

# **I Play, Therefore I Man.**

**An Analysis of Masculinity in the Context of Action Man.**

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## Declaration of originality

This essay is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design & Technology – Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (hons) in Visual Communication. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed: 

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to say a big thank you to Dr. Michael Connerty for his continued guidance throughout this dissertation and Dr Linda King for helping me choose and research this topic. Both your efforts are greatly appreciated.

Dr. Mum. There is no way this thesis was going to be dedicated to anyone but you! Thank you for all the brilliant support, constructive criticism and invaluable conversations. I owe you one <3 I'd also like to say a big big sorry to my dad who I took my stress out on 5 minutes ago, I gave you an earful earlier and it was very mean.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the different forms of masculinity portrayed by Action Man between its inception in 1966 and demise in 2006. It considers this in the framework of how gender is defined and performed through toys, focusing on the imagined figure of the adventure hero, of which the soldier is one iteration. It examines the inter-relationship between this, the toy soldier and the pleasure culture of war in the context of boyhood play.

The core of this discussion traces the changing nature of the masculinities underlying the conception of this action figure. It suggests that during the initial phase of its production by British company Palitoy (1966-1983), it sought to align itself with a very British type of hero, absorbing elements of the older form of the 'Empire hero' and overlaying them with those of a new type of gentleman spy. Two forms of masculinity are at play here: the first is an identity based on physicality and the demonstration of bravery in the context of war or other adventure narratives; the second looking to the accumulation of knowledge and technical expertise. In its second phase of production by US based company Hasbro (1993-2006), the hero-type shifts towards the very American 'man of action' hero, a wilder, more muscular character engaged in fantastical narratives where good overcomes evil. The masculinities at the heart of both phases of Action Man are evidenced in the visual and material culture that surrounds them.

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## Introduction

I used to refer to my own action figures as “Men”, never soldiers or toys, always “Men”. For as far back as I can remember action figures and hero stories played an important role in my childhood. In fact, they frequently overlapped, as I built elaborate structures out of my collection of videotape boxes for my ‘men’ to explore, while *Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) or *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) played in the background. My imaginary world was extended by the wonder of stories about little men that came alive in *The Indian in the Cupboard* (1995), *Toy Story* (1995) or *Toy Soldiers* (1998). I don’t remember the play as much as I do standing back and observing the magnum opus I had created, my ‘men’ poised elaborately, dangling on a piece of string or stuck to the aluminium foil quicksand. To me it was grandeur.

Such toy ‘men’, or action figures, have been a long-lasting vehicle for ideas about the world presented to children and how children should perceive it. Varney states that “...toys are among the earliest and most influential technologies with which children came into contact”<sup>1</sup> As such they transmit powerful expectations about social relations, examples of inappropriate and appropriate behaviour & character models to children. As a military action figure, Action Man really belongs to a long history of war toys, intertwined itself with the history of boyhood.<sup>2</sup>

Gender has become a very divisive topic, especially in the commentary that surrounds the toxic masculinity seen to be at the root of gender-based violence, and indeed full-scale war. Miniatures like toy soldiers, or more recently, action figures, are one of many forms of objects that mediate popular perceptions of masculinity in the context of violent acts. Action Man is a primary example of this. Children learn what it means to be a man or a woman partly through their interaction with the world of things: How is gender constructed in the visual and material culture of childhood? What exactly is the relationship that action figures have with the performance of masculinity?

