Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era

Susan Jeffords
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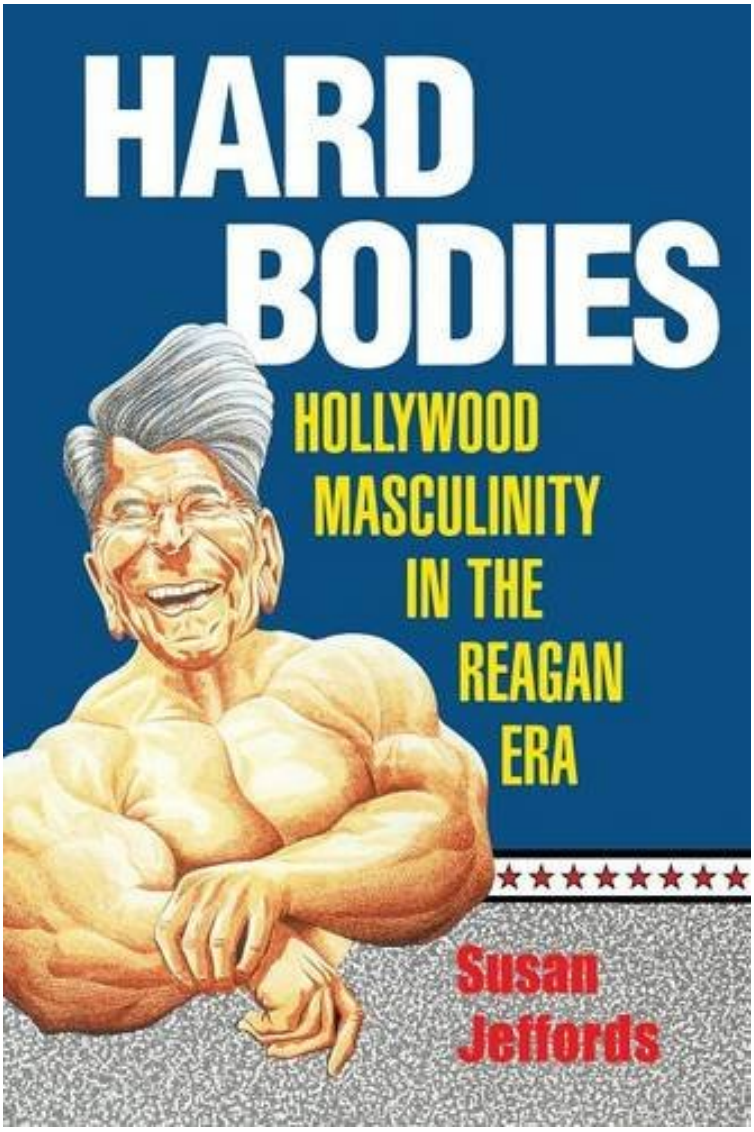

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Susan Jeffords : Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era:

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Not Entirely Convincing, but a Fascinating Analysis of Action Films in the 1980sBy Roger D. LauniusIn many respects "Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era" is a fascinating book. In other respects it is maddening; for every example that the author used to demonstrate a provocative and useful thesis there are counterexamples that could be used to refute it. In "Hard Bodies" Susan Jeffords, professor of English and director of Women's Studies at the University of Washington, offers an entree into

