

Hard To Stop

Image and Authorship in the Films of Steven Seagal

BY

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Acceptance Page

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Abstract

Little serious scholarly work has been done on the career of Steven Seagal which is surprising given his immense popularity in the early 1990s. In addition to suggesting more work be done on less traditional stars, this thesis asks what factors lead to an understanding of Steven Seagal as a working class action hero. It makes the case for understanding Seagal as a star because of the impressive box office success of his films along with his immense popularity during that time frame. The thesis focuses mainly on Seagal's films from 1988 until 1995, with only occasional references to his later, less commercially successful work which nonetheless helps explicate the essence of the Seagal persona.

The main theoretical texts utilized in this thesis are Richard Dyer's *Stars*, which examines both the sociological and semiotic implications of stardom, and Rick Altman's *Film/Genre*, which explores the evolution of the working class action film. The way in which Seagal's working class action hero persona was constructed and sustained lies in the dynamic interactions of three competing forces: the studios, Seagal himself, and his audience. In addition to how his persona was created, the thesis looks at those aspects of Seagal's star persona essential to Seagal's status as a working class action hero. Seagal's principal characters are associated with the Vietnam or a Vietnam-like War; they are men enforce their own codes of conduct and justice; and, they connect in multiple ways with numerous ethnicities and cultures. This thesis performs its analysis of Seagal's star persona through historical and sociological approaches, drawing heavily from industry and popular publications to help gauge public interest in the actor.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family, friends, and professors, without whom none of this would have been possible

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Stars are an important component of the film industry who are often used as collateral in order to try to guarantee the success of a movie with audiences. Star image is constructed by producers, the press, and audiences and is often associated with a particular film genre. Specifically, this can be achieved by having an actor or actress appear in several films in a specific genre so that the star becomes associated with not only the genre, but also with themes and values related to that genre. This study examines the film persona of Steven Seagal and considers the factors that contribute to an understanding of his star image in relation to his screen persona as a working class action hero.

The trajectory of Seagal's film career has risen to meteoric heights and fallen just as precipitously. Though many critics have described his acting ability as negligible, his relatively large fan base has contributed to his popularity from globally distributed theatrical films to the direct-to-video market. One major facet of his popularity is Seagal's commitment to taking roles in which his characters are coded either explicitly or implicitly as blue collar. Seagal can thus be classified as a working class action hero, an action film term whose heritage draws from Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* series and Charles Bronson's *Death Wish* series. These actors found a niche within the action film genre by appealing to segments of the viewing public that had not been specifically addressed. These were characters who recognized the indifference or outright corruption of the establishment—including malfeasant characters from both the private sector and government—and sought redress of such institutional transgressions by often violent means through personal codes of justice echoing a sense of fairness and concern for those unable to

defend themselves derived from the tenets of basic morality and ethics embedded in the fabric of the country's founding political and religious texts.

Seagal's star persona developed during the heyday of the contemporary action film from 1988 to 1995. Relying predominantly on a working class action hero persona similar to that of Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson, Seagal incorporated martial arts into the genre as a means of product differentiation. Looking at themes that not only run throughout his body of work, but which also connect his characters on screen to his persona in real life (as made manifest through interviews, news articles, and press releases), helps in understanding how Seagal associated himself with the working class action hero. Moreover, tracing the lineage of the blue collar action star—or working class action hero—from Eastwood and Bronson to Seagal is useful in order to understand aspects of his characters that set them apart from his more well-known contemporaries—Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. The term “working class action hero,” which is explored more in-depth in chapter two, centers on the basic convention of a law-enforcement related protagonist who is committed to helping the downtrodden and disenfranchised because of his personal sense of justice.

One way of understanding a star's image is by analyzing trade publications to see how the star is represented and understood within the industry. Publications such as *Variety* and *Daily Variety* are useful tools regarding the industrial context of Seagal's image. Daily periodicals, such as *The New York Times*, provide numerous examples of how this image is viewed by critics and highlight how observations and even suggestions from the press can inform changes in a star's persona. Finally, interviews with niche fan magazines (such as *Impact*) and unofficial fan websites (www.steven-seagal.net) provide glimpses into the input that fans provide in shaping a star's image.

Seagal's films also provide a useful means of investigating the industrial context of star image. Aside from providing a more complete picture of the evolution of the action genre, it should be noted that Seagal's early films were extremely profitable. Indeed, Warner Bros. repeatedly returned to Seagal for subsequent successes. When *Under Siege* (1992) was released, Warner executives expected the film to earn as high as \$15M in its initial run (Pendleton 1). However, during its opening weekend, it surpassed those expectations by earning \$15,760,003 and not only removed the critically acclaimed *Last of The Mohicans* (1992) out of the number one spot, but broke the October opening weekend record previously set by *Look Who's Talking* (1989) at \$12,107,784 (McBride 1). Throughout this thesis, box office figures will be utilized to help underscore the immense popularity of Steven Seagal during his relatively brief but nonetheless significant wave of popularity. One possible reason for the marginalization of his work is that his popularity is often overlooked.

Scope

This thesis covers the period when Seagal was at the height of his popularity from 1988 to 1995. With the release of *Under Siege 2* (1995) Seagal's box office receipts declined until he finally ventured into the direct-to-video market in the new millennium as a more efficient and economic way to reach his audience. This is also the period in which his image as an action star in the culture of the Reagan era was most evident, including his nominal commitment to "progressive" issues, as well as his negotiation of the "hard bodied" action film star image that had been developed throughout the course of the 1980s. As Susan Jeffords states:

whereas the Reagan years offered the image of a 'hard body' to contrast directly to the 'soft body' of the Carter years, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a reevaluation of that

hard body, not for a return to the soft body but for a rearticulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal, and family-oriented values. (Jeffords 1994: 13)

In the characters that Seagal plays, Jeffords' conception of a "rearticulation of masculine strength" can be seen, especially the way in which domestic values inform his characters' motives and his star persona. This paper will also address historical, ethnic, and sociological understandings of Seagal's star image.

Review of Literature

There is a considerable body of literature on star studies and genre theory which provides the foundation for this thesis' arguments. In regard to star studies, Richard Dyer's *Stars* is a seminal text because of the ways it suggests that stars can be understood as both commodities for the studios and as celebrities whose extrafilmic activities often receive more popular attention than the films in which they appear. More importantly, Dyer's *Stars* avoids what Stuart Cosgrove calls "the most comfortable resort of all": that a star can be understood as having one permanent, unmistakable image (312-13). This is directly applicable to the case of Steven Seagal as he has often been accused of being an actor whose character never changes. Using Dyer's text, when examining the publicity, advertising, and critical reception of a star's films, Seagal's image becomes much more complex than previously assumed.

Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* provides an equally useful text that, working in conjunction with Dyer's star studies approach, provides additional insight into star image. Altman argues that genre is not a fixed, monolithic entity (similar to Dyer's argument that there is no singular image of a star) by stressing that understandings of genre are dependent upon historical and cultural considerations. Using this approach when examining the working class action

protagonist, one can see its evolution from the vigilante hero of the 1970s into the working class action hero in the late 1980s, and how that transformation in the contemporary action hero relates to political and cultural concerns. Also of note is Altman's assertion that a common misconception among genre theorists is that producers, consumers, and critics all use genres more or less the same way. For Seagal's films, the reason behind a studio using the working class action film subgenre is different than why a consumer would go to see that film. Here, arguments about why certain films are made while others are not is of particular interest to this study because of Warner Bros.' significant input into the marketing and image of Seagal during his early, successful films, as the studio sought to differentiate him from his contemporary action film stars.

The contemporary action film is a relatively broad genre with many important and influential works that have shaped the discourse surrounding its cultural contexts. The work of Yvonne Tasker and Susan Jeffords, for instance, has been invaluable for revealing the factors that helped shape the hypermasculine action cinema of the 1980s, factors that remain with us today. The concept of the 'hard body' is pertinent to this study because it explores the intersection between politics and culture, suggesting that the growing emphasis on machismo and American masculinity came to be represented on the big screen by muscular men, their bodies often glistening with sweat. Although this thesis does not focus on gender, these texts provide useful concepts that help explain certain aspects of Steven Seagal's persona.

Also of importance to this thesis are works that deal with culture of violence in American cinema. Specifically noteworthy are *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture In Post-Vietnam America* by James William Gibson, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of The Frontier In Twentieth-Century America* by Richard Slotkin, and the essay "Passion and Acceleration: Generic Change

In The Action Film” by Rikke Schubart. While only one of these sources focuses solely on action films, they each provide valuable insight into the cultural and historical contexts of action films of the 1980s. Gibson’s text, for example, is enlightening with regard to the role that paramilitary culture has played in post-Vietnam culture, which includes cinema. He notes that with a lack of confidence in the government following its defeat in Vietnam, coupled with a struggling economy, American men began to dream “about the powers and features of another kind of man who could retake and reorder the world. And the hero of all these dreams was the paramilitary warrior. In the New War he fights the battles of Vietnam a thousand times, each time winning decisively” (Gibson 11). This gave rise to a revisioning of the action film that incorporated elements of the paramilitary warrior with the working class hero. It is no coincidence that in the vast majority of Seagal’s films, his background is based in secret operations in Southeast Asia, for not only is it a plot device to explain his martial arts skills, but it sends a clear message to the audience about the type of hero he represents.

Richard Slotkin’s work is useful for providing a cultural context in which to view the formulation of action cinema, as well as the personas and myths that are developed within the genre. He traces the evolution of the American myth of the frontier from the concept of Manifest Destiny in the 19th century, to its recurring invocation by U.S. presidents throughout the 20th century. One of Slotkin’s examples is that of John Wayne, whose persona became ingrained in the American psyche with conservative values associated with the American west and with combat. Similarly, Seagal’s image has often associated him with martial arts and both the military and law-enforcement. The two actors, despite operating within different genres and during different time periods, both function as faces for conservative law-and-order values.

Schubart's essay utilizes Vladimir Propp's folktale dissections to indicate how the action hero has gone from a theme of passion, which "links the hero to society, to hierarchy and the law, to martyrdom and masochism," to one of acceleration, which deals with "aggression turned into kinetic energy, sadism in the shape of vengeance, explosions, pure speed, the hard body, invulnerability, invincibility, impenetrability" (192). For the theme of "passion" Schubart cites the Sylvester Stallone character John Rambo, a man who essentially is given up to martyrdom for his country's failure to win the Vietnam War. For "acceleration," he offers Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Terminator as exemplary because the character is essentially unstoppable and invincible. This is of particular interest to this thesis because Seagal, early in his career, straddled these two themes of passion and acceleration. However, as his persona progressed, he shifted to an invincible and unstoppable force, something which is mirrored in his reality television show, *Steven Seagal, Lawman*.

One of the few scholarly texts that specifically addresses Seagal's image is Eric Lichtenfeld's *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and The American Action Movie*. Lichtenfeld's work seeks to schematically understand the broader genre of action films and its use of specific subgenres and cycles through case studies of specific films that indicate particular trends within the industry. Lichtenfeld provides this thesis with an understanding of the cultural context in which certain action film conventions were developed. However, Lichtenfeld's work on Seagal is minimal and this thesis greatly expands upon it by examining the cultural connotations of Seagal's martial arts experience.

Why is Steven Seagal absent from the literature on action cinema? One answer suggests that his films were perceived to be too lowbrow for scholarly attention. Certainly the films of

Steven Seagal carry no pretense to artistic quality or intellectual insights,¹ but neither do the films of Arnold Schwarzenegger or Bruce Willis, who have received scholarly attention.

Another possible issue is the brief expanse of Seagal's popularity coming as it did at the end of the early 1990s action cycle. This work fills a void in the existing literature of the action film star by arguing that there exists in the early 1990s action film cycle a particular type of hero that can be understood as a working class action hero. Seagal is used as a case study to explore how we can understand this working class action hero through cultural and historical terms.

Perhaps the image which Steven Seagal presents in his work simply does not fit that of popular conceptions of an action star. This is understandable on some levels because as Tasker points out, the 1980s action film stars arose as a result of "a backlash against the feminism of the 1970s" and were exemplary of Reagan-era conservatism (1). Thus, they were representative of the hypermasculinity that would define the 1980s. Indeed, it is almost impossible to not consider the shirtless, chiseled bodies of male action stars like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger when thinking about action cinema (to be sure, look no further than the titles of two influential texts regarding action films: *Spectacular Bodies* and *Hard Bodies*). Seagal negates this trend by appearing on screen fully clothed almost exclusively and does not appear to be in peak physical condition. Along those same lines, he does not brutishly beat up his foes nor does he rely on excessive weaponry. Instead, Seagal is almost graceful in his use of the martial arts to dispose of his enemies. Furthermore, it isn't the aggressive forms of karate that Chuck Norris and Jean-Claude Van Damme practice; rather, he utilizes aikido,² a martial art that is translated to mean "the Way of unifying (with) life energy" (Saotome 222) and is performed by

¹ Disregarding *On Deadly Ground*, Seagal's directorial debut which carries the imprint of a man who wants everyone to believe his film is meaningful. Indeed, he claims that he fought Warner Bros. executives vigorously to keep the dramatic content of the film intact instead of reducing the film to a collection of action set-pieces.

² He is currently a 7th dan degree and Shihan ("master instructor" in English) in aikido.

transferring the energy (or motion) of the attacker away from oneself (however, one would not realize this when watching the films of Steven Seagal).

Methodology

The two primary approaches that this thesis uses in order to understand Steven Seagal's star image as a working class action hero are star studies and genre theory. These two approaches are useful because, firstly, Seagal operates almost exclusively in the action film genre and, thus, utilizing genre theory helps to understand the contexts and conventions in which Seagal's characters exist. Secondly, star studies is helpful because it helps to frame Seagal's characters in a larger cultural context. Richard Dyer indicates that there are four specific categories of texts utilized when constructing a star image: publicity, promotion, films, and criticism/commentary.

The first of these categories, publicity is defined by Dyer as material on stars that is made available to the public and does not appear to be promotional in purpose. Publicity material includes interviews with a star, gossip columns, and human interest articles written about a star's private life. A more modern iteration of this aspect of crafting a star's image can be seen in talk show interviews featuring celebrities. Usually it is not openly acknowledged that the entire purpose of an interview is to promote the most recent work of a star, but it is often understood that this is the reason for the star's appearance on the talk show. Indeed, Robert C. Allen notes that interviews are often arranged as pretexts for stars to promote their latest films by the studios. Moreover, he suggests that "through publicity we like to think we are able to pierce through the façade constructed for the star by the studio and get at the inside and unauthorized details of the star's persona—hence the exposé quality of much star publicity" (Allen 552). Indeed, Dyer

asserts that the importance of publicity is that it appears as natural and uncontrolled glimpses into a star's life and is seemingly unfettered by studio control.