I once found a box in the attic of my grandparents’ house. The box contained relics, all synonymous with the childhood of a young boy in the 70s. Comic books, annuals, and

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<sup>1</sup> Varney, Wendy; *Of Men and Machines: Images of Masculinity in Boys Toys*, p.153

<sup>2</sup> Dawson Graham, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, p238



instruction manuals had covers with names like Beano, Subbuteo and Air-fix on them had all belonged to my father. One large ream that caught my eye was a collection of ephemera from the popular Action Man, a character that shared the same name with the action figure I frequently played with as a child. The sheer number of mini booklets with adventure tales and resourceful instructions for crafting vehicles and play scenes would've provided my boyhood self with a backdrop to delve even deeper into my back garden excursions with my beloved Action Man. However, this ephemera was always absent within the boxes of Action Man I had ever opened. My own childhood experiences with play and my dad's experiences with play were mutual on one level, but it felt that the underlying concepts behind his Action Man were quite different to mine. The supporting material that accompanied my figures (what little there was of it) never encouraged me to build make-shift settings or "know my weapons", rather, it told me to buy the next plastic set or stop "world destruction." Multiple questions arose out of that afternoon spent in the attic. What exactly was at the base of these differences? How exactly does the first-generation of Action Man (my dad) differ and relate to the second-generation (me)? Were the gender expectations mediated through his toys different to those I had experienced?

This personal collection forms the basis of the objects examined in this thesis. This body of primary sources was extended by looking to the digitised collections of the *Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood* (a part of the *Victoria and Albert Museum*); the *Imperial War Museum* and the *National Army Museum*. Invaluable also was the collection maintained by the collector's interest group *Action Man HQ*, administered by expert enthusiast Rob Wisdom. The only frustration within this context was the inaccessibility of the physical *Palitoy Archive* due to the closure of the *Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood* during the major renovation project that coincided with the writing of this thesis.

The first chapter of this dissertation introduces a variety of inter-linked concepts. These construct a foundation in which an analysis of the masculinities underlying the figure of Action Man can be built. Of key importance here are the concepts of gender differentiation and performance, especially in the context of the material and visual culture of childhood. I examine ideas surrounding the nature of masculine identity, focusing on the gender hegemonies based on physical or rational dominance. This discussion is extended by exploring how popular models of masculinity are generated

through the construction of hero types and how these relate both to the specific conditions underlying their emergence and become sedimentary over time. The figure of the adventure hero and its relationship to the soldier is a rich source of ideas in relation to my later discussion of Action Man himself, as is the discussion of the nature of war toys and play in boyhood.

Once the theoretical body of this dissertation is established, I begin to explore the visual and material culture of the first (1966-1983) and second generation (1993-2006) of Action Man through the lens of masculinity. Chapter two explores the conception of Palitoy's Action Man as the first 'doll for boys' and its close relationship to the American G.I Joe. Having explored the factors surrounding the toy's emergence, I discuss how the model of consumption at its base, changing conceptions of the hero ideal and ideas about masculinity inform the character of the action figure during this period.

Chapter three seeks to analyse the second-generation of Action Man and its' shift in licensee from British Palitoy to American Hasbro. It explores the changing cultural context for his re-emergence, looking in at the inter-connectedness of shifting ideas about the body, masculinity, action movies and the emergence of a Man of Action hero type. It aims to discuss how these factors may have impacted on an altered conception of who the hero at the heart of Action Man was.

## **1. At Play**

**1.1 What Are Little Boys Made Of?**

**1.2 Toy Soldiers**

**1.3 Adventurers and Heroes**

**1.4 Serious Play**

Play is one of our first, and most memorable interactions with the wider world. As such, the things we play with carry a power beyond their designation as ‘simple playthings’. In fact, toys are far from simple. We absorb messages about attitudes to our choice of toys in infancy<sup>3</sup>, including ideas about how we define ourselves. They are a part of a complex process of socialisation where we learn how to behave within accepted social norms.<sup>4</sup> One of the most central of these is a sense of our own gender, and the patterns of behaviour and possibility associated with this. Ideas about how we define and perform gender identities through social practices and the objects are by now accepted<sup>5</sup>, and continue to be important in unpacking how dominant ideas about what it means to be a woman or a man arise and are perpetuated.

