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From *Rocky* (1976) to *Creed* (2015): “musculinity”¹ and modesty

Clémentine Tholas

Forty years ago, in 1976, moviegoers discovered a 29-year old kind-hearted thug whose only way out of the Philadelphian rough districts was boxing. *Rocky* – film and character – was the brainchild of Sylvester Stallone, who managed to convince director John Avildsen and producers Robert Chartoff and Irwin Winkler to both shoot a script written by a penniless actor and hire him as the main lead. In 1977, *Rocky* was nominated for ten Academy Awards and ended up winning the award for “best picture”, making Stallone a star overnight. Six sequels to the original movie have come out since – *Rocky II* (1979), *Rocky III-The Eye of the Tiger* (1982), *Rocky IV* (1985), *Rocky V* (1990), *Rocky Balboa* (2006), and *Creed* (2015). Today the *Rocky* franchise has become such a global cultural phenomenon that almost everyone is familiar with the line “Yo, Adrian” or the *Rocky* steps in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art on the Benjamin Franklin parkway. The last film was directed by young Ryan Coogler. It shifts the focus from Rocky to Adonis Creed, the son of late boxing champion Apollo Creed as well as Rocky’s new protégé. A second *Creed* movie is expected to be made by the Coogler-Stallone duo and released in 2017, thus continuing the seemingly never-ending series, with Adonis appearing as the new torch-bearer when the light of Balboa dims after being diagnosed with cancer.²

This article discusses how Rocky Balboa should not be interpreted as a muscular super-fighter but as a humble character, a simple “bum from the neighborhood”. Both Stallone and Avildsen have underscored the humility and decency of Rocky as what made him such an endearing hero: “Rocky has a lot of issues, a lot of problems. He is like all of us” (Stallone); “On the second and the third page, the guy is talking to his turtle, and I was charmed” (Avildsen).³ My approach is related to new readings of Stallone introduced by Chris Holmlund, editor of *The Ultimate Stallone Reader*. She explains that Stallone studies appeared in the 1980s with the groundbreaking works of Yvonne Tasker and Susan Jeffords on the notions of “musculinity” and the “hard body”, but only gained full academic recognition in the 2010s after the 2008 SCMS conference in Philadelphia, during which scholars offered a vision of Stallone as a one-man-band

(performer, screenwriter, director, producer), breaking free from the brawny action hero image he has been reduced to for many decades.⁴ In response to Valerie Walkerdine and Chris Holmlund's views of Stallone as the image of working-class combative masculinity challenging oppression and longing for mastery,⁵ here I analyze how Rocky's social, emotional and physical fragility is increased throughout the series of films. It is interesting to consider *Rocky* as a romanticized vision of the working class in which success and money corrupt the natural man, a perspective introduced by Peter Biskind and Barbara Ehrenreich; they interpret the working class as depoliticized in the 1970s productions but sexualized and connected with conflictual images of hard and impulsive but also soft and sentitized masculinities.⁶ The different films mingle violent manliness with emotive power and emphasize the gentleness of the character who needs to toughen up if he wants to survive in a world ruled by ferocity, exploitation and manipulation. Yet, Rocky, albeit presented as a rough action hero, stands out thanks to his gullibility and mildness. I argue that the articulation between the action genre and the development of Rocky in the films is paradoxical. The serial pattern gradually constructs a character whose delicate virility and brittleness make him a more likeable and thoughtful hero. If Rocky has sometimes been read as a white man who fights to regain his declining power, this paper examines how Rocky's vulnerability shapes him as a better man and not as a super champion. It addresses the soft side of masculinity and the treatment of modesty and sensitivity in the *Rocky* saga which seems to restructure the American action man as an unthreatening demure hero.