Promotion is defined by Dyer as "texts which [are] produced as part of the deliberate creation/manufacture of a particular image or image-context for a particular star" (68). Allen notes that these texts include materials designed to provide guidelines for understanding the star's image, such as posed photographs, studio press releases, and public appearances. Secondary promotional materials can include lobby cards, film posters, trailers, and advertisements for films. The most effective promotional materials today are movie trailers and film advertisements because of the ubiquity of television and the Internet. Steven Seagal, for example, following a decade of pop cultural anonymity, has seen a rise in interest in him after he was featured by name in the trailers and advertisements for Robert Rodriguez's *Machete* (2010).

Dyer notes that every film that a star appears in is marketed as a star vehicle. Moreover, frequently these films place the star into a familiar role for audiences, either in terms of similar character types or genre. This can certainly be seen in the films of Steven Seagal, as he always appears in action films as the tough guy with a social conscience protecting the unprotected. Robert Allen, writing about Joan Crawford, notes that as a star she was singularly identified with one genre, the woman's film, and that her role was most often that of the independent woman. He also mentions that her costuming often drew more critical response than her acting, which can also be paralleled to Steven Seagal films (557-58). Rather than discuss the facets of Seagal's acting prowess, critics and audiences often discuss his martial arts skills. Films function as the counterpoint to a star's public and private image and are the site of negotiation of the filmic and extratextual images.

For Dyer, criticism and commentary concerns itself with appreciation and interpretation of a star's body of work. This would include film reviews, magazine articles, and books. Dyer notes that while there may appear to be some overlap between criticism and publicity, criticism being distinct in that it presents itself as speaking on behalf of the audience. Criticism and commentary function as a reaction to the image star's onscreen image. The role that this reaction plays in the continually evolving formulation of a star's image is that it may popularize or recognize an audience's interest in one particular aspect of a star that may in the future become a focal point in a star's work (Allen 558). Criticism also allows for the re-positioning or re-invention of a star's persona if it is widely believed that the star's popularity has diminished. With regard to Seagal, for instance, one need look no further than his recent role in *Machete*, where he plays a completely atypical role—the villain. Criticism and commentary, therefore, perform integral roles as feedback from the audience and help in constructing and reconstructing a star's image.

Genre theory helps to understand the connection between the working class action hero and Seagal's star persona by providing analysis of genre conventions and characteristics. Altman's conception of genre as being a fluid rather than a set of stable conventions contribute to my argument that the working class action film evolved from the contemporary action film with a different set of star personas. Moreover, the purpose behind the potential fluidity of genres can be attributed to industrial and economic constraints, meaning that genres change over time because they must in order to remain economically viable by continually (re)appealing to audiences.

Thesis Organization

This thesis is divided into four chapters examining the factors that contribute to an understanding of Steven Seagal as a working class action hero. The second chapter examines the roots of the working class action film,³ focusing on its predecessor the vigilante film. An understanding of the social and cultural contexts of the vigilante film is imperative to not only understanding the films of Seagal, but his entire image. Connected with the working class action film is a discussion concerning the role of Vietnam and paramilitary culture in Seagal's work. Why do his films frequently include (para)military background in southeast Asia? What can this tell us about the characters that he plays and his audience? The causes and effects play into the post-Vietnam narrative and masculinity that Seagal developed and indicate that his persona is as much a product of that failed war as John Rambo. The role that the studios (specifically Warner Bros.) played in further developing Seagal into a man of action is also explored, including their handling of the titles of his films in order to make it appear that he fits into the role of masculine hero by suggesting that his characters are always in action. Finally, the claims that Steven Seagal himself makes regarding his connection to paramilitary security groups as well as organized crime are mentioned.

Chapter three concerns Seagal's connections with law and order in his films, as well as his portrayal as a family man. Whom does Seagal protect in his films and why? What motivations for action does he have? The invasion of domestic space is a main component in his films and often motivates the violence within them. This is supplemented by his real life profession of working as a deputy in Louisiana. Recently he has turned this vocation into a

³A term I use to describe the lower budget action films, best exemplified by Jean-Claude Van Damme and Steven Seagal.

reality TV spectacle in *Steven Seagal Lawman*, which provides a further layer of realism to the idea that law and order and Steven Seagal and his film characters are connected.

Chapter four explores the way in which Steven Seagal constructs himself as an ethnic chameleon. Seagal often plays a variety of ethnic identities within his films—ranging from Native American to Russian, he plays these different roles for no apparent narrative purpose, yet they are important aspects of his characters. This is interestingly complicated further by the fact that Seagal himself is ethnically mixed, being part Jewish and Irish-American, yet he never addresses either of these ethnicities in his characters. Moreover, his characters have aspects of the “man who knows Indians” Western trope, meaning that he is able to earn the trust or speak the language of various street gangs or minorities, despite being a member of law enforcement. Finally, there are various exotic mysticisms present in most of film that do not serve any purpose other than to imbue the character which he is playing with a sort of supernatural presence. This mystical presence is often a key part of Seagal’s image and is also explored in this chapter.

The conclusion to this thesis discusses the significance of Seagal’s image in understanding the development of the working class action hero in the 1980s and 1990s and why it so strongly appealed to audiences. By utilizing Steven Seagal as a case study for the working class action hero, this thesis hopes to not only better understand a specific historical cycle of American action films, but to recognize the symbiotic relationship between genre and star.

Chapter Two

Paramilitary Culture and the “New War”

“Indeed, the fundamental narratives that shape paramilitary culture and its New War fantasies are often nothing but reinterpretations or reworkings of archaic warrior myths.”

- James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams*

Working Class Vigilantes

This chapter examines the evolution of the working class action film from its roots in the vigilante film cycle of the 1970s to the contemporary action film of the 1980s. This period saw the rise in popularity of distinctively working class characters in many action films. Related to this evolution is the impact of the Vietnam War and how the paramilitary culture associated with it affected the American psyche and the action film genre. This chapter explores the effects of that cultural impact on Steven Seagal’s film persona during the 1990s.

Action cinema can be defined as a film with a large budget that utilizes violent action sequences to thrill its audience (Hayward 5). The working class action film establishes itself as a subgenre through textual and intertextual concerns. The protagonists of the working class action film are often associated with law enforcement in some capacity (Steven Seagal in *Above The Law* [1988], Dolph Lundgren in *Cover Up* [1991], and Gary Busey in *Eye of The Tiger* [1986], as well as others). The protagonists in these films are surrounded by bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption and this motivates their desire to return law and order to their community. David Desser argues that the law-enforcement subgenre in martial arts films, particularly those of Steven Seagal, almost always concerns corruption within the law enforcement agencies where

the protagonist works. Desser states that “with the corruption of the status quo, of the wealthy, comes an element of social class-consciousness. The hero not only sides with the little guy ... but the little guy is usually expressly coded as working-class and the hero’s roots are within this class” (100). Implicit in this assertion is that those in power either lack the ability to adequately address the needs of the working class or they simply do not care.

In this respect, the working class action film can be compared to the vigilante film cycle of the 1970s. The vigilante film arose with the demise of the Production Code, the establishment of the New Hollywood Cinema, and the increased acceptance of graphic violence on the screen (Lichtenfeld 9). Warner Bros. *Dirty Harry* (1971) is generally considered the progenitor of the cycle, which transplanted narrative tropes and concerns of Westerns (as well as a familiar Western star) onto an urban setting. Cultural historian Richard Slotkin claims that from 1971 to 1977, films that featured policemen operating at the edge of the law and urban vigilantes were the central protagonists of American action films. Moreover, “what makes the urban vigilante genre different from the Western is its ‘post-Frontier’ setting. Its world is urbanized, and its possibilities for progress and redemption are constricted by vastly ramified corporate conspiracies and by monstrous accumulations of wealth, power, and corruption” (Slotkin 634). In *Dirty Harry*, a corrupt bureaucracy and liberal laws prevent the serial killer, Scorpio, from being charged because the evidence against him was obtained without a search warrant. In *Death Wish*, the New York City Police Department is unable to find the murderers of architect Paul Kersey’s (Charles Bronson) wife and this instigates his own campaign to clean up the streets. By comparison, the majority of Seagal’s early work (such as *Above The Law* and *Out For Justice* (1991)) is set in urban milieus and focuses on the corruption and/or inability of law enforcement agencies.

Both the vigilante film and the working class action film have similar narrative structures. Crime is either running rampant in a community (as in the *Death Wish* series) or the law is corrupt or ineffectual in stopping a criminal (as in the *Dirty Harry* series). Reasons for this vary, but one should note the role audiences play in establishing these common tropes. Specifically, because an audience often identifies with a filmic world that mirrors their own conceptions, topical crime films have a greater chance to be produced and are economical. Indeed, the crime rate in urban areas was high in the 1970s, with the number of violent crimes rising from 288,000 in 1960 (including 9,110 murders) to 1,040,000 in 1975 (including 20,510 murders) (Susan Carter, ed. *Historical Statistics of the United States Millennial Edition Online*). Looking to maximize interest in films, producers prioritized films that capitalized on citizen frustrations with the crime rate. The solution to these crime problems was not going to be found by legal means because the structures of law enforcement were too bogged down in bureaucratic inefficiency, red tape, and corruption. Mirroring this, often in the films of Seagal and other working class action film stars, law enforcement is not only inefficient, it is corrupt. That left the lone vigilante to bring justice to the streets through any means necessary, even though it also criminalized him. In addition to fighting against rampant criminality, the working class action hero often struggles against entrenched and corrupt power structures. This is not to suggest that working class action films are progressive. Rather, they represent an inchoate reaction against established, corrupt power structures (through the utilization of bullying, self-aggrandizing corporate executives and their complicit political and law enforcement minions). The vigilante film cycle, then, can be viewed as an important predecessor to the working class action film.

The films of Steven Seagal often contain explicitly coded working class signifiers, usually in the form of the people being protected by Seagal. Another class component to

consider is that the characters Seagal portrays are often implicitly associated as working class. For instance, his numerous roles as a member of law enforcement never have him sitting behind a desk—he is always in the field preventing or solving crime. In *On Deadly Ground* (1994), he is (presumably) highly paid, but his job involves putting out fires in oil fields, a job that is extremely dangerous and requires hard work. In *Under Siege*, he is a cook on a Navy ship and refuses to wear his uniform, preferring to wear either his cook's or civilian clothing. Arguably Seagal's commitment to the working class profession in his films can account for much of his popular appeal in the late 1980s and 1990s. In regards to working class action films popularity, Richard Slotkin notes that while the economy grew under Ronald Reagan's tenure as president, "the benefits of expansion were distributed so unequally that, while the richest Americans were acquiring a larger share of the national wealth, the number of persons living in poverty increased and the real income and assets of most of the population declined" (648). This class distinction becomes part of the appeal of Seagal's persona with working class audiences.

Equally important aspects of the working class action film, however, are extratextual. Paramount in this consideration is the budget of the film. While these would not be classified as 'B' movies, it is safe to say that working class action films (such as those of Chuck Norris, Dolph Lundgren, and Rutger Hauer, among others) are significantly less costly productions than most tent-pole action films. For example, if we look at the early work of Steven Seagal, it is not until *Under Siege* that the budgets increase. Indeed, *Above The Law* was made for an estimated \$7.5M, *Out For Justice* for \$14M, and *Marked For Death* for \$12M. By 1990 film producers were noticing that smaller budget action films had unique appeals to audiences and it was easier to recoup costs, noting that (at the time) it cost \$25M on average to make a film, not including expensive special effects and action stars' salaries that topped \$10M so that it was not unusual

for a film's budget to pass \$40M. Moreover, films with a smaller budget that engage in perhaps more simplistic entertainment can cater to a more specific audience that looks for, as Martin Baum, an agent at Creative Artists Agency (CAA), notes, "fun, escapism, likability of the [central] character and killing that is not wanton or gratuitous" (Rohter D1). While the notion of gratuitous killing can be debated, Baum's laundry-list of characteristics for lower budget action films is telling; they result in a no-nonsense, entertaining, and predictable genre film, for which the box office results indicate that there is a huge market. In short, it is the perfect formula for a Steven Seagal film.

Out For Appeal

How did Seagal achieve such phenomenal heights of stardom so quickly? Although a definitive answer might be elusive, clues from industry professionals provide a useful context. Executives at 20th Century Fox, the distributors of *Marked For Death* (1990), noted that during the late 1980s when Arnold Schwarzenegger and other action stars were expanding their appeal with different genres, there was a void waiting to be filled. Tom Sherak, head of marketing at Fox, suggested that "the marketplace was thirsty for a hero, that it was looking for someone to fill the Arnold Schwarzenegger gap" (Rohter "Company News: Small Budget, Small Star, Big Hit"). Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* opined that "among the many things Mr. Seagal hit in his first films was a raw nerve, at least as far as his audience was concerned. Here was an action star for supposedly nonviolent times, a Zen avenger whose moral superiority gave him a nominally upscale appeal" (Maslin "Film View: At the Polls, Ace Tops Schindler). Opinions from some in the industry claimed the time was right for a new generation of action stars and that those stars needed to have a purpose in their films, a moral compass to guide them in their actions.

What then is Steven Seagal's market appeal? It would be impossible to quantify what the audience demographics are for Seagal's films but there is evidence to support the claim that he reaches a wide audience. The baseline audience is young and male, as producer Joel Silver noted in a *Daily Variety* article, with young men looking specifically for "the hard-edged action film" (Fleming "Seagal Licks His 'Wounds'"). Indeed, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) conducted research that found many teenage British boys' favorite film stars included Steven Seagal, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and Jackie Chan, prompting the BBFC to attack the culture of violence in these films and suggest that they appeal to teenage males because of their gratuitous violence and spectacle (Dawtrety "U.K. Censor Frustrated").