## 1.1 What Are Little Boys Made Of?

“If the doll is the universal plaything for a girl, so is the toy soldier the natural toy for boys.”<sup>6</sup>

Forty states that the designing of childhood objects to fit the desires of adults came about from the emphasis that was placed on play as an “essential activity for children” in nineteenth century Britain.<sup>7</sup> Children were both to be distinct from adults but also inevitably trained to be adults. This may have been true in terms of gender. Specific gender identifiers in this context both change and become layered over time. For example, Callahan and Paoletti trace the differentiation of gender in relation to children’s clothing, describing how the type of clothing, its decoration and colour were subject to prevalent ideas.<sup>8</sup> After the 1920s, specific decoration was thought to be appropriate for either boys or girls. These divisions had their roots in nineteenth century depictions of children, where “Dogs and drums...were more often paired with boys, and kittens and flowers with girls.”<sup>9</sup> Pink and blue were associated with specific genders by the 1910s, but even in the late 1930s, pink might be interpreted as being “a pale tint of red”, associated with Mars, the god of war and masculinity. It was only in

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<sup>3</sup> McMahon, Felicia, “Toys” in <https://www.britannica.com/technology/toy>

<sup>4</sup> Scott, John, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, p.274

<sup>5</sup> Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Daiken, Leslie in Dawson Graham, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, p238

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.67

<sup>8</sup> **All children wore dresses from birth through to early childhood in the nineteenth century. When a boy was deemed to be old enough, he was dressed in trousers and “society viewed him as symbolically beginning the process of being a man.** Callahan, Colleen R. & Paoletti, Jo.B., *“Is it a Girl or a Boy? Gender Identity and Children’s Clothing* p.193.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.195

the post-World War Two period that these colours became more fixed as pink for girls and blue for boys,<sup>10</sup> a division which still maintains dominance.

Children are socialised into gender roles through material and visual culture. What these roles are can vary depending on socio-economic, political or cultural context, as can their visual or material character. This becomes a complex inter-weaving of past and present concerns.

Clearly toys are key to this process of gender socialization and performance in children. Dawson draws attention to the way that histories of toys have assumed that the expression of gender through the choice of playthings is a matter of common sense: Girls play with dolls or replicas of domestic objects, boys play with toy soldiers and guns, as if these choices express some natural compulsion.<sup>11</sup> In contrast he examines the way in which the demands of the toy industry and wider social factors influence the “Public imaginings...” that “...inform private fantasies and determine the imaginative resonance of particular forms of toy.”<sup>12</sup> The development of toy soldiers, culminating in the action figure, is clearly deeply involved in what it means to be a boy/man at play. Just as domesticity is among the reductive ‘public imaginings’ that construct girlhood, war has long been associated with the performance of boyhood.

## 1.2 Toy Soldiers

From at least the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sons of the wealthy played with miniature soldiers cast in solid metal and wearing hand painted uniforms. The earliest mass-produced toy soldiers were the hollow cast and lead alloy figures created by toymaker *William Britain & Sons* from 1893.<sup>13</sup> The means of production used by Britains made these toys cheaper and therefore more widely available. Over time, their affordability encouraged the collection of sets. During the Boer War, the same firm produced toy

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Paoletti and Calahan argue that over time, colour choices for boys' clothes became more reductive - blue might still be chosen for girls alongside pink, but pink would not be worn by boys. Even when making neutral choices, the changes made were generally to make clothes less 'feminine' in terms of colour and decoration. *Ibid.* p.196

<sup>11</sup> *Op. Cit.* 6, p238

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p.239

<sup>13</sup> Opie, James; *British Toy Soldiers, 1893 to the present*, Arms and Armoured Press, 1988, p.6

figures of Boer infantry and cavalry, who were sold as sets rather than individually, and could be pitched against their enemy in miniature battles. By the early 1900s war paraphernalia consisting of forts and weapons were being mass-produced to accompany the lead alloy soldiers.<sup>14</sup> The advent of World War One saw Britains produce whole sets of ‘Tommy’s’ as well as a range of accessories mimicking the new type of mechanised war.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, another larger type of soldier doll began to emerge around this time - full



