugung”). We feel with Conan when he works slavishly at the Wheel of Pain going around in circles for years. We feel with Douglas Quaid when he uses his drill at a construction site in *Total Recall* (1990). And we feel with Ben Richards in *The Running Man* when he carries a huge steel beam as a prisoner in a penal colony. Through visually and aurally stimulated *motor mimicry* (the first type of somatic empathy), we participate in Schwarzenegger’s goal-oriented movements. When Conan grabs his sword, we also rely on our embodied knowledge of how it feels like to touch metal and therefore participate in *sensation mimicry* (the second type). And, finally, being involved in affective mimicry (the third type), we might feel furious when we perceive Dutch’s anger in *Predator*. These are the three main types of somatic empathy: the inner reproduction of *actions*, bodily *sensations*, and basic *emotions* and *affects*.

Since the process of somatic empathy is so basic, it requires very little from the moviegoer. Some preconditions do exist, however. First, we need to assume an aesthetic attitude, i.e., follow the film openly and attentively. Distracted viewing can reduce or even block somatic empathy. Second, we must show a certain empathy readiness, i.e., allow ourselves to feel with Schwarzenegger’s body. An aversive stance—due to whatever form of antipathy—can hinder our inner participation. Third, the actions and situations in the film have to be shown in an accurate way so that we can follow the actions appropriately in visual and auditory fashion. A scene shown from afar and without sound will certainly reduce the viewer’s ability to empathize with the onscreen action. Fourth, a certain familiarity with the actions and situations we perceive is mandatory; the more “natural” they seem to us, the easier we will empathize with them. Although in most cases like running, jumping, or drilling this can be taken for granted, some actions and situations will always be more familiar to some viewers than to others. For

instance, viewers who have a greater motor repertoire in (i.e., possess more embodied knowledge about) fighting or lifting heavy weights can empathize more easily when those activities are shown in the film. An interesting brain imaging experiment backs this assumption. Researchers from University College London used fMRI scans to compare the way ballet dancers and capoeiristas responded to watching their own kind of dance as well as the dance they were not experts in. The results showed that brain activity in motor simulation regions were stronger when dancers watched the movements that they knew as compared to those that they had not performed before (Calvo-Merino et al.). On a more general level, Groos speculated that in terms of the aesthetic pleasure derived from inner participation people with greater motor skills (“motorisch Veranlagte”) might be privileged (170).

Fifth, we need a minimal background belief in what we see, or, to put it differently, the more we understand the bodily actions we see as *possible* and *real*, the easier we will be able to reproduce them kinesthetically. Here it is crucial to remember that in narrative films the actors on the screen are always present ambiguously, smoothly blending their *real* phenomenal bodies with the bodies of the *fictional* characters. However, the performative dimension of the actor’s real body can easily come to the fore and captivate the audience more strongly than the representational dimension of the character. In these cases it is important to note that the viewer draws on and profits from not only the deeply engrained *embodied* knowledge about other bodies (that we all share to a certain degree), but also his or her individual *world* knowledge about Arnold Schwarzenegger.<sup>6</sup> Since many viewers know that he is a former Mr. Olympia who has worked out heavily to acquire his muscular physique, they know that Schwarzenegger does not have to wear a “muscle suit,” that he does not need a body double and that he does not rely on support from digital special effects. What you see is what you get.<sup>7</sup> In Schwarzenegger’s 1980s hard-body films interfering thoughts

<sup>6</sup> Information can come from everything publicly available about Schwarzenegger: his other films, public appearances and speeches, studio hand-outs, reviews, interviews, advertisement, internet blogs, biographies, and press coverage of the star’s doings and “private” life (Dyer 2-3).

<sup>7</sup> That individual world knowledge can also undermine somatic empathy becomes clear in the following statement of a participant in an empirical study concerning Sylvester Stallone, in which an interviewee called “Andy”

such as “nothing looks real in this film, everything seems to be based on special effects” will rarely undermine the effect. Again, evidence for the importance of our understanding that the bodily actions we see are real comes from brain imaging studies. In a neurophysiologic experiment the positron emission tomography (PET) registered no noteworthy activity in the motor areas of the subjects’ brains when they watched images of an *artificial* grasping hand created by *virtual reality technology*. However, the PET delivered positive results when the subjects watched a *real* grasping hand (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 126).