However, the appeal of Steven Seagal films is not restricted to young men. The producers of *Marked For Death* noted that in addition to the film being produced cheaply and with a built-in audience, Seagal provides an additional bonus because he appeals to women (Rohter "Company News: Small Budget, Small Star, Big Hit"). Though they do not provide specifics, it can be surmised that financiers or the studio would have at least some sort of evidence to support their marketability assertions. Janet Maslin lends credence to this assertion by noting that Seagal's appeal to women can be found in not only his physical attractiveness, but also his brash and confident demeanor ("Seagal Packs More Than A Wallop"). Potentially in addition to the visceral, physical appeal of Seagal an additional attraction to female audiences is his characters' commitment to family values, often being spurred to action because his family is threatened. Seagal's films are also popular with African-Americans and in Asian territories (Seagal's films are particularly successful in southeast Asia, where international box office returns are usually significantly higher than European markets) (Carver Carver, Benedict. "O'seas

Pic Sales Hit by Asian Cash Crisis"). As late as 1996 Steven Seagal was in the top ten of America's favorite movie stars, according to a Harris poll (Van Gelder "Final Footlights").

One particularly interesting audience segment that Seagal attracts is the rural, small town market. Seagal's characters have a blue collar appeal as previously discussed and during his heyday his films were extremely popular among theater chains that serviced rural areas. Mike Patrick, owner of Georgia-based Carmike Cinemas which operates mainly in non-competitive markets in America (and covers significant portions of non-urban American), also makes an interesting assertion that a true star (for him at least) is an actor like Schwarzenegger, Seagal, or Van Damme—"a star who does blockbuster business close to military bases" (Frook "Patrick Urges More Action Pix"). Patrick's assertion is an interesting one because it provides a link between Steven Seagal and his audience, between a man who is associated with the military in all of his films and members of the United States military. To what extent the (para)military influences the films and image of Seagal will be explored, but first we should look at how the studios helped shape his image.

Shaping Steven Seagal

Looking at why and how studios and producers would want to influence a star's image is important when considering how that image is developed and used. John Ellis notes that for the industry, stars provide a blueprint for what the film will be like, an "invitation" in the film that incites a patron's desire to see it. Ellis provides an historical insight into the rise of the concept of the star that is pertinent to my paradigm for Steven Seagal:

The star arrived as a marketing strategy in American cinema at the point in which the initial expansion of cinema had taken place. The nickelodeon boom was over: basic

patterns had been established (centralized production, distribution by rental, atomized exhibition) which were to last almost to the 1920s. Marketing of films began to develop. Films needed to be distinguished from each other so that they could be recognizable to exhibitors and audiences, so that they could attract their particular fragments of the mass audience. ... Increasingly, the supposed [or constructed] personality of the performer became a means of describing or specifying a particular film. The performer's supposed personality was not the ostensible subject of many films, however. It was discussed and promoted elsewhere, in other media, and very quickly it became one of the staple functions of the film industry to supply 'appropriate' material to those other media. The 'image' of the star began to become a major part of the creation of narrative image.

(Ellis 539-40).

An examination of the trailers for several Seagal films reveals how the studios/producers began to shape his image. Considering that the trailer for *Above The Law* (his first film) never once mentions the name “Steven Seagal” or includes his name in the opening credits, it does highlight aspects of the film that would become identifiable with him, such as having voiceover narration explicitly mention Nico Toscani being a “sixth degree black belt in aikido,”⁴ trained to survive in Vietnam, and that he is a police officer who is an honest cop. Two years later when *Hard To Kill* was released, the trailer mentions Seagal by name twice, including the closing line “Steven Seagal is hard to kill,” indicating that audiences would consider him well-known enough to simply refer to him by name, rather than using his character’s name. The trailer for his next film, *Marked For Death*, continues this evolution by referring back to what his characters suffered in his previous two films before finally mentioning that Steven Seagal is playing John

⁴ Of course, black belt is not a term used for aikido, but Seagal was a 6th dan degree in aikido.

Hatcher in the film, and continues the tradition started with *Hard To Kill* (1990) proclaiming “Steven Seagal is ...” followed by the film’s title. Looking at the modern film industry’s most ubiquitous advertising outlets—trailers—it becomes quite clear how from very early on the studios were marketing and packaging Steven Seagal and his films in a particular way to appeal to certain audiences.

Richard Dyer further illuminates this utilitarian view of stardom by noting that there are four main areas in which stars are crucial for the functioning of Hollywood: capital, investment, outlay, and the market. Regarding capital, he notes that stars themselves represent a form of capital for the studios by essentially being able to exploit the intangible qualities of the star for economic gain. For potential investors, Dyer argues that stars are an implicit guarantee of financial stability for a project that should at least recoup its invested capital. For outlay, salaries owed to stars represent a significant investment and, therefore, they must have their public personas tightly controlled (though this was much more prevalent in the studio-era, producers are still concerned about the public image presented by stars of their films). And, finally, Dyer claims that stars are used as selling points for a film, a way to help organize the market around familiar characters and faces (11). Though Dyer provides a Marxist approach in examining the star system, it is one that is worth mentioning for this thesis.

Hortense Powdermaker, on the other hand, takes an anthropological approach to the star system in order to analyze how stars are marketed:

The star has tangible features which can be advertised and marketed—a face, a body, a pair of legs, a voice, a certain kind of personality, real or synthetic—and can be typed. ... The system provides a formula easy to understand and has made the production of

movies seem more like just another business. The use of this formula may serve also to protect executives from talent and having to pay too much attention to such intangibles as the quality of a story or of acting. Here is a standardized product which they can understand, which can be advertised and sold, and which not only they, but also banks and exhibitors, regard as insurance for large profits. (228-29)

Powdermaker's description can easily be applied to Steven Seagal, since the trailers for his films begin to focus exclusively on the actor as the main selling point and the spectacular action elements primarily perform an ancillary function. Indeed, an implicit understanding of this principle can be seen in the reviews of Seagal films. Leonard Klady begins his review of *Under Siege 2* (1995) by asserting that "unquestionably, the dramatically calcified martial-arts action star will draw out his fans opening weekend," ("Under Siege 2 Review") and in his review of *Fire Down Below* (1997) that the film will not succeed on the level of *Under Siege* but it "should generate typical mid-range theatrical numbers and solid movement in ancillaries"⁵ ("Fire Down Below") Emanuel Levy writes in his review of *Under Siege* that "Steven Seagal fans and action buffs should eat up this taut suspenser" ("Under Siege"). In addition to studios, other parts of the film industry also utilize stars, particularly talent agencies. When Seagal left Creative Artists Agency (CAA) in 1995, his new agency—International Creative Management (ICM)—were very explicit in their plans to use him for not only his domestic box office appeal, but also his foreign pre-sales potential and to make him an enticing option to package him with ICM writers and directors (Brodie "Seagal Exits CAA For ICM"). Seagal, then, was obviously an immensely important figure for the film industry throughout the 1990s not only to sell movie tickets, but also for employment opportunities and global marketing. Having examined the

⁵ Ancillaries refers to the non-theatrical markets, *i.e.* television and home market release revenue.

importance of establishing, molding, and maintaining a star's image, this study will now consider Seagal's image and how it is connected to paramilitary culture—a connection that further distinguishes his action films.

Hard To Forget

The beginning of *Above The Law* establishes quite explicitly Steven Seagal's connection with the United States military. In the film, Seagal's character Nico Toscani is working on covert operations in southeast Asia during the Vietnam War and is tasked with assisting Zagon, a member of the CIA, in interrogating a presumably hostile Asian man. Toscani initially was proud of serving his country, however, as he mentions in a voiceover during the flashback, "[his] eyes were about to be opened." What is revealed to him is the clandestine corruption and brutality that existed within the military. In his particular case, it is the brutal, unlawful, and lethal interrogation techniques of Zagon. It is one of the very rare scenes in Seagal's films that actually takes place during the Vietnam War and, according to James Gibson, suggestive of one of the warrior myths that helped shape American culture. That myth is of the lone gunman, celebrated for his individualism, and an important figure that Gibson traces back to the Revolutionary War where American militias won independence from Britain. Its importance can be found in that independent gunmen defeated what were perceived to be evil antagonists, thereby creating a new society (Gibson 17-18). However, as America gained power in the world and established its military glory, the myth of the lone gunman began to lose its relevance, especially as the country became involved in global wars, requiring a more collective outlook.

The dismissal of the lone gunman myth in popular culture (outside of early Westerns) would effectively cease with the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. The psychological effect this had on the nation was devastating and no individual group was more damaged than white males.

Indeed, not only were they insecure about their power abroad, but they were also seeing their patriarchal dominance at home falling apart with the rise of civil rights and feminism (Gibson 11). As previously mentioned, the way in which this perceived assault was dealt with was by turning inwards and dreaming of scenarios in which white males could not only counter their loss of power at home, but also retake America's honor abroad by re-fighting the Vietnam War endlessly, symbolically winning each time instead of suffering an ignoble retreat (11-12).

According to Gibson, while this phenomenon ostensibly began in the late 1970s, we can still see it in the films of Seagal, forever fighting battles of the past in the present, always with a shaded military background to connote that he had *seen* things and was a participant in what Gibson refers to as the "New War." Richard Slotkin also claims that the political situation of the 1980s (and into the 1990s) exacerbated this phenomenon, noting that President George H.W. Bush asserted that the Gulf War regenerated national pride and atoned for the ignoble defeat in Vietnam. The effect of treating the Gulf War as "a ritual of regeneration through violence" and "asking [the American public] to receive it as redemption for [America's] failure in Vietnam" is that Americans were told to conceive of political and moral priorities in solely mythic terms (652). This process eschews the material realities of not only war, but also the national psyche in favor of a mass-cultural mythology leading to the exculpation of America's past defeats and replacing them with symbolic victories.

In order to provide a better understanding of how Gibson's concept of the New War and Slotkin's "regeneration through violence" relate to Seagal's star image, a brief discussion is necessary. Mostly fought by paramilitary warriors, the New War's combatants are often hostile to legal authorities and this stems from their time spent in Vietnam and the view that their government let them down both as soldiers and as men. This is echoed in *Above The Law* with

Toscani's discovery of the brutality and corruption involved in the U.S. involvement in southeast Asia, leaving him disgusted with their role in the Vietnam War. Moreover, these paramilitary warriors, Gibson notes, "are completely enraged when they fight, and the violence they inflict is shocking. The scores of scenes featuring dismemberment, torture, and shredded bodies oozing fluids are absolutely central to the culture and are far removed from the older, dispassionate moral accounting [of Westerns]" (30). So intense is their passion for fighting, that it cannot be satisfied. In other words, these are battles which can never end, they will continue endlessly because there is no moral purpose behind them other than an attempt to satisfy the desire for destruction. Because the wars (or battles) are without end, they can effectively be placed in any time period and any geographical setting without upsetting any semblance of realism (29-30). For example, one need look no further than the films of Seagal, all of which are set in modern times and often in an urban area, far from the killing fields of southeast Asia. Moreover, the New War also allows for continual regeneration through violence in films, allowing American viewers to superficially "remove" the memories of America's defeat in Vietnam with every Steven Seagal film viewing.

We can see this symptom of the New War very clearly in the films of Seagal when we realize that the primary motivation for his characters is vengeance. While the story may suggest that it is revenge for a friend or family member who was killed, the constant reference to a military past (in Vietnam) in Seagal's films provides an important link to the New War and suggests reading these characters as an enraged warrior, looking for any outlet through which to engage his bloodlust. Indeed, even during its initial release Vincent Canby noted in his review of *Above The Law* that it is "the year's first left-wing right-wing movie. It's an action melodrama that expresses the sentiments of the lunatic fringe at the political center." In Canby's review we

have a very explicit acknowledgment that the character of Nico is not exactly someone who is psychologically well-balanced, with Canby adding that he “is the sort of guy who might disagree with you, but he’d break your neck and shoot you through the heart to protect your civil rights” (“Above The Law, a Detective’s Battle”). Toscani, then, is someone whose enraged fighting will stop at nothing, not even killing a person who he purports to be protecting, so long as he can exact his vengeance upon a nebulous foe in order to wage an endless war.

The New War has no end game. There is no attempt to explain what kind of society or culture will develop in the wake of the battles fought by the New Warriors. As Gibson notes, the utter levels of violence performed by those involved with the New War is considered an end unto itself, the victories masquerading as a restoration of an America they believed to be lost (31). This is clear in the films of Steven Seagal where, upon defeating the film’s main antagonist, the film ends. Never is there any sort of character or plot development (or even closure, for the violence was closure unto itself) after the climactic battle. Two exceptions would be *Out For Justice*, whose ending is a punch line to a joke setup earlier in the film,⁶ and *On Deadly Ground*, whose conclusion is ostensibly a chance for Seagal to perform an extended monologue under the guise of a pro-environmental speech. Gibson argues that “the victory of the heroes is in large part an illusion. The New War never moves forward, never transforms society into a morally better place, never propels the hero into maturity. Killing simply makes it possible for another violent cycle to begin” (114). The lack of any sort of structural change in these films, then, gives Seagal an image of stasis, one his fans can rely on to provide a comfortably familiar story of an

⁶ A man throws a dog out the window of his car that Seagal picks up and adopts. At the end, Seagal and his reunited wife are walking along the boardwalk and see the same man; Seagal, expectedly, knocks the man out and the dog urinates on him.

ever-battling warrior seeking to attain the unobtainable—a return to glory for America and white males.

Hollywood films require some narrative motivation, especially in regards to the exposition of character development. One passage in Gibson's book, describing the birth of the new warrior, appears to be written explicitly with Seagal's films in mind. Gibson writes that the new warriors are a special breed of man:

Although they once led normal lives and had careers and families, something has happened to change them, to transform them into warriors perpetually in search of adventure, danger, and death. More often than not, New War stories have their origin in the Vietnam War. Most of the heroes served in Vietnam. Others did not serve in Vietnam per se, but fought in limited, undeclared wars elsewhere and were similarly betrayed by leaders who sold them out. Yet others suffered some form of Vietnam-like 'self-imposed restraint' at home, when major social institutions—particularly the police and court system—failed to combat the enemies of American society. (33)

Above The Law is a perfect example of Gibson's definition of the New Warrior. Nico Toscani served time in southeast Asia as a member of a paramilitary force and witnessed the atrocities that occurred. He returns home to work as a detective and uphold the law, yet, when pursuing drug dealers who work for powerful interests, he is told to let them go free. This view of the law as impotent can be traced back to the vigilante cycle discussed earlier, with police detective Harry Callahan in the *Dirty Harry* series being forced to take extra-legal action against a serial killer. Seagal, by the same token, also must engage in extra-legal activities to perform his own justice to his community. The main difference for him, though, is that his antagonists

are part of the law. We can see, then, a trend moving from passive, impotent law enforcement towards law structures that are antagonistic towards justice.