Figure 2 Lord Kitchener doll, 1915 (c),  
<https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1994-12-145-1>,



Figure 1, Doll with Springed Arms, 1915 (c),  
<https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1994-12-145-1>,

sized dolls dressed as British soldiers were thought suitable for girls. Charitable toy soldier manufacturing initiatives involving invalided soldiers, produced both small model soldiers and larger soldier dolls, including portrait dolls of Lord Kitchener (1915) (see fig. 1).<sup>16</sup> An extension of this idea was the National Doll Leagues’ *Children’s Unconscious Doll Exerciser*, designed by Eugene Sandor (1915) (see fig.2). Modelled on an ordinary Tommy, this had springed arms and was designed to encourage children themselves to exercise.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p.138

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p.138

<sup>16</sup> <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1994-12-145-1>, 03,02,23

Paris describes how after 1945 the replication of the Second World War in play “...was powerfully reinforced by a new generation of sophisticated toys and games”<sup>17</sup>. After the end of the war, the use of plastic in the production of toys increased, and by the 1960s whole boxes of military figures of all nationalities were very affordable, as were “highly accurate miniature replicas of Second World War tanks, armoured cars, lorries and artillery...”<sup>18</sup> It was in this context that a new type of boy’s military toy figure, the Action Figure, was to emerge.



Figure 4 Daddy What did you do in the Great War?  
Johnson Co. & LTD. 1915,  
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/17053>



Figure 3 Britains Soldiers

To consider the production of toy soldiers, or indeed any war game, in isolation from the ‘public imaginings’ of the society that produced them is to ignore the meanings ascribed to them, including those about gender. Savile Lumley’s poster ‘*Daddy what did you do in the Great War?*’ (1915) (see fig.4) gives us a sense of how play with toy soldiers was used to form attitudes towards masculinity in the context of war. While the father in the image is being challenged about his masculinity, the boy at his feet is being inculcated into the adult world of war by playing with his toy soldiers, taunting his father by practicing what a ‘real’ man ‘should’ do. What ideas have been brought to bear on the relationship between toy soldiers, masculinity and play?

<sup>17</sup> Paris Michael, *Warrior Nation; Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000*, Reaktion Books, 2000 p.238

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p.236

## 1.3 Adventurers and Heroes

There's a significant body of thought about different models of masculinity. Connell considers how

“Historically there has been an important division between forms of masculinity organised around direct domination (e.g., corporate management, military command) and forms organised around technical knowledge (e.g., professions, science).”<sup>19</sup>

The first strand of masculinity that Connell refers to is one based on physical prowess and has repeatedly been at the heart of constructing heroic figures, especially in the context of adventure narratives. These adventure heroes are idealized “prodigies of courage and endurance”, who can overcome immense physical and other “...obstacles in the successful completion of his quest.”<sup>20</sup> These quests should involve a journey to far off or wild realms, distant from domesticity, in which peril and conflict occur. The hero himself should be physically and morally capable of overcoming such challenges.<sup>21</sup> The “Empire Hero” is a fiction that peddled popular perceptions of nationality, empire and race in terms of Britishness “where Englishmen, often in wild, exotic locations, countered threats to home country and empire from a variety of malevolent forces.”<sup>22</sup> Edley examines what he calls “The cultural significance of the male body”<sup>23</sup>, drawing our attention to a period of transition in how the male body was perceived from the second half of the nineteenth century. After poor performances in both the Crimean (1854-1856) and Boer Wars (1899-1902), there was an attempt to restore low nationwide morale. Army recruits were deemed unhealthy and weak by their military authorities. It is during this period that there was a widespread focus on the health and vitality of boys and young men, especially in the context of the public school.