the ideology of the Reagan era of the 1980s by unpacking several blockbuster film series, especially "Rambo," "Lethal Weapon," "Die Hard," and "Robocop." For Jeffords, these films display an underlying masculinity. As she put it: "The depiction of the indefatigable, muscular, and invincible masculine body became the lynchpin of the Reagan imaginary; this hardened male form became the emblem not only for the Reagan presidency but for its ideologies and economies as well" (p. 25).The incredibly "buff" bodies of the actors in these films, always on display, according to Jeffords stood for the aggressive militaristic and hard power strategies of the Reagan administration. At the same time, as these various film series unfolded over time Jeffords tracks the changes in the "hard bodies" involved and their place in the schema of the era. For example, in the first of "The Terminator" series Arnold Schwarzenegger's cyborg is a brutal, single-minded killing machine, the prototypical "hard body" of the Reagan era. Jeffords argues that in the second film in the series, Schwarzenegger's cyborg has become a protective, nurturing father figure for the young John Connor. In Jefford's characterization, the second film was reflective of a different version of masculinity as espoused in the George H.W. Bush administration (1989-1993). She concludes that the second film presented "male viewers an alternative to the declining workplace and national structure as sources of masculine authority and power--the world of the family" (p. 170).This is a powerful thesis which has much to recommend it. And Jeffords marshals strong evidence to support it throughout this intriguing book. At the same time Jeffords overstates her case in two fundamental ways. First, she fails to account for the very many other films of the Reagan era which do not support her thesis of masculine aggressiveness on display. The Oscar winners for best picture between 1981 and 1988 were "Chariots of Fire" (1981), "Gandhi" (1982), "Terms of Endearment" (1983), "Amadeus" (1984), "Out of Africa" (1985), "Platoon" (1986), "The Last Emperor" (1987), and "Rain Man" (1988). Of those, none displayed aggressive masculinity as epitomized by Jeffords as the dominant theme of the era. With this as the case, does Jeffords offer a convincing thesis of aggressive masculinity as a dominant theme of the Reagan era?A second concern is Jeffords suggestive relationship between the film and the Reagan presidential style of leadership. She seems to read Hollywood's interest in producing these blockbusters, and the dominant masculinity inherent in them, as a reflection of the era in which they emerged. This is an old theme in film studies, and there is much truth to it, but the overreliance on this concept can lead down paths that overstate intentionality. That may be a weakness of "Hard Bodies."Notwithstanding the fact that I question some of the conclusions contained in "Hard Bodies," Susan Jeffords' work is a fascinating statement of a powerful and provocative thesis. It forces all who seriously analyze films of the 1980s to deal with her arguments in some manner. They might be accepted or rejected, but more likely they will be revised. Regardless, everyone must deal with them. That is the penultimate accomplishment of any scholar, and Jeffords fulfills it with exemplary skill. I have given this book four out of five stars only because I question some of her conclusions, not because I do not value the very real contributions it makes to the body of knowledge about modern American society.0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Excellent analysis of the Reagan era in filmBy bcastleJeffords' book doesn't try to take everything into account. It's focused squarely on changing representations of men on screen in Hollywood films of the 80s, and their connection to Reagan's political rhetoric. But given the rise in violent, muscle-bound men like Stallone and Schwarzenegger during the era, here is the best explanation of how and why we started watching this type of hero.1 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Hard bodiesBy CustomerAmazing analisis of hardboiled films of the eighties.It's incredible whats going on in your mind when you watch a film: Hidden messages you inconsciously acknowledge but are unable to describe at will.This book is also (or mainly) about politics and which is the right attitude to confront life's challenges, that is , the one proposed by the right wing.Interesting, gripping, intense, maybe excessive at times, but never boring.

Hard Bodies is about Ronald Reagan, Robert Bly, "America," Rambo, Dirty Harry, national identity, and individual manhood. By linking blockbuster Hollywood films of the 1980s to Ronald Reagan and his image, Susan Jeffords explores the links between masculinity and U.S. identity and how their images changed during that decade. Her book powerfully defines a distinctly ideological period in the renegotiation of masculinity in the post-Vietnam era. As Jeffords perceptively notes, Reagan was most effective at constructing and promoting his own image. His election in 1980 and his landslide re-election in 1984 offered politicians and the film industry some insight into "what audiences want to see." Audiences--and constituencies--were looking for characters who stood up for individualism, liberty, anti-governmentalism, militarism, and who embodied a kind of mythic heroism. The administration in Washington and Hollywood filmmakers sensed and tried to fill that need. Jeffords describes how movies meshed inextricably with Reagan's life as he cast himself as a hero and influenced the country to believe the same script. Invoking Clint Eastwood in his speeches and treating scenes from movies as if they were real, Reagan played on his image in order to link popular and national narratives. Hollywood returned the compliment.Through her illuminating and detailed analyses of both the Reagan presidency and many blockbuster movies, Jeffords provides a scenario within which the successes of the New Right and the Reagan presidency can begin to be understood: she both encourages an understanding of how this complicity functioned and provides a framework within which to respond to the New Right's methods and arguments. Rambo, Lethal Weapon, Die Hard, Robocop, Back to the Future, Star Wars, the Indiana Jones series, Mississippi Burning, Rain Man, Batman, and Unforgiven are among the films she discusses. In