Rituals and Rebirth

Each film presents Rocky, or his new alter-ego Adonis, fighting both for a professional distinction and a personal motivation. Two films have been directed by John Avildsen, four by Sylvester Stallone (who also penned six screenplays in the series), while *Creed* was directed and written by Ryan Coogler. Boxer Rocky Balboa is surrounded by a close circle of relatives and other boxers composed of Adrian, his wife (Talia Shire), Paulie Pennino, his brother-in-law (Burt Young), Mickey Goldmill, his old coach (Burgess Meredith), Robert, Rocky's son, Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) and Tony "Duke" Evers (Tony Burton). Other characters are periodically introduced as the nemesis whom the hero will have to defeat. Rocky's life evolves in limited settings, for example his South Philly neighborhood in the Italian district; his apartment or house; his gym and training locations; and finally, the boxing rings, thus centering the plot on specific iconic places laden with meaning for a character who seems to be set in his ways. Eric Litchenfeld defines Rocky as "an extension (or manifestation) of his environment", stressing the strong connections between his identity, his feelings and his personal geography.⁷ Even when displaced in other locales for new challenges, for instance California, Russia, or England, Rocky sticks to a temporal, geographical, or emotional routine that enables him to defy hardships

Scholars found that the series uses similar plotlines, tropes and characters: Rocky is repeatedly faced with a challenge related to personal failings, economic problems, family issues, or the loss of a loved one (Adrian & Apollo). The only way he can overcome these trials is to fight an opponent who incarnates Balboa's fears and frustrations (Apollo Creed, Clubber Lang, Ivan Drago, Tommy "The Machine Gunn",

Mason "the Line" Dixon). The character's life is a perpetual battle in and out of the ring and Rocky always has "to go the distance" – as his coach Mickey says – through a hostile external world, different from his usual surroundings. According to Marianne Kac-Vergne, as in any action movie the hero seeks to regain his dignity through a struggle against those who have humiliated him.⁸ *Creed* recycles the same formula as young Adonis Creed can only make a name for himself by fighting British heavyweight champion Ricky Conlan (Tony Bellew). Both Rocky and Adonis are confronted with internal and external threats, because they are enemies to their success as much as their opponents are. The two characters illustrate Chris Holmund's idea that introspection and personal dilemmas are key ingredients to Stallone's films because he tends to "foreground emotional interests" and "keep the action personal,"⁹ the muscles only serving a nobler cause.

Most films of the series use a repetitive pattern and integrate images from the previous films in the introduction, and utilize numerous flashbacks as well. The original saga should be seen as "one big movie",¹⁰ presenting the evolution of Rocky Balboa from the moment he leaves street life to prove his value as a professional boxer to his retirement and new career as a trainer of younger boxers. The first cycle, and each film within it, could thus appear as a simple story of rise, fall, and rise. The second cycle, heralded by *Rocky V*, is more complicated because Rocky has moved on to a new stage in life and acknowledges his position as an obsolete boxer turned into a restaurant owner whose come-back on the ring is quite strange. In *Rocky Balboa*, his restaurant appears as a time capsule in which memories of the past are accumulated and illustrate the discrepancy between the flamboyant fighter Rocky was and the aging man he is now. In 1993, Frank Ardolino presented the first cycle of the *Rocky* series as a "rebirth narrative" and a "narrative of sameness,"¹¹ using the repetition of key scenes and motifs in order to intertwine the past, the present, and the future because the past serves as a driving force to change what is to happen while the efforts in the present allow Rocky to redeem past mistakes.¹² These comments also apply to the new cycle because each film is about the constant resurrection of Rocky when he is on the verge of "throwing in the towel" for good. From the very first film, the saga deals with the end of Rocky's career because the 29-year old underdog was never supposed to become the heavyweight champion. Nina Schnieder demonstrates that age is a major hindrance in the entire series because Rocky is repeatedly too old to make it and out of place in the major league. The seven films show that Rocky is never fit to fight and that, normally, his best option should be remaining in the corner or retiring. Yet, against all odds, he always wins, directly or indirectly.¹³ Interestingly, while aging is a challenge to many actresses in Hollywood who have difficulties embracing their aging, it seems that for Stallone and his fantasy alter ego, Rocky, advancing age is a way to keep the franchise profitable by creating a soft super hero. Each time, Rocky is offered an opportunity to start anew and change his fate, by fighting himself or having another character trigger his will power (Adrian or his son), or helping other boxers for the cause of outcasts (Tommy Gunn, Adonis Creed). In *Rocky V*, during a press conference, he tells his son "Having you is like being born again". The idea of resurrection is crucial to the entire series because in each film Rocky comes back as a new man with new challenges and a new form of knowledge.