Now, one crucial question remains: where does the pleasure come from? If somatic empathy is a reflexive, prereflective form of inner participation, why do people enjoy partaking in Schwarzenegger’s energetic force and successful muscular actions? And why is it less likely that we enjoy feeling with someone frail and unable to reach a certain goal? According to Lipps, “positive *Einfühlung*” implies that the impulse instigated by the aesthetically perceived object that causes me to experience and feel myself in a certain way must be appropriate and confer with my own needs and impulses to experience myself (360). In other words, the aesthetic experience must confirm and enhance my own inner self. While we might grow with the ease, force, and power that allow Schwarzenegger’s body to achieve a certain goal, we would most likely contradict our own needs and impulses by watching someone weak constantly blocked from advancing his actions. However, this is not to deny the importance of negative *Einfühlung* in a film like *Red Heat* or *Terminator*. Because the process works so easily, we empathize with Schwarzenegger *and* his frequently weak and stupid opponents, thus experiencing positive *as well as* negative *Einfühlung*. I argue that it is precisely against the backdrop of the negative that our positive empathy with Schwarzenegger’s successful powerful actions stands out more prominently.

But isn’t the process of somatic empathy also activated when we watch someone else in a real-life situation? And if this is the case, how can we qualify partaking in Schwarzenegger’s forceful actions as an *aesthetic* pleasure? The answer obviously depends on how we define

comments on the star’s age: “As he’s got [*sic*] older he’s less convincing in the action roles that I enjoy. If he was to pump himself up for another boxing film... I would find it hard to place any credibility against such pursuits as it would be misplaced largely because of his age” (qtd. in Huffer 163).

aesthetic experience. Personally, I consider it hard to draw a line between watching, say, a soccer game, an Olympic ice-skating contest, and a ballet performance—all of them imply an aesthetic *experience*, even if their aesthetic *value* might be weighed differently. At the very least, we can say that in contrast to numerous socially interactive situations, which involve us directly, the comparatively inactive observer position of the movie theater allows us to be more aware. In everyday life our involvement often pushes the process of somatic empathy to the fringe of our field of consciousness, because we have to control our responsive actions. Sociologist Jack Katz explains:

If I am speaking to you in a lecture hall, you may indulge yourself in fanciful considerations of my physique, my body motions, the idiosyncrasies of the designs that my gestures make as I speak, etc. But if we are talking with *each other*, you will be pressed to hear and see through my speech in order that you might *respond* to it. In face-to-face interaction, what one person says to another is almost constantly meaningful to the latter as a series of indications of when, how, and to what the latter should respond. As a result, the listening respondent in face-to-face talk is *not free* to focus on the speaker’s body. The listening party is more or less constantly geared to the image of self that he or she anticipates creating for the other via various lines of potential response. (268; emphasis added)

Even in everyday situations in which we are mere onlookers, the situation might still involve a potential call to intervene and participate actively. On the other hand, the absence of goal-directed actions and potential calls to intervene due to the unbridgeable ontological distance to the fictional world of the film can make us more conscious of our experience. Since we never need to act with our own bodies, the inner motor mimicry might be experienced as particularly *intense*.

Importantly, a crucial phenomenological difference exists between (a) *being* Schwarzenegger in a specific situation, (b) following his actions with *active imitation*, and (c) partaking in his actions as a motionless observer via *somatic empathy*. Since I do not outwardly imitate Schwarzenegger’s onscreen actions with my whole body but am involved in inner mimicry, I do not experience *my* body in action. What I experience is my own body activated via the perception of *someone else’s* active body. Since (in a way) I am *in* that other body, a partial



dislocation of the self takes place: I am simultaneously here and there. I am me and I am Schwarzenegger's body at the same time. I do not experience my body as actively following my own impulse, my own will, my own voluntary action. Instead, I feel my body passively activated through observational participation in the doings of another's body. We do not feel straightforwardly; rather, we feel with and through someone else. We do not "produce" kinesthetically ourselves, but rather experience an inner kinesthetic *re*-production. In the cinema there is a significant discrepancy between my own motionless motor passivity and Schwarzenegger's forceful motor activity: only because I sit passively and unmoving here and now in the movie theater am I simultaneously able to move and fight *with* Schwarzenegger's energetic body in the then and there of the filmic world. As French film theorist Edgar Morin once noted about this nexus of motor stillness and audiovisual kinesthesia:

The absence or the atrophy of motor, practical, or active participation (one of these adjectives is more suitable than the others depending on the particular case) is closely linked to psychological and affective participation. Unable to express itself in action, the spectator's participation becomes internal, felt. [...] the absence of practical participation establishes an intense affective participation: veritable transfers take place between the soul of the spectator and the spectacle on the screen. (95)

Were I to follow Schwarzenegger's actions not with passive inner mimicry but with active outer imitation—i.e., copy his movements with my whole body—my field of consciousness would be dominated first and foremost by my active outer imitation rather than by my passive inner participation. I would experience myself acting, but I would not be passively active. Of course, this passive activity implies strong and rather intense bodily feelings that *resemble* those we see on the screen, but they are certainly phenomenologically distinguishable.

Once we admit that these bodily feelings can be pleasurable in and of themselves, we can begin to untangle viewing pleasures such as those originating in somatic empathy from the tight grip of the psychoanalytic model of desire. As a consequence, accounts of viewing pleasure will become less monolithic and more flexible. Let me briefly illustrate this element of my argument by looking at research that pretends to work with social scientific methodology but which nevertheless relies on the influential psychoanalytic model of desire. Ian Huffer conducted an

empirical fan study to investigate the reasons male viewers enjoy Sylvester Stallone films. "Paul" provided precisely the answer that we would expect if we were to look at hard-body films from the psychoanalytic perspective: "Stallone's body is the prime reason for his success and therefore the main attraction to any of his films. *We do not have, but we all want, a physique like his* and so that is why we want to watch his films" (qtd. in Huffer 160; emphasis added). Accordingly, Huffer argues that it is Stallone's "sculpted body" which makes him an aspirational figure to "Paul" (161). The viewer identifies with the representation of the Stallone body, a body that he desires to have but does not.

I consider this argument problematic in two ways. First, it is certainly a bold exaggeration that everybody who enjoys Stallone or Schwarzenegger films necessarily wants to *look like* Sly and Arnie. From the fact that I like to watch their bodies in action does not automatically follow that I want to have their physique—I can simply gain bodily pleasure from partaking in their successful actions and strength via somatic empathy. Similarly, just because I enjoy empathizing with Jackie Chan fight, Fred Astaire dance, or Dumbo fly does not imply that I want to look or have a physique like Chan or Astaire (let alone Dumbo). As mentioned, "positive *Einfühlung*" implies that the impulse to *experience* myself instigated by the aesthetically perceived object must be appropriate and confer with my own needs and impulses to *experience myself*; it does not mean that I want to feel (or even be) like the aesthetically perceived object.<sup>8</sup>

Second, since the psychoanalytic theory of desire so strongly focuses on sexuality, it has to revert to complicated notions of identification and anxiety in order to explain the male viewer's pleasure in watching male bodies, a desire that from the psychoanalytic viewpoint must have homosexual undertones. As Huffer comments on why "Paul" likes Stallone's *action* films, but not his comedies (*Oscar*) or more serious fare

<sup>8</sup> In a recent article, Susan Hayward criticizes the psychoanalytic concept of desire on similar grounds. Arguing from a Deleuzian perspective she notes, "surely, it is not just what they [the stars] *represent* that needs to be understood [...] but what they do and what *affects* they have or can cause." Hayward emphasizes that for Deleuze desire does not mean the overcoming of loss, lack, or separation, but a process of striving and self-enhancement—whereby self-enhancement is meant as quality of self-growth (253; emphases added).

(*Copland*), "The necessity of action may be [...] the result of a certain *anxiety* in gaining pleasure from the male form, the action giving it a purpose" (166). But why introduce the notion of "anxiety" here? And why presuppose that male viewers (unconsciously) desire the bodies of Schwarzenegger or Stallone in sexual ways? Wouldn't it be more plausible to claim that viewers prefer Stallone and Schwarzenegger in action films because it is here that these actors can enable the kind of bodily pleasure via somatic empathy that their muscles are made for, something they cannot do in comedies and art house films?