“Within its’ public schools, the idea took hold that the character of a man was fashioned more on the playing fields than in the classroom”. Sports like cricket and

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<sup>19</sup> R Connell; *Masculinities*, University of California Press, 2005 p.165

<sup>20</sup> Op Cit 6, p.55

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p54-55

<sup>22</sup> Beardow, Ted, *The Empire Hero, Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 41, No. 1 2018, p.66

<sup>23</sup> Edley, op. cit. p.55



football were seen not only to build strength and agility, but to inspire “courage discipline and fair-play”<sup>24</sup>,

Beardow describes the conception of the Empire hero as being formed over a long period of time. He appears as

“a gentleman, often wealthy, and a natural leader. He is the product of an English public-school education and adherent to its concept of chivalry... a public-school moral code that stresses independent action, peer loyalty, sportsmanship, self-reliance, and concepts of decency and fair-play, physically superior and not infrequently attractive or charismatic...” The Empire Hero is “experienced and well-travelled in distant and dangerous places, skilled with weapons and inured to violence, he has well developed survival skills and usually appreciates the thrills and excitement of his lifestyle.”<sup>25</sup>

One can see how figures including the adventurer, the sailor, the explorer, the sportsman and the soldier at war might all fulfill these demands.

Edley puts forward the argument that, “masculinity is a result or consequence of men’s (or boy’s) exposure, either to war itself or to a culture that champions... ‘warrior values’.”<sup>26</sup> Dawson and Paris both allude to the imagining of masculinity in this context as often being a part of the “Pleasure Culture of War”, stating that “War stories and images permeated cultural artefacts aimed at young boys with shared forms of fantasy and play”,<sup>27</sup> becoming a part of the heroic adventure genre. Toy soldiers are a prime example of the pleasure culture of war. Not only could a child obtain one of these figures, but they were also exposed to what Summers calls popular militarism<sup>28</sup>, a widespread acceptance for war and an admiration for the British soldier as the epitome of masculinity, part of their lexicon of adventure heroes.

Whilst some elements of the models of masculinity constructed for boys, laid down in the context of the nineteenth century, were to change over time others continued into the late twentieth century<sup>29</sup> and beyond. It’s possible to see how the Empire hero-type

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.61

<sup>25</sup> Ibid p.67

<sup>26</sup> Edley, Nigel; *Men and Masculinity*, Routledge, 2017, p.138

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.138

<sup>28</sup> Summers, Anne; *Militarism in Britain Before the Great War*

<sup>29</sup> Mackenzie, John, *Propaganda and Empire; The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880-1960*, Manchester University Press, 1984, p.219

of the nineteenth century becomes layered with, for example, the chirpy ‘Tommy’ of the first and second world wars and the later sophisticated, upper-class figure of British agents and spies. As Dawson has suggested, any adventure text “...involves an encounter between the historically formed motifs and sedimented structure of the genre and new developments in the cultural imaginaries resonant at the moment of its production.”<sup>30</sup>

During the first world war, propaganda was directed at young men who were old enough to enlist. However, there was also a national hero figure targeted at younger boys. Jack Cornwell, a sixteen-year-old recruit had been killed during battle in 1916. Thereafter, Britain went into national mourning.”<sup>31</sup> One way of maintaining national morale was to construct a heroic figure that prospective recruits could look up to. The celebration of Cornwell gave governing bodies a chance to promote older masculine ideals of “duty, obedience and sacrifice.”<sup>32</sup> An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* advised adults to use Cornwell as an example of good character when speaking to little boys.



Figure 5 Jack Cornwell aboard the HMS Chester,

<sup>30</sup> Dawson draws here on the work of Frederic Jameson in his discussion of “sedimented content.” Dawson Op. Cit. 6, p.57.