The link between both cycles of films is also built on the recurrence of "ritualistic training sequences" orchestrated as a repetition with variations "to illustrate both difference from the past and continuity with it."¹⁴ These sequences are probably the

most awaited moments for the audience because they concentrate on the pain and efforts of Rocky to become someone better and to prepare to win. For example, in *Rocky* and *Rocky II*, the hero keeps the same training locations (the industrial wasteland, the Italian market, the slaughterhouse, the museum steps), an almost identical outfit, the grey track suit, the old converse shoes, the snow hat. However, in *Rocky II*, “the Italian Stallion” is now clumsily written on the back of his sweatshirt, and he doesn’t run alone but rather is waved at by people in the streets and followed by hordes of children who cheer him. This solitary training becomes a collective effort to support the champion who has won everyone’s heart. In the next installments, Bill Conti’s signature theme “Gonna Fly Now” is replaced by other tunes (ex: “The Eye of the Tiger” in *Rocky III*, “Burning Heart” in *Rocky IV*, both by the band Survivor), but reintroduced in *Rocky Balboa* as a reference to the spirit of the original film. The sixth installment also reactivates the same elements as the first two films, including the dog as a running companion, expect that this time Rocky is getting older and struggles much more. In *Rocky III* and *IV*, Rocky’s training is transferred to other locations such as the slums of Los Angeles, cradle of Apollo, or the Russian tundra, to take the character out of his comfort zone and make him tougher through destabilization. In *Rocky V* and *Creed*, Rocky becomes the trainer of Tommy and then Adonis. First, he tries in vain to be a new Mickey and to make Tommy a new Rocky, a tactic that doesn’t pay off because the young man is ridiculed by being called “Rocky’s Clone”, “Rocky’s Robot”.

In *Creed*, Rocky is a weakened coach who has to train Adonis from the hospital where he receives his chemotherapy treatments. The last film combines ingredients from the other training sequences: the relocation in an unfamiliar and unfriendly place – the hospital and another gym–, the guidance of an old champion who knows all the tricks, the individual running sessions in the streets with the grey tracksuit and the black snow hat, but now Adonis is supported and escorted by the local youths on their motorbikes. *Creed* eventually conveys successful transmission from a focus on Rocky to a younger boxer that was absent in the previous films. In *Rocky Balboa*, Rocky has to fight again, he is unable to find a real heir for his legacy with Tommy in *Rocky V*. The training session in *Creed*, as well as Rocky’s age/sickness, make it clear that, this time, he is retiring for good, that no comeback to the ring is possible and the coming sequels will be different from the first six films. Rocky is thus over as a boxer, but not as a character. If the hero seems to be at his worst and unable to embody a boxing champion anymore, how can he continue carrying the saga on his shoulders? If a sequel is announced, producers are confident that Rocky can still attract crowds in the movie theaters; it thus seems worth studying the power of Rocky as an anti-action hero.

Meekness and Sensitiveness

While the *Rocky* series has been described as the paragon of “Reaganite entertainment” celebrating an idealized past and conservative values (cf. Andrew Britton)¹⁵ or the assertion of white supremacy over a racial or a cultural other,¹⁶ I prefer to center my article on the expression of humbleness and self-effacement embodied by the main character. As Susan Jeffords explained, Hollywood films produced in the 1990s promoted “the New Man” who represented a “more internalized masculine dimension,” a character exploring “ethical dilemmas, emotional traumas, and psychological goals,” The film industry offered “in a place of bold male muscularity

and/as violence, [...] a self-effacing man, one who now, instead of learning to fight, learns to love."¹⁷ With the *Rocky* series, it seems that this combination of muscle and heart started as early as the 1970s, anticipating the latter trend. In most films, Balboa is described as a fighter characterized by his genuine heart. In *Rocky IV*, right before the match against Drago, Paulie's comment "You're all heart" encapsulates this peculiarity. When explaining his authorial choices in *The Official Rocky Scrapbook*, Sylvester Stallone stressed his desire to craft a compassionate everyman:

That night I went home and I had the beginning of my character. I had him now. I was going to make a creation called Rocky Balboa, a man from the streets, a walking cliché of sorts, the all-American tragedy, a man who didn't have much mentality but had incredible emotion and patriotism and spirituality and good nature even though nature had not been good to him. All he required from life was a warm bed and some food and maybe a laugh during the day. He was a man of simple tastes. [...] But Rocky Balboa was different. He was America's child. He was to the seventies what Chaplin's Little Tramp was to the twenties.¹⁸

In light of these remarks, Rocky, often described as "a bum from the neighborhood," appears as an alter ego of Chaplin's popular character, belonging to the lower classes of American society and demonstrating the same sympathetic potential. As a result, being a bum proves to be his real power, more than his muscles. Even if Rocky is obviously not as astute as The Tramp, the film series demonstrates he can prove very resourceful and draws from his emotional power to accomplish great deeds in and out of the ring.