What this does for Seagal's image, then, is associate him with some universal, nebulous idea of justice and law and order, one that transcends bureaucratic red tape and structural corruption and signifies him as a man of action. Of course, in times of social unrest and economic uncertainty, audiences want a hero who is willing to get to work instead of following procedure and hoping things turn out for the best. This is why Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson were popular with the *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish* series, respectively. *Above The Law* even acknowledges Toscani's less-than-legal tactics, with the drug-dealing character of Salvano noting: "This maniac should be wearing a number, not a badge." That line of dialogue indicates that he expects someone with disregard for the legal protocols and loopholes which exist for those with power to exploit, to be in prison.

The New Family

Heroes fighting for an acceptable domestic environment is central to many action films that involve New Warriors, and the work of Steven Seagal proves no exception. Returning to the parallels between ancient warrior myths and the New Warrior, Gibson notes that the adult warrior's chief task is to keep his community safe from both material enemies and abstract ones, such as demons or mythical beings,⁷ for it is only when evil is kept at bay that biological reproduction and domestic life can comfortably exist. But the new warrior diverges from those of ancient myths when we take into consideration the fact that it is only by shedding his familial obligations that he can engage in his pure bloodlust. Indeed, Gibson notes that once "freed from the ambivalence and restraints of deep emotional relationships, freed from the boring tasks and

⁷ As an aside, material and abstract enemies are both present in *Marked For Death*.

burdensome responsibilities of everyday life, he is reborn into the mythic world of primeval chaos, where he can develop his full powers of destruction” (41). It is interesting to note that Seagal fulfills Gibson’s description, yet he also makes nominal appeals to, and bases his motivating action on, protecting his family in several films.

While exploring Seagal’s image of a family man will be dealt with in a later chapter, looking at his desire for domesticity in the context of the New War is instructive for examining the complexity of his star persona. A very striking example can be found in *Marked For Death*, in which Steven Seagal plays John Hatcher, an undercover narcotics agent who breaks the law so frequently that he has a mental breakdown when his partner is killed in a botched sting operation. Hatcher quits his job and returns to his hometown in the bucolic Lincoln Heights suburb of Chicago. Upon entering his childhood bedroom, we see high school awards, football jerseys, and guns hanging on the wall. Moreover, there are photographs of him in uniform in southeast Asia with fellow military men interspersed with familial photos one would expect to find in a childhood room. This strange juxtaposition of the domestic and the violent (military) is a perfect illustration of Gibson’s concept of the New War being one of totality—there is no way to separate the violent and the tranquil in the new warrior’s life. Also of note is that later in the film when Hatcher and his two partners are assaulting the antagonist Screwface’s compound, they utilize explicitly military tactics, including hand signals and strafing.

Steven Seagal’s personal life provides an additional example showing how he has incorporated the New Warrior image to appeal to his fan base. On his reality television show *Steven Seagal: Lawman*, the episodes are usually structured so that the audience follows Seagal through his daily duties as a patrolling police officer in New Orleans, intercut with lighter moments of him performing music, visiting children, or training fellow officers. One

particularly evocative interstitial scene involves Seagal training his dogs to be attack dogs. The dogs, however, are not police dogs, but his own personal pets and he rationalizes why he is training them to attack by stating that he has to keep his family protected when he is away. There are several curious observations concerning this episode, the most obvious being that he feels his family is in constant danger and, therefore, he must do everything he can to safeguard them. This, of course, involves training pet dogs to be vicious attackers and it is noteworthy that we are shown the dogs attacking an employee of the dog trainer (wearing minimal padding). In fact, the dogs are so vicious that they end up mildly hurting the trainer. Another interesting observation is that we are never shown Seagal's family in the series, he just talks about how it is necessary to protect "them" from possible criminals. Additionally, the house that Seagal lives in appears to be in a well-to-do neighborhood, hardly a community that appears to need to be protected by multiple attack dogs. What this vignette of Seagal's personal life indicates is that Seagal, like the New Warriors he plays in his films, is unable to divorce his domestic life from the ominous threat of constant violence and attack. Indeed, he talks about his home almost as if it were a compound, needing to be made impenetrable to all outside forces because anything that is unknown has a high potential for being dangerous for Seagal and "his family."

Violent Veterans

Film historian William J. Palmer has noted that initially the violent veteran was someone traumatized by his experience in Vietnam, unable to remove himself from it, and simply exists within American society, such as Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in *Taxi Driver* (1976) or Steven (John Savage) in *The Deer Hunter* (1978).⁸ However, the 1980s Vietnam veteran is more one-dimensional than his late 1970s counterpart. He became involved with society, either as a cop or

⁸ Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Johnny Vohden in *Rolling Thunder* (1977) for example.

a criminal, rather than being caught within a middle ground. The shift in representations of Vietnam veterans removes any nuances that the war may have had on veterans in favor of providing a black and white world within which they might live. This is exemplified in several of Seagal's early films, whether it is Toscani and Zagon being involved in southeast Asia in *Above The Law* or Casey Ryback and William Stranix serving as special operatives in Vietnam in *Under Siege*. In fact, in addition to the backgrounds of Seagal films typically involving war in southeast Asia, his films usually include mercenary forces hired by an antagonist who spent time in Vietnam or a Vietnam-like situation. Of course, even with this shift in terms of merely existing within a society or actively taking part in trying to shape it, the one constant is the genre's narrative dependence on violence (Palmer 110).

This change in the characterization of the Vietnam veteran was also noticed in a different way by Rikke Schubart, who theorized that 1980s action heroes saw a shift from passion to acceleration. Schubart posits Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo as the character that best embodies his concept of passion, suggesting that the plot of passion has four parts: marginalization, selection, sacrifice, and vengeance. To briefly summarize his arguments, the hero must first be marginalized, he must have few familial relations so that he cannot be avenged in his sacrifice; then, the hero is selected by chance, seemingly stumbling upon (or having it put upon him) a crisis; thirdly, the hero must then be "sacrificed" as a scapegoat for a society that is unstable so that it can return to normalcy; and finally, after being put up for sacrifice but surviving, the hero returns to deliver vengeance upon his adversaries. Further examples of action film heroes that evince Schubart's conception of passion include Harry Callahan, who is shot in pursuit of Scorpio at the foot of a cross, and Conan (Arnold Schwarzenegger), who is crucified at one point in *Conan The Barbarian* (1982). The retribution of the hero is, of course, the most

important aspect for action films because it provides the audience a sense of earned comeuppance for the put-upon hero (Schubart 195-96). This is the case in several of Seagal's early films where his characters who are ambivalent to those in power must be sacrificed to return the community to a sense of normalcy. We can see very clearly Schubart's concept of the scapegoat hero in *Hard To Kill*, where Mason Storm (Seagal) stumbles across an assassination plot on a government official and must be killed in order to keep it secret. When the assassination is complete, mistakenly believing Storm dead, his assassins frame him as a crooked police officer. Even when he awakens from his coma and is on the run from his would-be assassins, he is painted as a dangerous and violent lunatic to the public so that he is shunned and unwelcome everywhere he tries to hide. Crucial to the plot, though, his pursuers kill his wife and attempt to kill his son, which allows Storm the motivation and capacity to avenge a lost object (or, in this case, a lost family member). We also see a similar narrative structure in *Above The Law* where Toscani's mother is injured by a bomb and his partner is shot, in *Marked For Death* when Hatcher's niece is shot, and in *Out For Justice* when Gino Felino's partner is murdered in a crowded street.

Seagal's characters also embody Schubart's concept of acceleration, the main attribute of the evolved action hero. Schubart notes that his use of acceleration does not have to do with physics but rather focuses on a transformation of the body. Schubart writes that the best way to understand his conception of acceleration is to look at how it negates passion. He argues that the first three stages of passion are removed, leaving only the narrative motive to drive the protagonist to action. The heroes of accelerated action films "have no past as broken idols ... and they are never in any danger" (199). Schubart suggests that the first film to feature a hero of acceleration was *The Terminator* because of the cyberization of the body and the complete

impenetrability (and invincibility) of the hero (not necessarily in the first film but in its sequel). Indeed, Schubart explicitly references many Seagal films as evocative of acceleration. In *Under Siege*, Casey Ryback easily dispatches a militia of trained soldiers and in *Out For Justice* Seagal goes throughout the film “snapping wrists, breaking arms, killing, and torturing—but is never once himself touched or threatened” (199). With this shift towards acceleration, the previous motivations that give the hero the “right” to deliver vengeance upon his enemies are erased and we are left simply with an avenging, nearly indestructibly hero. Stephen Holden’s *New York Times* review of *Under Siege 2* (1995) stated that “Steven Seagal is an action-hero to gratify the wildest middle-aged male fantasies of indestructibility” and “when the Uzis come out, he goes into combat mode. The odds are 50-to-1, but, at the rate of a man a minute, he works from the caboose to the engine, eliminating every obstacle in his path” (“Two-word Title Twice as Nice For Steven Seagal”). The quote exemplifies the kind of logic that a regular Seagal fan might employ and offers valuable, contemporary insight into his appeal. Seagal straddles the line between passion and acceleration; however, as his career progressed, he began to resemble more and more the killing machines of acceleration than the mythic heroes of passion.

Examining the term ‘acceleration’ in a more literal sense, it becomes apparent that studios attempted to market Seagal as a constantly moving man of action, especially in his early films. This becomes apparent in the titles of his films. *Above The Law*, *Hard To Kill*, *Marked For Death*, and *Out For Justice* all suggest attributes about Steven Seagal in his films, in addition to being taut three word titles, that also suggest the general theme of the film. Indeed, an article from *Daily Variety* states that there was a conscious effort by his studios (Warner Bros. and Fox) with his first four films to market Seagal as a brand. According to the article, “all of the titles had that certain Steven Seagal ring to them. ... As soon as you heard the title, you knew

what you were getting. Studio marketing people always felt that this was one more way to sell one of his films.” Seagal, however, was never happy with this attempt to exert control over his films, and originally had titled *Out For Justice* as *The Price of Our Blood*, what he called “a real Mafia title.” Similarly, *Under Siege* was initially titled *Dreadnought* by the film’s writer and executive producer Jonathan Lawton, but that title did not test well and Warners stepped in and offered up *Last To Surrender* as an alternative, keeping true to the studio’s formula. Seagal and Lawton, however, vehemently opposed this title because it continued the tradition of the snappy, three word titling and fought to have it changed by sending a strongly worded letter to the film’s marketing executives (Marx “Two-word Title Twice as Nice for Steven Seagal”). The title was subsequently changed.

Studio input into Seagal’s persona continued beyond the title coup for *Under Siege*. By the time *Exit Wounds* (2001) was released, Seagal’s career was clearly waning, but Warner Bros. still felt he had box office draw. Lorenzo di Bonaventura, Warner Bros. President of Worldwide Motion Pictures (a distributor), asserted that “we believe there is a tremendous reservoir of good will toward Steven, which we can access if we put him in a movie that represents him the way the public wants to see him. ... We paired him with [producer] Joel Silver, who has unparalleled success in this genre and who we thought would deliver the kind of movie people want to see Steven in.” Warners, with producer Silver’s specific input, orchestrated *Exit Wounds* so that Seagal fit the generic criteria they believed the public wanted. Moreover, the studio extended its reach even into the corporeal realm, making Seagal’s inclusion in the film contingent upon him losing weight (Fleming “Seagal Licks His ‘Wounds’”). Thus, not only did the studio control the content and titles of Steven Seagal’s films at many sectors in his career, it went so far as to exert control over his physicality.

A final recent aspect of Seagal's image relating to Gibson's concept of the New War is his involvement with Maricopa County sheriff Joe Arpaio of Arizona. Seagal, along with more than fifty other members of the public, including *The Hulk* (1978-1982) television show star Lou Ferrigno, are part of an armed "Immigration Posse" that seeks to combat illegal immigration along the U.S.-Mexico border. This parallels Gibson's argument that the rise of a paramilitary culture in the United States following the Vietnam War is strongly linked to a sense of white male insecurity about losing power, politically and culturally. Sheriff Arpaio stated that he did not expect the actors to be on active duty very often due to their careers, but believed that they could "be instrumental in heightening public awareness of the immigration issue and encouraging others to join the posse's effort to help reduce the flow of illegal immigrants into our communities" (Seper "'Toughest Sheriff' Recruits Big Names For Border 'Posse'").

Interestingly, Seagal is not a permanent resident of Arizona, nor is the state that he works in (Louisiana) even a border state, suggesting that Seagal might be thought of as a New Warrior, as someone involved in paramilitary-like operations because it provides him with a sense of control over an unstable world while also neatly dove-tailing with his screen persona. Ironically this attitude is contradictory to that of Seagal's Nico Toscani in *Above The Law*. In that film, Toscani stumbles upon a group of illegal immigrants hiding in a church basement, but guarantees them that he is a friend and will work to help them. It is this tension between character and actor, fictional narrative and real life situations for Steven Seagal that will be examined in the next chapter, focusing on how Seagal constructs his own image as a law-abiding family man.

Chapter 3

Morality and Family

“Now you’re a good cop.”

- Mason Storm, after killing a corrupt cop, *Hard To Kill*

In her overview of Steven Seagal’s career, Janet Maslin points out that his primary audience would be “extremely disappointed” if no one was hurt in his films. Typically, the majority of those “hurt” in Seagal’s films are those deserving of the painful justice meted out by the pony-tailed lawman. Until recently, Seagal’s film roles consistently focused on him as an instrument of law and order, suggesting a careful development of his persona by Warner Bros., his primary producer. Comparing Seagal to other contemporary action film stars such as Jean-Claude Van Damme and Chuck Norris, Maslin describes what differentiates him from his peers, “What Mr. Seagal ... offers instead [is] a clever, uncategorizable hybrid of physical prowess, fortune-cookie wisdom, law-and-order politics, street-smart bravado and, above all, the confident, insouciant manner of a natural-born [action] star” (“Seagal Packs More Than A Wallop”). Maslin astutely points out that not only does he have the confidence and charisma of an action star, but he offers “law-and-order politics,” something designed to appeal to a large section of his audience. This law-and-order image becomes a defining aspect of his star persona. This chapter examines the methods that Seagal uses to perpetuate this lawman image, as well as events in Seagal’s personal life that serve to mitigate his star persona.