<sup>31</sup> Conley believes that societal longing for such a hero was partly a result of “...an atmosphere of crisis abroad and a failed Somme Offensive. Conley argues that although some historians believe the romanticism of wartime sacrifice was a thing of the past by 1916 and 1917, the story of Jack Cornwell runs contrary to this. Conley, Mary A. From Jack Tar to Union Jack, p.163.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p.162

“Those whose mission is to now give the small boy advice will certainly find it harder to make dullness seem heroic as death amongst the shells. Yet they may succeed if they point out the true moral of young Cornwell’s happy end.”<sup>33</sup>

Fig.5 shows Cornwell standing aboard his ship, a dead comrade in the foreground and the chaos of battle surrounding him. In the face of horror he continues to perform his duty, his young face appearing to gaze resolutely into the future and his fate. This image of Cornwell was a part of a dissemination of images and objects related to war, there was also a tradition of representing the hero in action pose. *Cassell’s Popular Educator and Magazine of Art* published a series of illustrations and reports of the Crimean war in the 1850s. The editor insisted

“You know the sort of thing we want. The popular clap trap about British valour, and a compliment to the emperor... it has all been said before, but we must say something about recent events- for our war illustrations are exceedingly popular, and that is the key that our accompaniments must be played in.”<sup>34</sup>



Figure 6 The Battle of Alma



Figure 7 A Rugby Football Match at Blackheath,

In *The Battle of Alma*, a central hero dominates, brandishing his sword amid battle, exuding powerful athleticism. A similar effect can be seen in S.T. Dadds’ *A Rugby Football Match at Black Heath*, showing the hero of the day dispensing with the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.181

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, Patricia; *The Printed Image and the Transformation of popular culture, 1790-1860*, Oxford university press, 1991, p.98

opposition in a single dynamic move.<sup>35</sup> It is noted how in the second half of the twentieth century, comics such as *The Valiant* and *The Victor* continued this tradition by seeking “to inspire young boys with their tales of deering-do and self-sacrifice.”<sup>36</sup> Despite changing contexts and variations in hero-types, the visualization of the war hero maintained the image of an athletic figure whose dynamic movement denoted courage and physical strength (see fig.8 & fig.9).

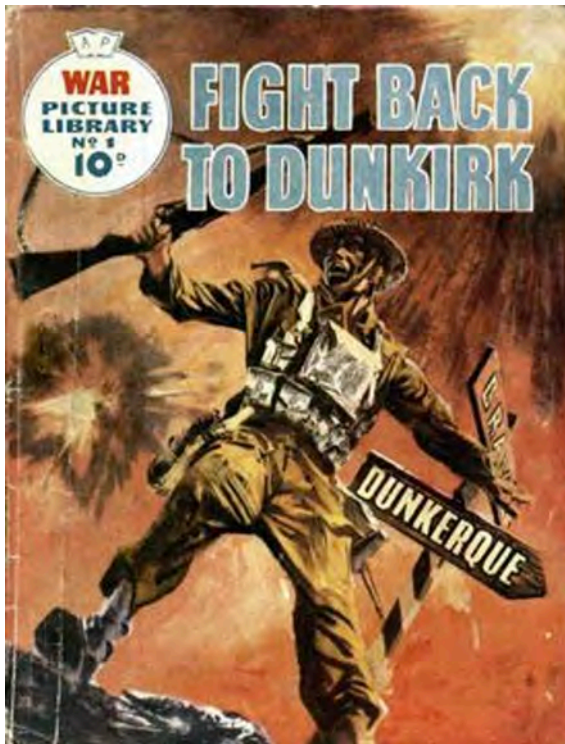


Figure 8 Cover, "Fight Back to Dunkirk," War Picture Library #1 (Sep 1958)