### 3. Aesthetic Strategies of Somatic Empathy

In this section I want to look briefly at some aesthetic strategies used in Schwarzenegger's hard-body movies. Filmmakers have to make certain aesthetic choices in order to facilitate the process of *Einfühlung*, particularly pertaining to questions of plot, camera position, sound effects, editing, and timing. The first choice involves the level of the plot: filmmakers have to find ways to show—not just to imply—Schwarzenegger in action, preferably an action that is strenuous and challenging. Imagine Schwarzenegger with a steel beam on his shoulder in *Running Man* or carrying an ax and the trunk of a large tree down a mountainside in *Commando* (1985). Not for nothing is the Austrian's most popular genre called the *action* film. To think of Schwarzenegger's films first and foremost in terms of their "representation" or "image" of hard bodies would be misleading. Even though Tasker describes the heroes of hard-body action films as "pin-ups," action heroes are heroes in action, not static posters on the wall (9).

However, for the viewer to empathize properly with Schwarzenegger's strenuous actions on the screen, the film has to give us good access to and even take us close to the bodily activities we are supposed to feel with. This is the second aesthetic strategy I want to mention: the choice of camera position and sound effects. Early on in *Predator*, Schwarzenegger's character Dutch and his friend, CIA agent Dillon (Carl Weathers), greet each other with a loud slap and immediately start arm-wrestling. We see their glistening veins, sweating forearm muscles, and biceps protruding in close-up. The arms shake and shiver, further indicating that real force is being used. Generally, the cinema's sound-

supported moving images are better suited to bring us close to human actions than many situations in everyday life. What the cinema might lack in terms of live presence, it compensates for with its ability to present the active bodies from different sides and angles, to show them in detail, to bring us close to them. This structural ability must be activated through aesthetic decisions—the film can just as easily remain distanced from its characters and downplay somatic empathy (as the cinema of Robert Bresson or the Berlin School underscores, for instance).

My third point concerns the choice between revealing long shots and concealing editing. To be sure, in order to optimize the viewer's *Einfühlung*, the filmmaker should not raise doubts about the aforementioned fact that "what we see is what we get." Once we doubt what is going on, somatic empathy is compromised. However, sometimes a slight suspicion as to whether the onscreen action is possible and real is preferable to straightforwardly perceiving a bodily lack of ability. In Schwarzenegger's case, this principle becomes obvious *ex negativo* in scenes that rely less on muscular force and more on martial skills. In an illuminating comparison between Schwarzenegger's *Conan the Barbarian* and movies starring Steven Seagal and Jackie Chan, Aaron Anderson has shown that the former is forced to rely on short shots, fast editing, and post-production, whereas the latter two can incorporate longer—and hence less suspicion-raising, somatically more effective—shots because of the actors' skills:

The climactic battle scene between the forces of Thulsa Doom (James Earl Jones) and Conan (Schwarzenegger) is created by editing a collage of unrelated single attacks. The effect reads very much like this: "attack"—cut—"attack"—cut—"close up on blood"—cut—"attack," and so on. This combination of editing and swordfights has nothing to do with any true attacks or parries, but rather simply consists of a series of sword-bashes incorporated into the final editing-created fight.

In other words, the edited short shots have to create an impression of a longer fighting sequence and are supposed to hide Schwarzenegger's lack of martial skill. Seagal and Chan's fight sequences, on the other hand, allow for a more direct form of somatic empathy. We might not be able to pinpoint these differences consciously, but we certainly feel them subconsciously. Fragmented sequences with frantic editing and short

shots may not be an optimal way to enable *Einfühlung*, but they help conceal what would otherwise reduce somatic pleasure even further: Schwarzenegger's obvious lack of martial skills.