Rocky puts on several costumes, corresponding either to the expression of his personality or to his desire to become stronger. Throughout the series, Rocky owns two major costumes: first a street costume composed of a black leather jacket, a hat, and some mitts, making him look like a shadow in the urban night; and then a boxer's costume made of a pair of shorts, some gloves, and a gum-shield. Rocky's boxing paraphernalia echoes the evocation by Yvonne Tasker of Zavitzianos's concept of "homeovestim" – wearing clothes of the same sex – and Lacan's "male parade" in which men put on the garments of masculine authority, as ways to raise self-esteem and regain authority.¹⁹ However, the boxing costume appears as an illusion of power and matches only very partially Rocky's identity. In times of trouble, when he learns he is ruined in *Rocky V*, Rocky finds comfort not in the combat attire but his old clothes he finds in the attic of his mansion. He puts them back on and becomes again the man from South Philly. While the stars and stripes boxing shorts of Apollo can be passed on from Apollo to Rocky (*Rocky III, IV*), from Rocky to Tommy (*Rocky V*) and finally to Adonis (*Creed*), transferring some male power to the person who wears them, Rocky's street costume is only made for Rocky and is more meaningful for him than the shorts which become a feeble signifier. The expression of Rocky's meekness is related to his sense of humor: he mocks his failings with the help of his foil Paulie, an overweight drunk side-kick. Paulie is another loser but he lives with his shabbiness and flaws, with no interest in introspection and no intense desire to change contrary to Rocky. But he also admires his friend and comforts him when necessary: "If I could just unzip myself and step out and be someone else, I'd wanna be you" (*Rocky IV*).

According to Frank Ardolino, Rocky may also resemble a small-town hero because of his "overall innocence, social naiveté, his love of plain talk and direct action, and his loyalty to family, friends and tradition."²⁰ The relationship with his wife Adrian adds a romantic and sentimental dimension to the series, even in the last episodes when he

continues talking to her after she is dead. It is also worth noting that, apart from *Creed*, the series is devoid of sex scenes; Rocky and Adrian's physical bond appears extremely chaste. Stallone explained in 1977 that they were soulmates: "The movie was really about two individuals – half people – coming together making a whole person."²¹ Rocky is less interested in Adrian's looks than in her intellectual potential, and he really picks a partner who can bring him what he considers he lacks. He looks for complementarity in their relationship, but not for a situation of domination as he asserts his male prowess mainly on the ring. The reserved and innocent representation of their love is remarkable, especially if we consider that it strikingly contrasts with the exhibition of half-naked male bodies, and participates in the rhetoric of modesty offered by the saga. For Chris Holmlund, the simplicity and sensitiveness of the hero appears to be a trait in Stallone's films which stage "macho heroes who are not afraid to show their feelings," men who "often cry and cry out." For example, Rocky is crying for Adrian when she is in a coma (*Rocky II*) and in the following films he will deeply mourn her (*Rocky Balboa* and *Creed*).²² Other scholars suggest that Stallone tends to play with the human duality between power and weakness and on gender roles as well, making his action heroes multifaceted characters. For Yvonne Tasker, "the performance of muscular masculinity within the cinema draws attention to both the restraint and the excess involved in "being a man"²³ and Stallone tries to sell the "male star as something other than a hunk/hulk."²⁴ She adds that the "drama of power and powerlessness [...] intrinsic to the anxieties about male identity and authority"²⁵ is a main characteristic of the action genre and of the star's films. In *Rocky Balboa*, the character emphasizes the instability of human life and his own fears: "You or nobody ain't never gonna hit as hard as life... But it ain't about how hard you hit, it's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward". Audiences are meant to understand that exposing Rocky's vulnerability through his sweet personality, but also through the sufferings of his body during the training and the matches, is a way to reveal his power.²⁶ His "musculinity" makes sense because he is also sensitive, and his taunt body may appear as a shield to protect this candid character. The reason why Rocky wins is not the yearning for fame or the desire to show he is the strongest, it is love. His heart and his feelings for Adrian and old Mickey make him overcome obstacles. Mickey's line "Get up you son of a bitch 'cause Mickey loves you" (*Rocky V*) illustrates the power of Rocky's emotional trigger.²⁷