Humble Beginnings

Historian Daniel Boorstin suggests that a component of classic Hollywood stardom was “the accidentally discovered soda-fountain girl who was quickly elevated to stardom [and] soon took its place alongside the log-cabin-to-White-House legend as a leitmotif of American democratic folklore” (162). This image is perpetuated in the various film versions of *A Star is Born*. The rise of an unknown personality to a well-known and carefully constructed celebrity has become an established contemporary version of the American rags-to-riches narrative.

Richard Dyer, however, points out that this is based on the belief that the class system does not apply to Hollywood, that anyone can become a star. On this point, he asserts that ordinariness, or the quotidian is the “hallmark of the star” (48). Looking at Seagal’s rise to stardom, we can see a very similar trajectory. He became interested in martial arts at an early age, eventually becoming a celebrated aikido master. Through teaching many notable Hollywood celebrities and power brokers he was “discovered” (“Seagal Packs More Than A Wallop”). Seagal fits comfortably into classical conceptions of stardom: someone who, through hard work, achieves success—the Hollywood version of the American dream.

However, there is an additional aspect of classical Hollywood stardom that Seagal does not typify. Dyer notes that conspicuous consumption has always been an important aspect of the cultivation of a star’s image, arguing that it not only displays the wealth of the wealthy and their access to the canons of taste and fashion, but the fact that they do *not* have to work (42). Seagal, however, has actively cultivated an image on film that showcased his persona as a hard worker, whether it is detective or military work. There are very few moments of leisure or luxury in his films and when they do appear, they are usually in working or middle class surroundings such as a neighborhood bar or a high school football practice. Moreover, his off-screen persona is also

one of work, as evidenced with his lawman job “responsibilities” as a Louisiana deputy and his assistance fighting illegal immigration in Arizona. While this aspect of Seagal’s persona differs with Dyer’s assertion of a celebrity who does little “work,” it established a carefully constructed image of a dedicated, hard-working family man, an image that is central to his fan-base.

On A Mission and Out For Justice

Seagal’s film *Out For Justice* (1991) provides an example of this hardworking persona. On the crowded streets of Brooklyn, an off-duty police officer is gunned down in front of his family by a drugged-up wannabe-gangster. The murdered cop turns out to be the partner of Gino Felino (Seagal), a man who loves his neighborhood and decides he must exact vengeance in his own way—the way of the neighborhood. What this means is that Felino must solve this problem internally, without involving the police because it was neighborhood crime committed by one of its own. Felino’s way is extra-legal and follows no official police procedure but that of Seagal’s own sense of justice—a vigilante type of justice his audience expects. Felino is pitted between two other factions wanting to deliver their own retribution upon Richie (the man who murdered Gino’s partner): the police and the mob. Time is of the essence for Gino if he wants to deliver the “correct” form of vengeance upon Richie.⁹ It is this dogged commitment to avenging his partner and friend and supporting his neighborhood that provides a familial dimension to Gino.

However, it is not only his commitment to justice that associates Gino with family in the film. The murder of his partner also interrupts a divorce proceeding between Gino and his wife. This is another constant theme in the films of Seagal, the interruption of domesticity by an antagonizing force. Of course, the divorce suggests that domesticity was already destabilized for Gino, but there is nonetheless hope for reconciliation. The murder of his partner, then, indicated

⁹ And it is the correct type, as Seagal’s characters are always just in their decisions.

to his wife (and the audience) the continued importance of work in his life. It should also be noted that Gino's partner was like family to him, another extension of the theme of an antagonist disrupting domesticity. Gino is a conflicted character in the film. On the one hand, he is an officer of the law and has a duty to uphold it; on the other, he has extensive connections in his past with mob associates and a drive for vendetta-like justice. There are several scenes in the film where he meets with mob bosses and discusses warm memories of his checkered past. Yet, he still does not completely identify with them, a fact underscored by Gino's decision to become a lawman instead of a "good fellow". The film, in its characterization of Felino suggests an evolution. While as a child he grew up unaware of socially acceptable norms of right and wrong, he grew into a man embracing good while shunning evil.

In Gino Felino, Seagal has created a character who delivers not only a vendetta-based justice, but also a justice based on practical morality. Janet Maslin, in her review of the film, accurately describes the conflicting attitudes of the character:

As a courtesy to his many fans, the ponytailed action hero Steven Seagal not only attacks sleaze but also goes out of his way to examine it. His films ... insist on offering an up-close-and-personal view of exactly the kinds of thugs, punks, pimps, hit men and hookers Mr. Seagal routinely finds himself up against in his sincere quest for law and order.

("Spotlight on Lowlife, Then ZAP!")

The film's opening sequence shows Gino's surveillance of a suspected drug dealer before noticing a pimp abusing a prostitute. Gino abandons his stake out in order to protect the woman. Rather than arrest the man for battery or prostitution, he throws him through the windshield of a nearby car. The shot sequence concludes with a freeze frame of the pimp crashing through the

windshield, superimposed by the film's title—*Out For Justice*. The Seagal audience clearly knows the type of narrative and persona to expect—a Seagal persona with his own style of justice and morality.

Honor Among Men

Another aspect of Seagal's persona and the code of honor associated with it is that he often rejects weaponry in favor of brute force. O.E. Klapp outlines the “tough guy” character type and the sense of honor in combat associated with them:

Since he usually fights others as tough as himself, he has a kind of fairness (whereas we should have little trouble rallying against a bully). ... Tough guys often display loyalty to some limited ideal such as bravery or the 'gang code', which also makes it possible to sympathize with them. Finally, they may symbolize fundamental status needs, such as proving oneself or the common man struggling with bare knuckles to make good. (150)

Klapp's definition of the morality of the tough guy fits very well with Seagal's characters but it does not help answer the question as to why they are guided by this moral code. Robert Warshow's examination of the Westerner (a character type associated with the American West) can help further explain this adherence to a code of honor. Warshow notes that because violence for the Westerner is such a thorough expression of his being, it must be kept pure and the Westerner “will not violate the accepted forms of combat though by doing so he could save a city” (657). Seagal can be viewed as a modern Westerner set in the city, a man with strong convictions to a code that many who operate outside of it would not understand. A scene from *Out For Justice*, in which Seagal honorably casts aside his weapon in order to engage in hand-to-

hand combat opens up additional readings pertaining to the elemental and spectacular display of masculine combat.

Gino Felino is doggedly pursuing Richie, the man who murdered his partner in the crowded streets of his Brooklyn neighborhood. He goes into a local butcher shop that he knows is a favorite haunt for Richie's associates. Richie, having entered the shop to explain to his underlings that he wants them to "hang [Gino] up by a hook," has just left with some of his gang. Gino encounters the remaining gang members who are armed with meat cleavers, chefs' knives, and even a baseball bat. The men advance on Gino one at a time, only to be met with the fluid aikido moves that effectively dispatch them—a central set-up in many Seagal films. There are obligatory dismemberments and broken bones that showcase Seagal's non-lethal, yet damaging moves. After dispatching most of the men, the remaining thugs continue to come after Seagal. At this point, he drops the baseball bat that he disarmed from one of Richie's cronies in order to fight hand-to-hand with his unarmed (and now disabled) opponent. Per the conventions of the working class action film, the encounter would not be complete without a bit of comic relief. This is provided by Felino delivering the weak final blow with a cured meat hanging next to him, admonishing his adversary and revealing his connection with the neighborhood: "You know somethin'? Richie's a bad guy. My friends don't like him, your friends don't like him either, you know what I'm sayin'? You're hangin' around with the wrong kind of people."

Aside from comic relief, this bit of dialogue also points back to the assertion that Seagal's characters routinely focus on community and how Seagal's characters might best serve and protect their communities, as evidenced by referrals to friends as indicators of socially acceptable company to keep. The scene concludes with Felino's confrontation with a butcher shop cashier who is armed with a pistol while he is not. Gino maintains his composure and smoothly disarms

the cashier and admonishes him for wanting to hurt Felino, again pointing back to the strong sense of community that Seagal's film portrays. As an aside, the scene is exemplary of the types of indoor fight sequences that action-ize every Seagal movie. One might also argue that indoor "arenas" such as the butcher shop provide more spectacular and off-beat settings, as well as more general destructive possibilities, including plate glass windows, mirrors, furniture, and lighting fixtures.

Seagal's willingness to discard weapons (especially firearms) suggests that he is a warrior who, as a point of honor does not have any advantage over his aggressors because that would be a breach of his personal and moral code. This is certainly applicable to the many fight scenes in which he battles one-on-one with his enemy. However, we see this modified when he takes on several adversaries in open quarters, such as the assault on the primary antagonist's compound in *Marked For Death* in which he uses paramilitary tactics such as explosives, high powered machine guns, and sniper rifles fitted with silencers to infiltrate the base. In addition to underscoring Seagal's moral code, the purpose of including the scenes of honorable one-on-one combat are designed specifically to showcase Seagal's martial arts skills. These fight sequences and moral viewpoints can be seen as attempts by Seagal to further shape his image into an exemplary law-abiding and law-enforcing citizen whose desire is simply to maintain safety and justice in his community.

A Commitment To Justice

Out For Justice is not the only film that showcases Seagal's commitment to his own sense of justice. With the exception of *Under Siege* (1992) and *Under Siege 2* (1995), the first six theatrical releases in which Seagal stars include this character trait for his action hero roles. In *Above The Law* (1988), for example, Nico is repeatedly told to abandon his inquiries into not

only drug dealers, but also his attempts to uncover and prevent an assassination attempt on a senator by rogue CIA agents.¹⁰ FBI agents actually interfere with Nico's attempts to uncover the scheme. However, his commitment to bringing justice to his community will not allow him to give up when his superiors tell him to stand down. Moreover, at one point in the film, when it becomes obvious that Nico will not cease his investigation, the police and FBI raid his house searching for evidence and take him to police headquarters for questioning.

In this respect parallels become apparent with the vigilante films of the 1970s where corrupt bureaucratic police structures would inhibit the hero's quest to bring about moral justice. An example of the impotency of the law in *Above The Law* can be seen in the early scenes with Salvano, the drug dealer who eventually leads Nico to the rogue CIA agents. Nico initially arrests Salvano on drug charges after spying on him and catching him red-handed during a sting operation. However, with a high-priced lawyer and connections in the government, Salvano is set free, saying: "This maniac (Nico) should be wearing a number, not a badge." What this implies is that the tactics that Nico uses are extreme and unlawful—that he is a criminal and not a law enforcer. There is motivation for the gangster's anger at the police, but what he says indicates that Nico is operating on a different moral level and sense of justice than the rest of the police force and society. Nonetheless, by the end of the film, Nico's tactics and personal sense of morality are vindicated by his triumph over his antagonists and a legal system often blind to justice. *Above The Law* ends with Nico being celebrated as a hero to his community and country and giving an interview in which he bluntly asserts: "Gentlemen, whenever you have a group of individuals who are beyond any investigation who can manipulate the press, judges, members of our congress, you're always gonna have within our government those who are above the law."

¹⁰ It should also be noted that *Above The Law* contains an interior fist fight set in a convenience store that also involves him setting aside his weapon to battle with a similarly armed opponent.

This rather effectively raises the question of who exactly *is* above the law, because throughout the film Nico acts in such a manner that is comparable to the methods used by his adversaries.

Hard To Kill (1990) provides an additional example of Seagal's dogged determination to pursue his own sense of justice in light of structural opposition. In the film, Mason Storm (Seagal) is surreptitiously eavesdropping and recording audio and video on what he thinks is a local mafia hit contract. Unbeknownst to him at the time, Storm has stumbled upon a political assassination attempt. A prominent local politician has hired the Mafia to kill a sitting Senator so that he can replace him. While trying to leave, Storm is discovered by the would-be assassins. He escapes and phones his friend at the police station, but, unknown to him, there are corrupt officers at the station who intercept his call. Storm, not realizing the fate that awaits him, stops off at a convenience store. There is a robbery attempt while he is browsing the store and Storm finds himself battling smalltime crooks in another obligatory fight scene where the protagonist easily dispatches them, in spite of his disadvantage in firepower. Storm then returns home with the video and audio recordings of the hit being commissioned by, at that moment, an unknown man. Always pragmatic, Storm stores the tapes in a hidden portion of his kitchen cupboard. Later, Storm's house is assaulted by assassins who attempt to kill him and his family. They succeed in shooting him and his wife, while his son escapes. Storm is rushed to a hospital and mistakenly pronounced dead, a fortuitous error for Mason Storm because it allows his assassins to believe he is no longer a threat to them or their scheme.

The remainder of the film focuses on Storm's attempts to survive (he is in a comatose state for several years) and his exposing of the Senator's assassins. While it is true that the murder of his wife and attempted murder of his son are important factors in his motivation, the underlying purpose of the film's narrative is to showcase Steven Seagal's admirable commitment

to justice by exposing Senator Trent for the assassination. Storm provides a perfect example of Schubart's concept of both passion and acceleration throughout the film: he is struck by bullets, run off the road, and suffers the murder of his wife. However, he is also unstoppable in his pursuit of justice.

The film focuses entirely on Mason Storm and his commitment to a moral sense of justice, indicating this commitment by placing Storm in a coma for several years. Upon awakening, one of his first thoughts is how he will exact revenge upon those who placed him in a coma. The rest of the film follows Storm on his relentless pursuit of vengeance. Perhaps most indicative of this is the line uttered by Storm after killing one of the crooked cops who doubled as an assassin: "*Now* you're a good cop." It displays not only the ease with which Storm has with killing (because the killing was justified ergo it is acceptable), but also his general disdain for corrupt law enforcement. According to Richard Dyer, commenting on Klapp's idea of the tough guy persona, because the hero's actions blur the boundaries between good and evil, the anti-social becomes the social and vice-versa (56). Audiences accept Steven Seagal's violent actions because they are not only anti-social, but morally justified. Here, again, Robert Warshow's work on the Western is useful. When discussing the allure of the Westerner, Warshow notes that the appeal of the Westerner to audiences lies in his values that are transmitted through images of a man whose entire being is violence. He wears a firearm that "tells us he lives in a world of violence, and even that he 'believes in violence. But the drama is one of self-restraint: the moment of violence must come in its own time and according to its special laws, or else it is valueless." The focus of the audience is not on the vanquished, but on the composure of the hero (667). The violence in Seagal's films, therefore, serves to reinforce

the audience's understanding of his characters as "good" precisely because of his calm demeanor and commitment to honor, despite the negative social effects of his actions.