Fourth, the filmmakers also have to answer a *temporal* question. When should Schwarzenegger's forceful body-in-action be revealed for the first time? I argue that from the perspective of somatic empathy it makes sense to give the viewer visual access to Schwarzenegger's body *early* in the film, so that he or she can get a "feeling" and can carry this bodily knowledge into later scenes with less exposure of the body. Consequently, a number of films show the half or even fully naked Schwarzenegger body in action right at the beginning. The choices range from having sex in *Total Recall* to the Wheel of Pain scene at the beginning of *Conan the Barbarian*, in which a montage sequence shows us the growing muscles of the Sisyphus-like hero. In order to integrate these scenes of (half-)naked action, the films come up with narrative motivations that are more or less convincing. Sometimes, however, they are outright ridiculous. The erotic scene in *Total Recall*, the gladiator fights at the beginning of *Conan the Barbarian*, and the greeting in *Predator*, for example, might be integrated somewhat seamlessly. But what about the opening scene in *Red Heat* (1988)? Alone, completely unarmed, and dressed with nothing more than a thong, Schwarzenegger's cop confronts a group of Russian gangsters in, of all places, a Moscow sauna. An alternative plan—"Why not wait outside with weapons and other policemen?"—apparently never occurs to him. And why should it? The scene with Schwarzenegger fighting naked in a sauna and outside in the snow has other functions. The same goes for the beginning of *Terminator*. We might ask why the Terminator arrives from the future buck naked, a mixture of Rodin's *The Thinker* and a giant toddler. Don't they have clothes in the year 2029? And why does he rob a gang of punks? The answers are obvious: it gives the filmmakers a reason to present us with the spectacle of the exposed Schwarzenegger muscles in action early on in the film. While Schwarzenegger's nakedness might be thinly veiled by narrative logic, it is important for the film's somatic effect. That these scenes unashamedly undervalue narrative motivation and logic should give us pause. They underscore the filmmakers' faith in the genre expectations of their audience: viewers expect to empathize somatically with Schwarzenegger's body, no matter what.

A fifth aesthetic strategy works on a different plane, since it enables somatic empathy much less than it uses it as a prerequisite for a different kind of enjoyment, namely pleasurable anticipation. In this case, the exposed body-in-action is seen not at the beginning of the film but at the end. The muscular body is revealed step by step, with Schwarzenegger taking off more and more clothes along the way. This approach self-referentially and ironically teases the viewer. Playing with the audience's expectations, it creates anticipatory suspense by raising the question, "When will we finally see his body in full blossom and thus be able to empathize most effectively?" This disclosure scenario is far from unusual for action movies. Film scholar Martin Flanagan notes, with only moderate exaggeration, that "One way of measuring narrative progress in an action film is to monitor the state of dress of the male lead—as in *Die Hard* and *Speed*, they will invariably start the film fully clothed and end it in a grubby vest or blood-soaked t-shirt" (112). In contrast to Bruce Willis or Keanu Reeves, Schwarzenegger often goes one step further, because somatic empathy works more effectively once the vest and the t-shirt are shed as well.

*Predator* perfectly illustrates this striptease strategy. Just as its body-count scenario gradually eliminates one co-fighter after another, the film's plot sees Schwarzenegger wearing fewer and fewer clothes. After having teased us with an early glimpse of his bulging biceps in the opening scene with the CIA agent (described above), the film proceeds as follows. First, we see Schwarzenegger in full uniform, his jacket properly closed. Then the military jacket is opened. Next we can follow him without jacket, exposing his powerful arms, wearing only a t-shirt and a vest. At a slightly later stage, Schwarzenegger has taken off his t-shirt, but has left the vest on. Finally, he fully exposes his upper body, first covered in mud, then bloodied or glistening with sweat. Again, the narrative motivation is weak. The humid climate of the jungle can serve only as a moderately convincing reason for Schwarzenegger's striptease. This is particularly true once we take into account that the film moves from day to night and Schwarzenegger wears his clothes when it is hottest, namely during the day. Again, however, the point is not narrative logic. What counts in this case is not so much the *optimizing* of somatic empathy, but the teasing of the viewer and the pleasure that comes with *anticipating* the possibility of optimal empathizing.



4. Unpleasant Somatic Empathy (or, Negative *Einfühlung*)

The basic forms of empathy occur almost automatically and are therefore hard to suppress. It is certainly not the case, however, that every viewer *enjoys* his or her *Einfühlung* with Schwarzenegger's body. Some might even feel displeasure. Others go still further and disallow a thorough intertwinement with the film in the first place and thus refuse to empathize somatically. How can we explain these discrepancies? I suggest three reasons, some of which were briefly touched upon above.