Jérôme Momcilovic presents Stallone's filmography as "the ideology of the immigrant's humility, of the effort of life-saving labor [...] the exaltation of the father figure, the laboring classes and family [...] the myth of upward mobility and second chance."²⁸ This definition emphasizing the idea of class awareness can apply to Rocky, whose entire journey is synonymous with self-improvement both at the social and personal levels. If Rocky, like other characters played by Stallone (Rambo for instance), starts as a common man who is held back by inhibition and fear, he is gradually revealed as a superior being.²⁹ Yet, it seems important not to lose sight of Rocky's struggle to remain a decent man rather than becoming the ultimate superman. The stakes of the *Rocky* series are regaining dignity and repairing a broken-self through a physical and psychological transformation, showing how the hero surpasses himself.³⁰ If we focus on Rocky's modest personality, we see that his constant struggle for self-improvement goes beyond the sphere of boxing and social achievement. For example, even though his father told him he was not much of a brain and should better use his body to succeed, Rocky also tries to improve his intellectual skills with Adrian's guidance. In *Rocky II*, after he is humiliated for not being able to read correctly the lines of an

aftershave commercial, Rocky trains himself to read correctly while in bed with his wife. This new challenge will help him maintain a connection with his wife when she is in a coma as he reads for her and writes her poems, and later on, his ability to read will help Rocky behave like a role model for his son when he reads him children stories like *Pinocchio* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* in *Rocky III*. Real or surrogate fatherhood is an important aspect of the series because it participates in building the hero not as a muscular warrior but as a kind man. *Rocky IV*, *Rocky V*, *Rocky Balboa* and *Creed* insist on Rocky's concern for younger generations (his son Robert, Tommy, Adonis) and his desire to help them. If Tommy endangers Rocky's relation with his son and finally betrays him, Adonis is faithful to Rocky. He considers him as family, calls him "Uncle," and supports him while struggling with cancer. Throughout the series, Rocky – who first appeared to be rather naïve – becomes a voice of experience, admittedly sometimes unsophisticated and awkward, but thanks to his kind-heartedness, modesty, and temperance he proves a reliable paternal figure, a secure refuge for Adonis in the last film.

Softness and Marginality

Rocky does not so much long to be a champion but to be a better man. This aspect of his personality is illustrated by his habit of standing in the background while his opponents incarnate ostentation. As a bum, Rocky holds the power to remain discreet and deferent while Apollo Creed, Clubber Lang, Ivan Drago, Tommy Gunn, and Mason Dixon all boast and brag. Apollo Creed is a showman who transforms boxing matches into gigantic shows with costumes, dancers, feathers, confetti, and famous singers (James Brown) in *Rocky I*, *Rocky II* and *Rocky IV*. On the contrary, Rocky's only displays are his austere religious rituals, kneeling and praying in the bathroom and crossing himself while in the ring. Lang's exuberance is mainly verbal, angrily expressing his rage against Rocky and society. Balboa is a man of few words, illustrating the saying that silence is golden – even if he becomes more and more voluble in the second cycle of films. Drago's extensive use of machines and steroids to shape his dehumanized body contrasts with Rocky's training in the harshness of the deserted Russian countryside. If Drago is almost turned into a robot, Rocky becomes a man of the woods, an American mother-nature's son who only needs snow, frost, and will-power to prepare himself for the match. Both Tommy Gunn and Mason Dixon are lured by money and fame whereas Rocky, after spending a few years in a lavish mansion when a champion, is back in his old neighborhood where he tries to make a living by training young boxers at the gym and then by running a restaurant. He knows that celebrity and dollars are transient: the American dream of economic success might not necessarily mean progress. All in all, despite all the power and muscle, the series manages to produce a "soft" character spectators don't have to be afraid of, an American hero who doesn't stand as an aggressive assertion of US imperialism even if he is still a spokesman of American superiority.