The Importance of Domesticity

In *Marked For Death*, when John Hatcher retires from his position within the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), he returns to his hometown of Lincoln Heights, Illinois in order to find "the gentle self inside." This includes a reunification with his sister and her family, where he is affectionately called Uncle John by his niece. The domestic setting is shown in two idyllic scenes, a birthday party for his niece and his high school's football practice. What spurs Hatcher to action is a gang of Jamaican drug dealers who have expanded their territory into this WASP town. The Jamaicans operate flagrantly, selling drugs to high school teenagers after school and during football practice. Initially, Hatcher is hesitant to engage the dealers, going so far as to chide his friend and ex-military partner, Max, to "let it go." However, when the two are enjoying themselves at a local bar one night and the Jamaicans begin a drug-related gunfight inside, Hatcher is dragged into the affair and begins fighting against the gang members. Not until the gang retaliates for his involvement in the bar fight by shooting at his sister's house and severely injuring his niece does the Seagal persona go into action.

Protection of family is a transcendent value in almost all of Seagal's films and is especially apparent in *Marked For Death*. When the Jamaican gang carries out a drive-by shooting of Hatcher's sister's house, Hatcher commits to bringing justice and delivering vengeance upon them. In this way, his morally justified and committed family man personas become intertwined. The limits to Hatcher's desire to avenge his family know no bounds and are again emblematic of an "acceleration" action persona. He endures his car being crushed by construction machinery, engages in high-speed pursuits through crowded urban areas, and even

travels to Kingston, Jamaica to kill Screwface (the antagonist) and his gang. True to Seagal's screen persona, Hatcher engages in many highly illegal activities, such as buying assault rifles and silencers, transporting those illegal arms across international borders, engaging in wanton destruction of property, and committing murder. All in pursuit of his ideal of moral justice.

An important component of this commitment to moral justice is who the Seagal persona protects. Quite often in his films, Seagal's characters battle an antagonist in order to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Typically they are family members, but not always. For example, in *Under Siege*, Seagal has no apparent familial connections and is, quite literally, thrust into a position where he must defend an entire country. All branches of the military are unable to stop terrorists from launching nuclear missiles against the United States, so it is up to Casey Ryback (Steven Seagal) to protect his defenseless countrymen. In *On Deadly Ground*, Forrest Taft is a worker at an oil company that is exploiting the natural resources of Alaska. However, after witnessing the oil company's corruption firsthand, he decides to defend not only the environment, but also the native tribes who are being exploited by the corporation. Taft is initiated into the native tribe family and lives with them for a period of time. This is foreshadowed in the film by his defense of an inebriated Native American in a bar from racist oil rig workers who function narratively as a means of activating Seagal's protector image, thereby showcasing his martial art skills.

In yet another example of Seagal's commitment to family and country, Casey Ryback attempts to repair the damaged relationship with his niece in *Under Siege II*. When terrorists take over the train that Ryback and his niece are aboard, he turns into the unstoppable machine that he was in *Under Siege*, laying waste to all who seek to not only cripple the United States,

but also to those who attempt to kill a member of his family. Seagal's character intertwines his responsibilities as a member of law enforcement and his commitment to his family.

An additional example of Seagal's protector persona is revealed in *Fire Down Below* (1997) where he portrays Jack Taggart, an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) official. Similar to *On Deadly Ground*, *Fire Down Below* focuses on the exploitation of natural resources and local populations by corporate conglomerates whose only concern is profit. In *Fire Down Below*'s case, a coal company is dumping toxic waste into abandoned mine shafts that is poisoning the water table servicing a local population in Kentucky. Taggart must battle the company and its hired hands in order to stop it. Again, we see Seagal playing the role of the heroic and solitary protector of the weak and, in the process, developing a familial relationship with an attractive young woman and her father, providing further incentive for him to work to stop the dumping of toxic waste. Similarly, in *Out For Justice*, it could be argued that because of his commitment to his neighborhood, he is protecting a type of family. The film opens with a quote from playwright Arthur Miller regarding Brooklyn (where the film is set): "While to the stranger's eye one street was no different from another, we all knew where our 'neighborhood' somehow ended. Beyond that, a person was ... a stranger." The use of that quote tells us explicitly that Seagal's connection to the neighborhood is strong and on a personal level beyond words—it is tacitly understood by everyone. In that way, we can look at Gino Felino's protection of his family from wanton violence as a narrative trope threading through many of Seagal's films.

Conclusion

Steven Seagal has carefully cultivated a screen persona closely connected to law enforcement and a sense of moral justice. Whether he is investigating rogue CIA agents plotting

to assassinate a senator in *Above The Law*, avenging a slain partner in his Brooklyn neighborhood in *Out For Justice*, or toppling an oil baron's plans for environmental destruction in order to profit financially in *On Deadly Ground*, Seagal consistently comes across as a force with a moral center that pays no attention to established legal structures, such as the police bureaucracy or due process. Richard Dyer cites Barry King when noting that stars reinforce the status quo by concealing contradictions or problems in their actions by allowing the audience to identify with the star and wonder "how does it feel to have such feelings" instead of "why do people feel this way" (30-31). This is because it is particularly applicable to Seagal and his characters because his persona allows his problematic actions (i.e. extralegal tactics, extreme violence, abolition of due process, etc.) to be ignored by the audience who tacitly accept that he is essentially above the law.

However, there is a disconnect with the real world, with Seagal's numerous legal troubles—a far cry from his on-screen persona of the honorable lawman. Of particular concern are the repeated allegations of threatening or assaulting women throughout his career. That his main concern is protecting his family and those who are unable to protect themselves (most notably, women and children) in his films is specifically problematic because it represents a complete reversal of the values he attempts to embody in his films. Yet, despite the problems of containing his screen persona as separate from his "real" one (as sensationalized by the tabloids), Seagal has managed to convince many that he does, in fact, act honorably and with the best interests of society at heart. Seagal brings about the justice necessary to protect his community via his incredible martial arts skills. It is through the lens of martial arts that the next chapter examines Seagal's fascination with, and use of, Orientalism and mysticism in constructing his persona.

Chapter 4

The Rainbow Warrior Persona

“I'd like to start out by saying, thank you to all the brothers and sisters that have come here today representing this cause. I have been asked by Mr. Itok and the tribal council to speak to you and the members of the Press about the injustice that has been brought against us by some Government Officials and Big Business.”

- Forrest Taft, *On Deadly Ground*

Having examined Steven Seagal's persona through the New Warrior to the lawful, family man, the final chapter of this thesis explores perhaps the most interesting aspect of Seagal's persona—his ever-changing ethnicity in his films. This is one aspect of Seagal that may not appear to be obvious upon first glance; his films often feel like the same film transplanted into different locales that blurs the dimensionality of ethnicity. However, looking closer at his films (especially his early work) reveals an appeal to and, indeed, evocation of a variety of ethnicities, ranging from East Asian to Native American. By focusing on various minorities in an American sense, Seagal is able to further extend his working class action hero persona by associating himself with those without power in American society. The amorphous nature of the ethnicity of Seagal in his films also provides his persona with a mystique, giving Seagal the veneer of mystery and intrigue. The focus of the chapter will be Seagal's appeals to these various ethnicities and the role that his audience plays in shaping this aspect of his persona.

Seagal and Martial Arts

Seagal has often been associated with East Asian culture throughout his career. As previously mentioned, Seagal received his break in the movie industry because he was the personal aikido trainer for CAA head Michael Ovitz, who saw in Seagal a raw, martial arts force that could be tailored to exploit the market for such action heroes. This training is showcased in his films beginning with *Above The Law* where there is an extensive montage of Nico Toscani as a youth learning martial arts in Japan, defeating all of the Asian students in his class. The film also places a heavy emphasis on aikido's influence on his personal and spiritual development. Seagal's trademark as a martial artist is well established in the action genre, tracing its roots to the popularity of the Hong Kong martial arts films in the 1970s and the emergence of Chuck Norris in the 1980s with the *Missing in Action* series.

David Desser argues that the martial arts film can be divided into five sub-genres, one of which Steven Seagal's films exemplifies—the “law enforcement” martial arts film. Chuck Norris' first big break was in *Good Guys Wear Black* (1979), which established tropes of the martial art film that are prevalent in Seagal films. It was also with this film that the martial arts film, initially brought to the United States in Bruce Lee vehicles, became visible to mainstream white audiences across the country. Desser asserts that *Good Guys Wear Black* “introduced a number of crucial elements to the genre, including the legacy of the Vietnam War, both as origin of the hero's special skills and as a paranoid backdrop of governmental cover-up and corruption” (84). As argued in chapter two, both the Vietnam War and governmental/law enforcement corruption are integral to understanding the cultural zeitgeist in which Seagal's early films were created.

The martial arts film, Desser argues, also provided an outlet through which white Americans could both rationalize the defeat in Vietnam and reassert America's dominance over the rest of the world. Desser notes that the enemies in martial arts films might be said to have somewhat mystical fighting abilities and that "co-opting those techniques, at least through the structured fantasy of genre" could help ease psychological tensions within the collective American mind (104). This became fully realized as the martial arts genre grew, resulting in white martial artists eventually becoming dominant over Asian adversaries in most films. Desser also notes that when not playing the villain in films (such as Bolo Cheung in *Bloodsport* [1988] and others), Asians are usually represented as "aging, weakened, and usually sexless" teachers of the white protagonist. Certainly both of these representations of Asians are true in Seagal's films, such as the lone Asian gang member in *Out For Justice* (who loses to Seagal in a one-on-one duel) as well as his teacher shown during the opening sequence of *Above the Law*. Seagal's films correspond to the tradition started by Chuck Norris of co-opting Asian martial arts in order to heal the damaged American psyche following the defeat in Vietnam. However, Seagal develops it further creating a pastiche of popular American conceptions of Asian culture for many of his characters in order to lend legitimacy to his martial arts skills. This pastiche is heavily involved with the mystique created by Seagal, a mystique that trades on nebulous concepts of Asian mysticism drawn from the region's many religions and martial arts.

In his second film, *Hard To Kill*, the identification with a non-specific, yet palpable Pan-Asian-ness becomes overt. In one of the film's key scenes, Mason Storm, having come out of his coma, flees from would-be assassins to a private ranch in California with his nurse. This begins a truly surreal sequence of recovery from his gunshot wounds which includes many aspects of pan-Asian mysticism. For example, the ranch house is decorated with various works

of Asian art, furniture, and plants. The explanation provided is that the owners of the house (friends of Seagal's nurse) are academics with an interest in Asian culture. However, it is not hard to look at Seagal's films to see Asian décors have been very consciously chosen for more than aesthetic reasons. Moreover, Mason Storm writes beautiful Chinese calligraphy and has what might be colloquially termed "ancient Chinese medicinal secrets." This is easily explained by having Storm inform his nurse that he grew up in "the Orient," once again connecting Seagal to an ethnicity that he shares culturally, if not by ancestry.

The Asian mysticism develops further during Storm's mental recovery phase. He is shown sitting in a Lotus position with acupuncture needles in his body that include burning incense in their tips. The effect is that the recovering cop is almost transforming his negative energy into smoke. Next, Storm is seen meditating before a statue of Buddha, adding yet another spiritual aspect to his character. Janet Maslin has pointed out Storm's use of what might be called "wise aphorisms" in her review of the film, glibly enjoying the mantra that Storm employs: "We're outgunned and undermanned, but you know what? We're gonna win. And you know why? Superior attitude. Superior state of mind" ("Out of A Coma, Still Dapper and Disarming").

In addition to spiritual/mystical representations in Seagal's films, Steven Seagal often associates himself with Eastern religious practices in his personal life. In 1997, a Tibetan holy man recognized Seagal as a tulku (a reincarnated lama). Tulkus are revered in Buddhism because they are perceived to be emanations of the Buddha who choose to be reborn in order to alleviate the suffering of others ("The Buddha From Another Planet"). *Esquire* magazine writer Nancy Griffin notes that in 1995, Seagal visited several Buddhist monasteries in India and the lamas there were reportedly very impressed. In 1996, Seagal told friends that he believed that he

had been a turku in a previous life and asked a Buddhist guru to recognize him as such. Many in both the entertainment industry and the Buddhist religion found such claims dubious, finding it hard to reconcile the extreme violence depicted in Seagal's films with the religion. This episode, however, led Griffin to dub Seagal "The Ballistic Mystic," a name that can be applied to several of Seagal's characters.

Zen Motivation

The source of Seagal's interest with a vague sense of Pan-Asian culture can partially be attributed to personal interest in the subject, but I would argue that his audience (i.e. consumers) also play a role in shaping and perpetuating this image. Film theorist Andrew Tudor has developed four categories of star-audience relationships¹¹ which are useful in understanding the relationship between Seagal and his audience, including: emotional affinity, wherein the audience is only loosely involved with the star's character, is the most common; self-identification, wherein identification with a character on screen reaches the point that the audience member will put him or herself into the same situations encountered on screen and feel the same emotions that those characters do; imitation, wherein audience members will mimic the character on screen by dressing or acting (walking, talking, etc.) like him or her; and projection, the most extreme of the identification categories, wherein an audience member will consciously choose to live his or her life in the way they think the star would, perhaps asking themselves what the star would do in a specific situation they encounter (80-82). While this is a fairly one-way avenue of communication and interaction with the star informing the audience, it is useful when considering how stars are used by consumers and makes an examination of how a star's persona is understood and consumed an important focus for research. In Seagal's case, his

¹¹ Janet Staiger's *Perverse Spectators* also deals with this relationship between film and viewer, too.

working class, multi-ethnic persona allows for self-identification among many viewers with his characters. Audience-star interactions are not always so one-sided, though, and Richard Dyer argues alternative ways in which the audience can influence the star.