First, Schwarzenegger's body displays unpleasant sides itself. While many viewers might feel considerable bodily pleasure in partaking in Schwarzenegger's muscular *force*, others cannot help noticing his often *rigid* and *heavy movements*. For instance, in scenes of chasing or escaping the running Schwarzenegger can become a particular drag. He seems not only bulky but also slow. We are dealing, after all, with a man often compared to a tree, as in his nickname, "the Styrian Oak," or as a "talking skyscraper," as *Washington Post* critic Rita Kempley calls him ("Total Recall"). His movements expose pure power and force. As such they are utterly different from, for example, the motor agility and grace of a Fred Astaire dance or the flexibility and kinetic speed displayed by Robert de Niro as middleweight champion Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*. Moreover, the (literally) down-to-earth horizontality of his actions contrasts with the verticality of the gravitation-defying movements of martial-arts performers like Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Jet Li—or, for that matter, Jean-Claude van Damme and Steven Seagal. While some of Schwarzenegger's motor activities are pleasantly goal-achieving, other goal-oriented actions like running or jumping are less satisfying—in a way, he does not achieve his goal. I would speculate that people who are fast runners, dancers, or martial artists might be particularly put off. For them sharing Schwarzenegger's expressive poverty and lack of grace can turn the film experience into a source of bodily displeasure. Lipps calls these unwelcome moments of defying one's own bodily needs, impulses, and tendencies "negative *Einfühlung*"—a negation of the self.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Lipps notes on "negative *Einfühlung*": "Diese besagt: Es liegt in dem Objekt, das ich betrachte, ein Antrieb zu einer Weise der eigenen inneren Betätigung, aber diese Weise widerspricht dem Bedürfnis und Drange meines eigenen Wesens. Ich fühle jenen Antrieb, aber ich fühle ihn als Negation meiner selbst" (360).

Since lived-body tendencies and preferences vary according to the viewer's embodied knowledge (Rizzolatti's "dictionary of acts"), differences might exist along such important categories as gender and age. This leads me to my second point, which may shed some light on the question of why Schwarzenegger drew predominantly young men into the movie theaters of the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Inasmuch as Schwarzenegger's forceful muscular actions epitomize a *young* and *hyper-virile masculinity*—Tasker describes the kind of cinema Schwarzenegger stands for as "muscular cinema" and coins the term "musculinity"—*elderly* and *female* viewers might feel a distancing discrepancy between their own lived-bodies and Schwarzenegger's body on the screen (3).<sup>11</sup> To put it somewhat differently, the motor, sensation, and affective affinities between these female and elderly viewers' lived-bodies and Schwarzenegger's body in action might not be sufficiently great as to enjoy somatic empathy. As a consequence, they experience unpleasant negative *Einfühlung* at the very moment young male viewers feel pleasure.

In an important feminist essay, Iris Marion Young points out some basic characteristics of female body comportment, manners of moving, and relation in space. She observes certain recurring ways in which women in contemporary advanced industrial, urban, and commercial societies *typically* comport themselves and move differently from the ways that men do, despite the *individual* variation in each woman's experience, opportunities, and possibilities. These characteristic differences are not based on anatomy, physiology, or some feminine "essence." Instead, they derive from the particular situation (in the sense used by existential phenomenology) of women as conditioned by their oppression in today's "Western" societies (152). Women do not make full use of the body's spatial and lateral potentialities, particularly in movements in which the body aims at accomplishing a definite purpose or task. Typically, the masculine stride is longer proportional to a man's body

<sup>10</sup> "Arnold's fans are overwhelmingly male," cultural critic Dave Saunders writes. "As a Google search will reveal, many Internet-based Schwarzenegger fan groups exist, and all are male-dominated (and usually male-administrated). The Arnold Fans website's staff, for instance, is entirely made up of men" (74, 224).

<sup>11</sup> Importantly, this muscular cinema is not limited to the male body, as action heroines like Sigourney Weaver, Linda Hamilton, and Jamie Lee Curtis confirm.

than is the feminine stride to a woman's (142). Hence for many women a constricted imagined space surrounds them, one beyond which they are not free to move. In addition, since women often experience their body both as a subjectively lived capacity *and* as an objectively looked-at thing, their self-reflexive stance results in an inhibited intentionality: they frequently project an "I can" and an "I cannot" with respect to the very same end and therefore withhold their own motile energy (147). Particularly pertinent for our context are Young's comments on the differences concerning tasks that require force, muscular strength, and coordination, which deserve to be repeated at length:

There are indeed real physical differences between men and woman in the kind and limit of their physical strength. Many of the observed differences between men and women in the performance of tasks requiring coordinated strength, however, are due not so much to brute muscular strength, but to the way each sex *uses* the body in approaching tasks. Women often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force. When we attempt such tasks, we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing. Women tend not to put their whole bodies into engagement in a physical task with the same ease and naturalness as men. For example, in attempting to lift something, women more often than men fail to plant themselves firmly and make their thighs bear the greatest proportion of the weight. Instead, we tend to concentrate our effort on those parts of the body most immediately connected to the task—the arms and shoulders—rarely bringing the power of the legs to the task at all. When turning or twisting something, to take another example, we frequently concentrate effort in the hand and wrist, not bringing to the task the power of the shoulder, which is necessary for its efficient performance. (142-43)

If this is indeed the case, it should not surprise us that female viewers might not feel identical pleasure when asked to somatically empathize with Schwarzenegger's body as men do.