her closing chapter, she suggests the direction that masculinity is taking in the 1990s.

From Publishers WeeklyOffering close and intriguing readings of movies like Rambo and Robocop , Jeffords (The Remasculinization of America) entertainingly argues that action films with white male heroes "portrayed many of the same narratives . . . that made the Reagan Revolution possible." While Jeffords acknowledges that many films--like E.T. and Blade Runner --countered the dominant ideology, she defensibly chooses to focus on some of the biggest hits. Thus, she finds links between the "hard body," or macho, militarism of Rambo and Reagan's attacks on Libya and Grenada and suggests that Rambo's wounding implies the possibility of repair and regeneration--i.e., the nation can recover from the wounds of the Carter years. In the late 1980s, she observes, masculine sensitivity replaced machismo; films like Casualties of War suggest that white men can still lead us to justice without the wimpishness of the Carter era. She concludes that Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven signals the current masculine model, an action-oriented idealism that invokes the family to justify foreign intervention. Photos not seen by PW. From Library JournalThe "Reagan Revolution," the author contends, influenced many of the popular action films of the 1980s. The Rambo (1985) , Terminator (1984), and Die Hard (1988) series all featured hard-bodied heroes who singlehandedly fought "against the bureaucracies that had lost touch with the people." The author also examines father-son relationships in the Star Wars (1977) and Back to the Future (1985) series and the "white men save the day" approach of Ca sualties of War (1989) and Mississippi Burning (1988). This volume is aimed squarely at an academic audience, which should have fun chewing on its highly debatable connections between political styles and popular entertainment. For most academic collections.- Thomas Wiener, formerly with "American Film"From Kirkus sSomething new on the storied relation between Hollywood models and American culture in the Reagan years: an impressively documented, though frequently strained, argument that films like Rambo and Robocop rehearsed the same images of masculinity manufactured for the personal benefit of the era's leading politicians. Crisscrossing between Robert Bly and Richard Nixon, Jeffords (English/University of Washington) contends that the ``unified national body" that Americans were seeking after the rudderless years of Vietnam and Jimmy Carter was configured in both blockbuster films and the Reagan White House as a masculine physical body--the hard body whose fitness, purpose, and courage could redeem the nation's individual failures of will. Jeffords traces a progression from Dirty Harry through Star Wars, Lethal Weapon, and Rambo (the apotheosis of the Reagan-Oliver North hard body) to Kindergarten Cop (which recreated Arnold Schwarzenegger as the kinder, gentler fantasy hero of the Bush years) and Disney's Beauty and the Beast (whose revisions from its source excused its male hero for his machismo by making its once-pivotal heroine merely the agency of his redemption). Curiously, the political analysis, bolstered by a formal battery of quotations, is generally more cogent than the close--and often amusingly tendentious--allegorical analysis of films like Back to the Future (Reagan's attempts to define his identity by rewriting history), Twins (like Rambo III, a hopeful view of the Reagan-Bush transition), and Batman (a figure for Bush's schizoid public identity). There's nothing unconvincing, though, about Jeffords's trenchant observations on the Reagan-Bush years as political theater. However Jeffords may stretch in some interpretations of individual films, she gives welcome new definition to the whole idea of the body politic. (Forty-two bw photographs) --