As mentioned earlier, Dyer takes a Marxist approach towards the relationship between stars and society, such that it becomes a dialectic of consumer/producer. Dyer argues that stars can be seen as a sort of manifestation of consumers' inner desires and he cites a passage from Francesco Alberoni when discussing how individual stars are chosen by the audience: "The star system ... never creates the star, but it proposes the candidate for 'election', and helps to retain the favor of the 'electors'" (21-22). While the attitude taken by Dyer and Alberoni may be a bit defeatist in the sense that producers still control the options available for consumers to choose, I tend to view the dialectic a bit more generously, with it allowing for a reasonable amount of input from the audience because it is a rare point in the process of filmmaking that consumers can actively influence the industry (by "voting with their pocketbook," so to speak). In this sense, then, it becomes clear how Seagal shapes his image to conform to the perceived demands of consumers.

One obvious (and perhaps reductive) example of the Seagal-audience relationship deals with his fixation on Asian culture. Audiences, especially American fans of Bruce Lee and Hong Kong martial arts films, might expect an action film star who specializes in aikido to have an association with Asian culture. Early in his career Seagal was quite explicit with the references to Asian art and culture, including extended sequences associating himself with them, such as his recovery scenes in *Hard To Kill* or the opening sequence in *Above The Law*. Seagal's film *Out For Justice* also includes references to Asian culture, such as his apartment being covered with Asian art on the walls and a bar fight with a man named Sticks using a broken pool cue to

perform an intricate fight/dance in an unnamed martial art style. Seagal, of course, beats the Asian at his own martial art, just as he did in both *Above The Law* and *Hard To Kill*, suggesting his superiority in an almost colonial manner.

Another aspect of Seagal's association with Asian culture is through fashion. Fashion has always been connected with star image, dating back to the inception of the star system, one needs only to look at fan magazines and publicity stills to note the extent of a star's image and their modes of dress. Richard Dyer notes that fashion is an incredibly important sign for characters (both actors and screen images), arguing that "dress is usually taken to point both to the social order in general and to the temperament of the individual concerned" (124). Seagal's clothing with its decidedly Asian look (albeit incredibly kitschy and based on Western conceptions of what Asian dress looks like) allows connections with a culture to which he has no concrete or specific relation. Seagal's films mirror this fashion sense. In *Marked For Death*, for instance, despite having very few references to specific conceptions of "Asian-ness," Seagal wears a jacket that contains a golden dragon flowing down the side (he also later engages in a sword fight with the Jamaican gang leader Screwface evoking images of the samurai). Gibson points out that in *Hard To Kill* Seagal "wears his hair pulled back in a carefully groomed ponytail reminiscent of samurai warriors" (43). All of this is in addition to the clothing that he has worn in his many public appearances throughout his career, often consisting of Nehru jackets or long, flowing garments.

Seagal also associates himself with Asia in the projects he chooses to undertake, something which has become more prominent since his mainstream popularity has faded and he has focused on the direct-to-video market. He both wrote for and starred in *Into The Sun* (2005) which placed Seagal in the world of the yakuza in order to protect his family. Speaking with

Daily Variety, he explained his interest in the project: “I was raised in Japan and have been studying Japanese culture for over 30 years. . . . I’ve also been an avid student of Kurosawa and was lucky enough to be in Japan with him and the stars and director of the original *Yakuza* in 1974” (Fleming “‘Sun’ Shines For Seagal”). That quote highlights the continued and deliberate association with Asia, in interviews, clothing choices, and projects Seagal has chosen.

Despite his tenuous connections with and questionable portrayals of Asian culture on screen, Seagal’s films remain very popular in Asian markets. For example, *Under Siege II*, which performed adequately in the United States but was nowhere near its predecessor’s numbers, set a Warner Bros. record for the largest opening weekend in Singapore, netting \$561,000 (Groves “Heatwave Hits O’Seas B.O.”). The film also posted similarly impressive numbers in Taiwan (\$1.2 million, the biggest Warners opening weekend ever in the nation), the Philippines (\$788,400 in five days on 24 screens), and Thailand (\$398,000 on 47 screens) (Groves “Tuesday Macho Pix Mucho O’Seas”). Similarly, *The Glimmer Man* (1996), which opened weakly in the United States and Europe, performed very well in southeast Asia, bringing in \$1.9 million in Taiwan in 12 days (Groves “‘Collins’ Heroic In Eire, Foments Fiery Int’l B.O.”) and \$545,000 in the Philippines on 59 screens (Groves “O’Seas B.O. Pays ‘Ransom’ ‘Hunchback’ Hits Highs; ‘Jingle’ Fails To Ring Up Biz”). Finally, *Exit Wounds* opened surprisingly strong in America but fell precipitously in the following weeks, yet performed strongly in the action markets of the Philippines (\$284,000 on 54 screens) and Thailand (\$253,000 on 72 screens) (Groves “O’Seas B.O. Off Key”). While it would be rash to offer definitive reasons for why Seagal appeals so strongly to Asian markets, Seagal’s working class action hero persona might resonate in these countries for the following reasons. Seagal’s characters are often protectors of the disenfranchised and weak and it seems reasonable to argue

that audiences in (relatively) poorer markets could identify and feel an attachment to a hero who is a champion of the working class. It also is possible that his commitment to martial arts, as well as spectacles of violence contribute significantly to his appeal in Far East markets.

The Consumers' Role

When discussing consumer roles in terms of negotiating a star's image, it is important to remember that regular audience members are not the only ones functioning as consumers. To this end, Richard Dyer includes film criticism and commentary under the umbrella of film consumers. Criticism and commentary occupy a unique place in the proffered triumvirate of forces that can shape an image (producer, star and consumer), for they are not completely part of the audience, but they also cannot be said to function as intermediaries for the producers. It is for this reason that criticism and commentary have been included under the auspices of audience input and not studio controlled publicity or press releases. More fundamentally, though, film criticism is the work of individuals who are expressing singular opinion (assuming they are not in clandestine employ of the movie studios) and, thus, can be considered members of the audience, but with a podium from which to speak. Dyer notes that often critics are representatives of the public, acting as amplifiers of widely-held public opinion; equally often, however, critics are used to shape public opinion (71). This thesis has utilized film reviews as extensions of public opinion and, therefore, ways to inform the star (and studios) as to what audiences like or do not like about Seagal's films. For example, Janet Maslin noted in her reviews of *Hard To Kill* and *Marked For Death* the appearance of his ponytail ("Mr. Seagal's trademark ponytail is also longer than it used to be, so it bounces when he runs") and in subsequent films, it was removed (Maslin "Out of A Coma, Still Dapper and Disarming" and "Savagery Trails Drug Agent Back To Middle America"). In addition to acting as surrogate

audience responses, film criticism and commentary may also include actual opinions from non-critic audience members, providing another layer of public opinion.

Seagal utilizes his audience's input to inform the working class sensibilities of characters. An important way in which this is done is through associations with various ethnicities. Ranging from Italian to Native American to Latino, Steven Seagal is either explicitly associated with an ethnic minority (his character is of ethnic descent) or implicitly associated with an ethnic minority (he is able to understand and identify with the language and culture). This comparison with minorities further augments Seagal's working class action hero persona.

Seagal as Italian-American

Industry trade journals (such as *Variety*) and general circulation publications (e.g., *The New York Times*) discuss the multiple, yet nonspecific, ethnicities with which Seagal has aligned himself in many of his films. In *Above The Law*, Seagal associates his character with Italian-American culture. In the same opening sequence that detailed his fascination with the martial arts and Asian culture in the film, Seagal's character also discusses how he immigrated to America from Italy as a young child. Interestingly, the voiceover monologue by Nico Toscani asserts that he was always patriotic and loved his country, perhaps a nod to Reagan-era audiences who wanted to be certain to whom Toscani's allegiance belonged. We are continually reminded of Toscani's association with Italy not only because of the ethnicity of his name, but because his family members are involved with the Mafia, a decidedly Italian institution. These ethnic associations are important because not only do they connect Seagal's persona with hard-working immigrants, but also because they add to his mystique as a man who can be all things to all people. Seagal continues this association with Italy in *Out For Justice*, in which he plays Gino Felino. In fact, Janet Maslin goes so far as to suggest that the film is a "Seagal version of a

Martin Scorsese film, which is to say that Mr. Seagal answers to the name of Gino and speaks in a De Niro-inspired Brooklynese” (“Spotlight on Lowlife, Then ZAP!”) Maslin makes sure to point out the importance of the character’s name in terms of its association with Italian-ness and even compares (although not in terms of quality) Seagal to such figures in Italian-American cinema as those created by Martin Scorsese. Of course, it should be noted that Seagal has no familial relation to Italy whatsoever, which makes his emphasis on Italian protagonists early in his career quite curious. He actually speaks several lines of dialogue in the film in Italian to add to the aura of authenticity of his character; this commitment to each of characters’ ethnicity is present in many of his films and helps add to the chameleon-like nature of his persona.

Seagal’s multi-lingual nature in his films also speaks to his ability to identify with ethnic groups which are decidedly working class. Richard Dyer addresses this vocal aspect of a star’s persona in semiological terms, arguing that how a character speaks can signify different things to audiences. What a character says and how he or she say it can both directly and indirectly inform us of different aspects of the character and, by extension, the star (Dyer 126). Take, for example, Gino in *Out For Justice* and Maslin’s phrase “De Niro-inspired Brooklynese,” certain assumptions can be made about the character, such as Gino’s being a product of the neighborhood who aligns himself with certain values and codes of honor. It can also intertextually reference characters that Robert De Niro has played—tough, no nonsense characters—all of which are infused into the character of Gino Felino and the persona of Steven Seagal. Moreover, Seagal’s ability to speak Italian lends gravitas to the scenes in which he meets with various commanders in the Brooklyn Mafia. Going back to Dyer’s theorization, it stands to reason that by speaking these Italian lines of dialogue in tense scenes, the audience not

only associates Seagal with entrenched conceptions of Italian ethnicity, especially cinematic conceptions of Italian-Americans, but also with the ethnic immigrant experience of hard work.

Seagal as Native American

The ultimate moment in the career of Seagal in terms of ethnic portrayals is perhaps found in *On Deadly Ground*. Here, Seagal plays Forrest Taft—a white man—who envelops himself in Native American imagery so tightly that, for all intents and purposes, he may as well be playing an Inuit character. Because Native Americans have arguably been the most marginalized group of people in America's history, Seagal's association with a Native American tribe is particularly notable in that it paints him as a protector of the weak, an important aspect of his working class action hero persona. In the film, Taft begins on the side of the oil company where he works as a problem solver—namely, he goes into oil field fires and extinguishes them. However, during one such problem mission, he learns that faulty equipment has been used. The reason behind the use of faulty equipment is that the oil company is seeking not only to maximize profits, but also to complete construction on their most important oil rig. If the project is not completed immediately, the company will lose the rights to the land, which will return to the local Inuit population. Thus begins his transformation that leads to, among other things, being made an honorary member of the local tribe of Inuit. Interestingly, the film foreshadows this evolution during an early bar scene which serves many purposes. First, it features the standard interior fight scene thrills for which Seagal's films are notorious; second, it perpetuates his image as a protector of those who cannot protect themselves, and a man whose moral center will not be influenced by dominant and corrupt institutions; and, finally, it creates an immediate connection with Native American culture. All of these work towards establishing Taft as a friend to the working class and the oppressed.

As discussed previously in the chapter, clothing also plays an important role in establishing Taft's connection with a culture not his own. Throughout the film we see Taft decked out in buckskin jackets covered in fringe, highlighting his interpretation of Native American and frontier garb. Janet Maslin notes in her review of the film that "much of what holds the character together is Forrest's taste for leisure clothes with an American Indian motif, though these make him look less like a trouble shooter than a movie star at play in Montana. Mr. Seagal makes an impressive number of unexplained jacket changes during the course of the story" ("How To Save The Planet According To A Big-Bang Theory"). Here we see a reviewer snidely remarking on the sartorial choices made by Seagal and, after this film, he does not attempt to directly associate himself with Native American culture again. More importantly, his modes of dress in the film serve to identify Seagal with an oppressed community while at the same time contributing to the amorphous ethnic nature of his persona.

Beyond clothing choices, Seagal in *On Deadly Ground* makes many other questionable choices. It should be noted that this was his first directorial effort and he makes no qualms about plastering the fact everywhere, including three title cards that include his name. Perhaps most egregious are the colonial overtones that Seagal gives Taft. When Taft is almost killed by his employer's hired guns, he is rescued by a passing Inuit tribe who take him back to their village. While he is recovering, the elder of the tribe recognizes in him a special quality, a quality that leads him to call Taft the "Bear," which in Inuit mythology refers to a protector of the land. Eventually, Taft goes on a dream journey during his recovery, one in which he becomes an eagle and a bear, dances with an Inuit woman in a darkened cave, and speaks the Inuit language. After this spiritual journey, Taft becomes a full-fledged member of the Inuit tribe and is recognized as the Inuit's savior from the oil company. In his review for *Variety*, Leonard Klady notes that the

film is similar to other efforts by first time action stars turned directors in that the hero (the action star-cum-director) is messianic and contains the ability to lead his “people” (in this case the Inuit) from the darkness into the sunlight. Moreover, Klady succinctly summarizes the crux of the problem with Seagal’s Native American portrayal by charging that “when [Seagal] ventures into the mystic and folkloric, the result is patently inauthentic” (“On Deadly Ground”). This line succinctly summarizes Seagal’s ventures into ethnic territory throughout his career: patently inauthentic. Yet the effect that Seagal’s ethnic portrayals have had on his persona should not be ignored. His chameleon-like navigation of ethnicity has added to his mystique and augmented his working class action hero persona.

Summations

Steven Seagal most certainly has strong authorial control over his image. He chooses roles based on what he personally enjoys and provides ethnic embellishments to present the image of a man whose cultural background is constantly changing. However, audience input should not be discounted when it comes to understanding the factors that go into constructing a persona. As Dyer notes, the idea that star image is a one way streets is “very limited” and “does not tell us why the offered images take the form they do” (*Stars*, 20). Alternative approaches suggest that consumers provide their own input. Take for example, the inclusion of popular rappers (at the time) in *Exit Wounds* (2001) and *Half Past Dead* (2002). Certainly they were included to lend a more authentic presence to films that deal with urban crime, but I would also argue that their inclusion represents an acknowledgement of popular culture. To revive his floundering career, he will include public figures who will increase interest in his films and improve their box office returns, such as Ja Rule in *Half Past Dead* and DMX in *Exit Wounds*.

This strongly indicates that audience tastes influenced Seagal's films and represented a shift in his persona that addresses younger, urban audiences in the new millennium.