Likewise, elderly viewers might have difficulties relating to the strength and muscular coordination of Schwarzenegger's body, just as they might not enjoy the havoc it wreaks so frequently. Compare the following quote which underscores how an aged body rejects the aesthetic pleasures of horror films involving painful somatic empathy:

I am an older woman who avoids contemporary horror films—this because, given my various and intense experiences of physical pain over the years, my body has become increasingly sensitive to visceral images of its imminent potential for violation. [...] unlike in my youth, when I felt my body and psyche invulnerable and could watch anything (well, almost), I now find it extremely difficult to submit myself to the particularly dreaded form of 'unpleasure' that horror films offer. (Sobchack, "Peek-a-boo!" 41)

Not only do Schwarzenegger's action sequences frequently contain violent images, but their exaggerated virility also might be too outlandish for older viewers. What is more, watching an action sequence might also spark a bitter memory for an aged viewer of what his (or her) body once was capable of—and what has been forever lost.

Third, as mentioned, the viewer's *tastes and beliefs* need to be minimally compatible with the film in order for him or her to show what I have called *empathy readiness*. If this empathy readiness does not exist because of distasteful or improper content, there can be no aesthetic attitude, no aesthetic experience, and no somatic empathy. Let me explain. Aesthetic experience at the movies differs from mundane, non-aesthetic experience in the specific stance the viewer adopts toward the world, his or her aesthetic attitude. Once the viewer adopts this aesthetic attitude, he or she approaches the film with active but non-instrumental perceptual devotion. This makes the encounter particularly effective in its affective dimension: adopting an aesthetic attitude implies that the viewer attaches him- or herself to the aesthetic object and deliberately puts him- or herself in a position to be affected by it. The goal-oriented, instrumental attitude of everyday life is set aside for roughly two hours. Freed from the pushes and pulls and pressures of non-aesthetic life, the cinematic viewer is open for other priorities, but only if the viewer pays active attention and opens him- or herself to the aesthetic object can he or she be affected by it at all. To put it differently, if the viewer refuses to assume the proper aesthetic attitude because he or she considers a film like *Running Man* worthless, its message reactionary and misogynistic, or the main actor ridiculous and detestable, there will be little somatic empathy with Schwarzenegger's body in the first place. At this point, it has become clear that despite the occasional predominance of the performative dimension of Schwarzenegger's phenomenal body, he still plays a certain character in a specific film. Further, our extra-filmic

knowledge about Schwarzenegger might play an important role in this case as well. Empathy readiness will be hard to come by if the viewer objects to the early Schwarzenegger's misogynistic statements, his promiscuous past, or even his proto-fascist celebration of certain character traits of Adolf Hitler.<sup>12</sup>

### 5. Imaginary Self-Extension

To be sure, arguing that basic somatic empathy plays a pivotal role in the pleasure some viewers feel when watching a Schwarzenegger movie does not imply that we should reduce aesthetic experiences to processes of *Einfühlung*. The fact that some proponents of *Einfühlung* inflated its importance and called the recipient's inner participation the "central phenomenon of aesthetic pleasure," as Groos once did, was one reason that *Einfühlungsästhetik* fell from grace (qtd. in Braungart 210).<sup>13</sup> If somatic empathy were everything, there would be no difference between watching a documentary like *Pumping Iron* (1975) and a fictional film like *Conan the Barbarian*, since both allow the viewer to partake in Schwarzenegger's muscular strength. Apart from Schwarzenegger's real body on the screen, we also simultaneously partake in his fictional characters, such as the T-101. These characters exist only as partial blanks (in the sense of reception aesthetics) and therefore have to be filled or concretized by our own thoughts, emotions, wishes, imaginations and memories—through our imaginary input, if you will. Here more elaborate forms of empathy come into play, forms that Murray Smith calls "imaginative empathy" or "emotional simulation" (Smith).