In the series, Rocky does not always avoid pretention and garishness – remember the ridiculous presence of the expensive robot in *Rocky IV* –, especially during his golden years as a champion, but Adrian and Paulie remind him about what matters most, namely respecting his relatives and being true to himself. What makes Rocky so likeable for spectators and scholars compared to other action heroes is that he

preserves his original "bum" identity, a status he once despised and badly wanted to escape, but which finally proves more respectful than easy money and illusory glory. By belonging to the margin of society or going back to it, Rocky achieves an unexpected authority. According to Marianne Kac-Vergne, in action movies outcasts are considered superior to regular elites because they have not been corrupted and they stand as more authentic and more human. Outsiders have the power to regenerate traditional structures of power.³¹ The bum therefore becomes a virtuous man for whom winning is worth less than struggling and trying, this motto being given emphasis in the lyrics of the Bill Conti's soundtrack: "Trying hard now, It's so hard now, Trying hard now, Getting strong now."³² In the tale of the humble Rocky – a working class hero, the value of effort and sacrifice becomes more important than the prize.

The Rocky series has often been depicted as a modern-day fairy-tale, a rags-to-riches story appealing to American and international audiences for holding universal qualities. If the saga has been associated with the action or the sport film genres, celebrating masculine might and a certain form of justified violence, the longevity of the franchise is much more rooted in people's attachment to Rocky Balboa. The character has almost entered the American national pantheon with his gloves, robe, and shorts being exhibited at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. and his statue standing aligned with George Washington's statue in Philadelphia. Yet, I argue here, Rocky embodies modesty and decency rather than muscular strength and patriotic pride. Even after all those years, his authenticity and uncomplicatedness is still praised by Stallone in interviews:

He is of the people, and he has no sense of entitlement or superiority. Actually he gets his power from being simplistic [...] He's completely without guile. He is "there" – he really hasn't changed [...] he didn't think of himself as any better than the person who's selling a fish or flowers. And I think I was trying to get that there is no egoism at all. Nothing! He is completely, like, back where he started.³³

The character is a selfless man with whom people can easily identify. Back in the early years of the Rocky series, some people may have wanted to be like this brave man fighting to get what he wanted; today, younger spectators can see in Rocky something that may remind them of a nice protective relative while more mature spectators perhaps see a man who is aging and facing the same issues as them. Surprisingly, despite the boxing theme, we tend to forget that Rocky is a boxer because the series' strength doesn't lie in the repetition of the fighting motif but in the maturation and complexification of the character away from the ring. As some scholars argue, the Rocky series reworks the boxing genre towards the social realist tradition and could to a certain extent be compared with Frank Capra's films for its celebration of the triumph of the common man.³⁴

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ENDNOTES

1. See Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies, Genre and the Action Film* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

2. Ramin Setoodeh, Kristopher Tapley, "Still Fighting," *Variety*, January 2016, 48.
3. Setoodeh, Tapley, "Still Fighting," 46-48.
4. Chris Holmlund, "Introduction: Presenting Stallone/ Stallone Presents," in *The Ultimate Stallone Reader*, ed. Chris Holmlund, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 15-16.
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26. Laurent Kasprowicz and Francis Hippolyte, "Le Corps body-buildé au cinéma: magie et anthropologie d'un spectacle, » in *Le Cinéma des années Reagan*, 201.
27. The entire line refers to Rocky Marcianno's cufflink used as a lucky charm: "If you ever get hurt and you feel that you're goin' down this little angel is gonna whisper in your ear. It's gonna say, 'Get up you son of a bitch 'cause Mickey loves you.'" Rocky remembers the moment Mickey gave him the present.
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34. Lawrence Webb, *The Cinema of Urban Crisis: Seventies Film and the Reinvention of the City* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 60; Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010), 329.

ABSTRACTS

The profitable *Rocky* franchise celebrated its 40th anniversary with a new instalment, *Creed*. As Roger Ebert explained in 1976, *Rocky* is not so much about a story but about a hero. This paper examines the construction of Rocky's character as a paradoxical action hero, a boxer made famous by his kind heart and mild manners instead of his muscles. The analysis of the seven films reveals how vulnerability and humbleness are used as the pillars of Rocky's fictional personality and intensify the emotional dimension of the saga to bring the boxing film closer to the urban melodrama.

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Mots-clés: masculinity; action hero; working class; sensitiveness; vulnerability; empowerment

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