Also of importance to the mystique of his multi-ethnic persona are the numerous languages Seagal's characters speak. He speaks several languages because it allows him to further diversify his ethnic connections. For example, in *Out For Justice*, *Above The Law*, and *Hard To Kill*, Seagal is able to speak perfect Spanish to communicate with different segments of society. In *Hard To Kill*, Mason Storm needs to switch cars in order to escape pursuers and his solution is to barter with a group of young Spanish-speaking minorities for their beat up old car in exchange for his. Not only can Seagal speak foreign languages, but he is able to use the street-wise, urban language quite fluently. In only one film does Seagal need an intermediary to communicate and it is in *Marked For Death*, the only film from his early career where he ostensibly cannot pass as local or native (due to it being set in Jamaica for the latter half of the film). Seagal manages to construct numerous associations with various ethnicities and cultures not his own by speaking their languages and understanding their cultures. His association with minority cultures also solidifies his working class action hero persona, showing that he is a friend to those less visible in mainstream society.

Through his exploitation of Orientalism, modes of dress, and multi-lingual abilities, Steven Seagal is able to intertwine his amorphous ethnicity and working class action hero persona. By closely identifying with ethnic minorities in many of his films, Seagal becomes associated with the cultural values intrinsic to them, thereby allowing himself the freedom to appear as an ally and protector of ethnic minority communities—a working class hero.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Discussion of Findings

This thesis developed by attempting to understand how Steven Seagal can be viewed as a working class action hero through star studies and genre theory. It has argued that there are three main aspects of his persona: his association with paramilitary culture and “the New War” of the 1980s, his commitment to a personal sense of justice and protection of his family/community, and the amorphous ethnicity of his characters. Each of these aspects has informed Seagal’s working class action hero persona to varying degrees, but each is important because they allow Seagal to appeal to different segments of the market, contributing to his popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

However, the brevity of his career as an action film star can be attributed to the changing media production environment of the 2000s. With the rise of digital production and distribution, the types of content offered to viewers, as well as new consumption venues, has created a much more complex and competitive marketplace. Because of this market fragmentation, Seagal’s core audience is now reached most efficiently through cable programming and direct-to-video films. This shift in distribution and exhibition possibilities has seen Seagal’s stardom dim and fade from popular culture’s memory. Nonetheless Seagal has attempted to re-engage with audiences by various means that include: music, television, direct-to-video offerings, and even energy drinks.

The Cultural Significance of Seagal

This thesis has argued that Steven Seagal's popularity during the 1990s can be best understood in the context of his working class action hero persona. These characters appealed to working class audiences because of their domestic and work-oriented commitments. Beyond this dual commitment, Seagal's characters were committed to a vigilante form of justice that sought justification through societal acceptance. In addition, Seagal chose to play characters that were either themselves multi-ethnic or supported and defended various ethnicities. This multi-ethnic aspect of his working class persona contributed to the segmentation of his audience fan-base, many of whom could be considered working class minorities. Seagal was able to deftly mix this commitment to working classes and minorities with an allegiance to American values (quite literally realized in the *Under Siege* series), creating a star persona that had wide appeal.

It is significant to note that no apparent heir has filled the theatrical exhibition gap left by Seagal. Nicolas Cage briefly filled it in the late 1990s, but branched out into different film genres. Jason Statham has emerged in the new millennium as an action star (albeit a throwback to James Bond), but his appeal is quite different from Seagal's, focusing more on his suave Euro cool-ness and proficiency with vehicles and machines rather than martial arts and hand-to-hand combat. The lack of a replacement to fill Seagal's void further distinguishes his niche market appeal and is a reason why it is so curious that not much scholarly work has been done on the "Ballistic Mystic." Has the market in America for the working class action hero shrunk to a size that the direct-to-video market can service? This is a question for future research on the working class action hero. One point this thesis has tried to argue is that star studies should not solely focus on major stars. Lesser known stars that exist exclusively within genres are worthy of study

because they can provide valuable cultural and historical contexts concerning their audience appeal.

Seagal in the New Millennium

Despite being a blockbuster action film star for a brief period of time, Steven Seagal cannot be considered a star in any sense of the term at this point in his career. However, this does not mean that Seagal is not still relevant in popular culture. Neil Genzlinger of the *The New York Times* provides an interesting trajectory for modern stars' careers compared to the stars of yesteryear. The old kind, who are "more than a flash in the pan but less than a national treasure," were stars for a while, then they would spend time on the television panel game show *Hollywood Squares*, and finally they would fade to obscurity. The new kind, however, were stars for a while, then they "embarrass" themselves on a reality television show, and finally fade to obscurity (Genzlinger "Familiar Faces Chasing Perps and Plots"). This formulation is directly applicable to Seagal because, in an effort to extend and broaden his appeal beyond his (admittedly numerous) devoted fans, he agreed to appear in a reality television show based on his work as a law enforcement officer. Seagal differs from other celebrities, though, in that he does not "embarrass" himself on his show. Rather, he uses the show as an opportunity to retake control of his image and continue developing and adapting his working class hero persona for new audiences. The figure that Seagal cuts on his show is similar to the persona developed in his early work: a man concerned about the well-being of his community and a commitment to his own moral sense.

While Seagal may no longer be considered a star, his direct-to-video productions remain profitable. In fact, one could argue that these films, following his most popular period, were more lucrative for Seagal himself. *Daily Variety*, in discussing *Exit Wounds*, noted that "there's

a ready homevid aud for any Seagal title. This means it should draw unusually high ancillary income” (DiOrio “The Most Expensive”). What this means for his direct-to-video films is that the traditional advertising budget can be bypassed, as well as the cost of prints, in order to maximize the income from the home video market. For example, Avi Lerner, the head of Nu Image (a direct-to-video distributor), noted that marketing two of Seagal’s films for theaters in the early 2000s would cost around \$20 to \$25 million for each film. However, the marketing for direct-to-video releases is approximately \$1 million (Dempsey “USA Unfurls Seagal Direct-To-Vid Pix”). Also of importance is the popularity of his direct-to-video films sold for television exhibition, which provide even more ancillary income. The premiere of *The Foreigner* (2003) on USA boosted the cable network into a rare primetime first place finish for the week, 31% above the average a year prior. Two other direct-to-video films were also released on USA that drew significant numbers: *Belly of the Beast* (2003) garnered 2.18 million adults aged 25-54 on its initial airing (Dempsey “Cable’s Big Score”) and *Out for a Kill* (2003) drew 2.14 million of the same demographic (Dempsey “USA Takes A King-Sized ‘Bullet’ Ride”).

Seagal continues developing his working class action hero persona through his reality television show by serving as a peacekeeper in the high crime district where he works as a deputy police officer. Also of note for both his film characters and star persona, there is a consistent background for his characters that involves the Vietnam War in some respect. Whether it is overtly mentioned as part of his character’s dossier (*Under Siege*) or implied by dialogue and mise-en-scene (*Marked for Death*), Vietnam and paramilitary culture loom in the background of all of his films. Similarly, in his television show, Seagal often engages in military tactics in the field as a deputy. While Southeast Asia is not mentioned in the television show, the paramilitary culture that developed as a result of the Vietnam War is foregrounded. A variegated

ethnicity is the final aspect of Seagal's persona and is one that is perhaps less obvious, but nonetheless important. Seagal also incorporates this aspect of his star persona into his television show by attempting to speak the language of the community he is serving (mainly African-Americans). However forced it may sound, it still must be taken into account when considering Seagal's attempts to maintain and manage his persona. By slipping between cultures based on his manner of speech, his way of dress, and textual clues, Seagal is able to appeal to many different audience segments, as well as give his characters a sense of authenticity that would otherwise be lacking.

In addition to his television show and direct-to-video work, Steven Seagal has also been creating music in several genres, each with an effect on a specific aspect of his persona. In 2004, Steven Seagal released *Songs from the Crystal Cave* on Warner Music Group's Label nonSolo Blue's in Europe and Asia. The title brings to mind the nebulous mystical imagery that Seagal has woven into several of his films and personal life, but the songs themselves are what reinforce various aspects of Seagal's star persona. There are, for instance, songs which appeal to his chameleon-like ethnicity, ranging in style from Middle Eastern and Bhangra types of music to an ill-advised dancehall track in which he employs a strained *patois* accent. Including these types of tracks provides further support for Seagal's concerted attempt at appearing to be multi-ethnic. Moreover, the dancehall track specifically addresses one ethnicity/race that Seagal has never been able to portray in his films—black. Despite surrounding himself with rappers and black actors, Seagal could only nominally appeal to black audiences. However, with his dancehall song he explicitly associates himself with Jamaican culture (referring back to *Marked for Death*). The majority of his album, though, is a mixture of blues, southern rock, and bluegrass. These genres help to continue to associate Seagal with his working class persona that he has cultivated

throughout his career. He also ties his music with his television show, as several episodes include scenes of Seagal playing his guitar and one spends a significant portion on Seagal playing a benefit concert for a children's hospital. Through these various genres of music, Steven Seagal continually maintains and re-envision his star persona through ancillary means.

Beyond cultural products, Seagal also continues to assert his presence on the Internet. There are two primary websites that focus on Seagal: his official website (<http://www.stevenseagal.com>) and an unofficial one (<http://www.steven-seagal.net>). Seagal's official website lacks a message board, but focuses on developing his persona as both an Eastern mystic and a working class man. The design is decidedly East Asian, with Seagal foregrounded in front of a tranquil lake with an Asian pavilion on the edge. He is also dressed in a Nehru jacket and the script used is in a style suggestive of Buddhism. However, he is also holding a guitar and wearing blue jeans looking decidedly "American." The interactive content of the site primarily is devoted to his cultural work, with links to his philanthropic projects, as well as an online store where one can purchase items relating to Seagal (such as his music and energy drink). The unofficial fan site, on the other hand, gives a much greater sense of Seagal's current audience. The forums have separate subforums for every aspect of Seagal's persona, including his films, music, and martial arts.

One final ancillary market that Seagal has used in an attempt to remain in public consciousness was his energy drink—"Steven Seagal's Lightning Bolt". The drink was an obvious attempt to both further and cash-in on his East Asian image, placing the chi symbol prominently on the package design. The advertisement for the energy drink claims that it uses both Tibetan Goji Berries and Asian Cordyceps. However, despite exploiting Seagal's manufactured Pan-Asian image, this product did not survive and has been discontinued.

Re-defining Seagal

This thesis has outlined the ways Steven Seagal has constructed his star image in terms of the working class action hero. Additionally, the ways in which both the producers (studios) and consumers (audience members) have contributed to Seagal's multifaceted star image have been explored and their importance emphasized. Needless to say the idea of a star's image being the product of solely one entity is incomplete and ignores many factors. In Seagal's case, the studios had strong control over his image early in his career, carefully managing his roles, the titles of his films, and even the ways in which film trailers were designed. However, as his career progressed and his popularity grew, he began to take increasing control of his own image resisting studio control over his persona.

But, as is the case with a star's image, it never remains static. Whether it is from audience demand that the star's image morphs into something new or because the cultural zeitgeist dictates the change in order for the star to survive, a carefully managed persona will always be in flux. For example, in the new millennium, Seagal has been attempting to exploit his previous image as a serious law man by taking on more comedic roles. In 2004, Seagal starred in a commercial produced by Mountain Dew that parodied his tough guy image by showing him accidentally stopping a robbery at a convenience store by having bumbling criminals run into an oblivious Seagal throughout the 30 second spot. Seagal followed this up with a cameo in *The Onion Movie* (2008) as a character crudely known as "Cock Puncher," which parodies his image as a skilled martial arts master. David Zucker, director of the disaster film parody *Airplane!* (1980), opined that "Steven gets the joke, he knows he is making fun of himself" (Fleming "Comeback Cued Up To Laugh Track"). This self-parody indicates that

Seagal knows full well the direction he is trying to steer his image in order to maintain his relevance in pop culture.

More recently, Seagal has exploited his persona of the “just protector of the weak” by appearing as Torrez, a drug kingpin villain in Robert Rodriguez’s *Machete*. The role is actually reminiscent of the beginning of *Marked for Death* where John Hatcher is performing a drug sting in Mexico, except this time Seagal is on the opposite side of the law. More so than his forays into comedy, his portrayal of Torrez represents the most jarring departure from his past image because it is so diametrically opposed to the characters he has portrayed. However, this new venue in roles could potentially allow his public profile to re-emerge and, indeed, broaden. One need only consider the film’s trailers, which boldly advertise his presence as an antagonist, to see how there is potential for his career to be re-invented (it should also be noted that this role adds Latino to the repertoire of ethnicities which he has portrayed on film).

The numerous recent examples of Seagal exploiting his past image serve as indicators of Seagal’s legacy. The cultural significance of such a legacy should not be underestimated, as the films studied in this thesis were consistent box office earners and his persona was ubiquitous throughout the industry. He attended restaurant and club openings, presented Oscars, and was considered one of the top 20 stars in Hollywood at one point in his career. It remains to be seen if Seagal will continue to redefine himself through new roles or if he will continue making consistent low-budget earners in the direct-to-video market, but suffice it to say that he has indelibly left his mark on the action film genre.

Future Research

Inevitably there were many things that had to be left out of this thesis because of its scope. Issues concerning masculinity in the films of Seagal were excised not only for space limitations, but also because Yvonne Tasker, Susan Jeffords, and others have done a very thorough job in mapping out masculinity and gender studies concerns in the action film genre as a whole. An interesting project, though, would be to look at how Seagal's conception of masculinity differs from that of his action film contemporaries, such as Jean-Claude Van Damme, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, or Bruce Willis. Another potential future project would be a specific Marxist ideological study of Seagal's films and to look at how they perpetuate a capitalist ideology, despite many of his films championing progressive causes in their scripts.

The term working class action film was also introduced in this thesis, as I argue that Seagal's films fall under this subgenre. However, a full exploration of the subgenre is beyond the scope of this thesis and could offer a venue for further research. A dissertation would allow for a much fuller comprehension of the working class action film, as well as differentiating it from the broader genre of action cinema.

These types of scholarly inquiry can be useful in understanding how and why various subgenres of the action film have evolved. Moreover, further questioning can lead to an understanding of how action stars who have passed their prime can maintain relevance in popular culture. This thesis hopes to have added to the discussion by focusing on Steven Seagal as a case study and examining the creation and maintenance of his star persona with the working class action film and how he continues to negotiate that persona through a constantly changing marketplace.

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