Since somatic empathy causes us always to feel *with* the body on the screen, since we are, as it were, *in* that other body, since we are simultaneously here and *there*, I argue that somatic empathy is a particularly direct and effective part of the more comprehensive concept of

imaginary *self-extension*. Following Wolfgang Iser's reception aesthetics, Winfried Fluck has suggested that imaginary self-extension is a crucial part of experiencing fictional narratives aesthetically (*Das kulturelle Imaginäre*, "Emotional Structures"). Fiction allows us to go beyond the confines of our own identity and life-world by imaginarily transferring our own thoughts, emotions, wishes, imaginations, and memories onto the fictional characters and their world. It is a voluntary and bounded experience that opens up gratifying possibilities of role-play and self-fashioning. As Iser notes, "Staging oneself as someone else is a source of aesthetic pleasure" (244).

Yet, imaginary self-extension does not imply a boundless and indiscriminate transfer of one's own wishes and emotions, as the notion of *projection* might suggest. Instead, we always remain within the limits of the film, which guides our transfers of wishes and emotions. Furthermore, imaginary self-extension does not imply that we lose ourselves completely in the fictional other, as the term *identification* implies. Rather, we are in a state of in-between: we are witnesses and participants, both ourselves and Conan. Fluck writes:

If there was no relation to ourselves, there would be no grounds for any interest, but if the text was a mere projection, it would provide only another encounter with ourselves. One of the wonderful things fictional texts can do is to put us in other worlds, where we can explore new experiences—but on grounds that make it possible to relate to these other worlds. ("Emotional Structures" 73)

Self-extension necessarily goes for all the other characters as well; i.e., we also have to actualize or concretize antagonists such as Doom or the T-1000. This is no disadvantage. The fluid form of role-play implies that the viewer can have it both ways. He or she derives a feeling of empowerment by siding with the immensely powerful villain and the awesome havoc that he (or she) wreaks *as well as* the eventual triumph of the Schwarzenegger character and the death and destruction of the villain. If the viewer provides appropriate empathy readiness, he or she can have the best of both sides (Shaw).

Interestingly, Schwarzenegger's perfectly modeled and modulated body stands for a similar aspiration: the possibility of self-creation (Tasker 78). The viewer's imaginary role-play functions via an actor/character body that expresses a desire for self-creation, self-renewal, and

<sup>12</sup> For example: "People need somebody to watch over them and tell them what to do. Ninety-five percent of the people in the world need to be told what to do and how to behave. [...] I admired Hitler, for instance, because he came from being a little man with almost no formal education, up to power" (qtd. in Saunders 42).

<sup>13</sup> In a different context, Groos notes that inner participation is *not* crucial for every form of aesthetic behavior (171).

self-empowerment. In contrast to Schwarzenegger, however, the viewer has a crucial advantage. On the one hand, he or she can merely partake in Conan or the Terminator's impressive physique imaginarily—he or she can never actually have or be that body. On the other hand, the imaginary role-play does not ask for the radical hardships, ascetic restraints, chemical upgrades, and bodily deformations that come with bodybuilding. As Vincent Canby puts it in the quotation at the very beginning of my article, "there is no way [Schwarzenegger] can unzip that overdeveloped physique and slip into something more comfortable." Hence it is utterly premature to argue that every viewer actually wants such a body. Imaginary self-extension qua somatic empathy is a genuine form of pleasure that does not necessarily rely on a lack in need of compensation.

One final question remains. Doesn't this model automatically lead to a blind apology? Doesn't it defend each kind of pleasure-generating form of fiction, no matter how misogynistic, racist, or politically reactionary? I would say no. To highlight the *workings* of certain aesthetic pleasures in the cinema does not dictate an *excuse* for each and every pleasure. Moreover, as previous sections have shown, certain preconditions need to be fulfilled for the viewer to enjoy somatic empathy. For instance, if there is no empathy readiness, the viewer will experience negative *Einfühlung* or refrain from being intertwined with the film in the first place. It is here that I see a possible starting point for critique. From the perspective of empathy readiness—and with the empirical audience of Schwarzenegger's films in mind—one can ask the question: Why did the predominantly male audience of the 1980s show such strong empathy readiness when it came to the bodybuilding physiques of bloody-thirsty, macho-type, often jingoist warriors, soldiers, and killing machines?

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