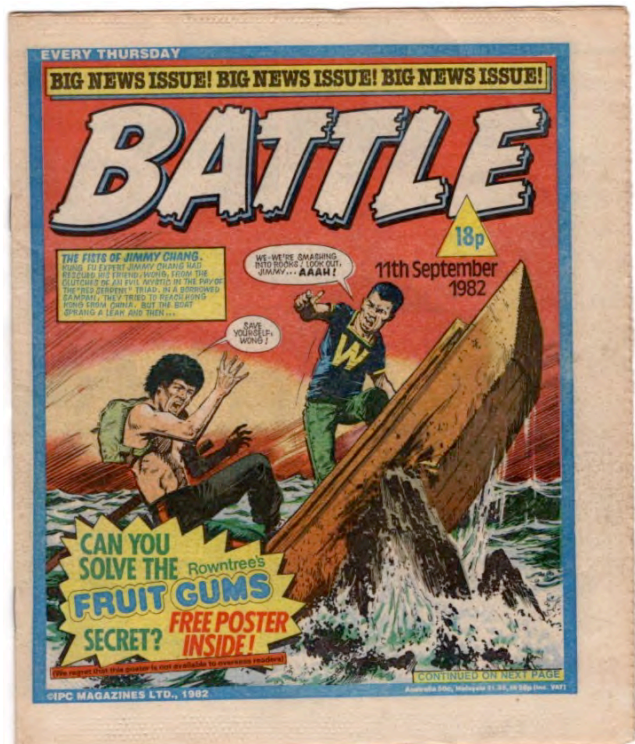


Figure 9 Cover "Battle", Authors' Own (sep 1982)

## 1.4 Serious Play

Connell asserts “...we can speak of a gender order in which masculinity was defined through an opposition to femininity.” He discusses the long-standing assumption that “...men are rational while women are emotional” and states that technology and science “the motors of progress” continue to be associated with masculinity. Furthermore, he outlines how hegemonic masculinities use the idea of rationality to establish dominance.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> It's interesting that Dadd's image may have been used by war artist Frank Brangwyns' recruitment poster 'Put strength in the Final blow' (1918), Walton, Ruth, *Four in Focus*, Timmers, Margaret ed. *The Power of The Poster*, V&A Publications, London, 1998, p.150

<sup>36</sup> Edley, op. cit. p.138

<sup>37</sup> Ibid p.164+187

The idea of skill and technical knowledge may be a part of demonstrating the superiority of the adventure hero in overcoming the obstacles of his quest. But the act of collecting might also be considered as an expression of this in that it fulfills the drive towards accumulating and performing knowledge and expertise. This point is more relevant to the child as consumer, rather than to the adventure hero themselves. Belk and Wallendorf found that gender is implicated in the practice of collecting both in terms of the nature of the objects being collected and the underlying motivations for collecting them.<sup>38</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century at least, it was perceived that

“Women were consumers of objects; men were collectors. Women bought to decorate or for the sheer joy of buying, but men had a vision for their collections, and viewed their collections as an ensemble with philosophy behind it.”<sup>39</sup>



Figure 10 H.G Wells, Little Wars, (1913)

Because action figures and toy soldiers are miniature and exaggerated versions of real life, concepts about the miniature may extend our understanding of them in the context of collecting. What attracts one to collecting, displaying and playing with miniature versions of real life? Stewart focuses on narratives, objects and language in the creation of metaphors. She asks “How can we describe something? What relation does description bear to ideas and the very invention of that ‘something’?”<sup>40</sup> She is

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<sup>38</sup> Witty found that girls were more likely to collect decorative objects, jewellery, dolls, household objects and school objects. Whereas boys collected animal and insect parts, tobacco souvenirs, objects of war and hunting or fishing objects.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.241

<sup>40</sup> Things and the way we describe or represent them generate meaning. The narratives we create about things communicate our hidden desires. Stewart Susan. On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection Duke University Press, 1993 p.04

particularly interested in the role of exaggeration in terms of scale in communicating meaning. Stewart refers to HG Wells's *Little Wars* (1913), a set of rules for war games in which he describes a scene made from cardboard, toy bricks, and a river chalked on the 'battlefield' (see fig.10). Wells compared his 'game' to a British army "kriegspiel... just as good as their game, and saner by reason of its size. Here is War, done down to rational proportions, and yet out of the way of mankind..."<sup>41</sup> Whilst Wells viewed his miniature battlefield as a way of avoiding war through play, one could also suggest that the action of collecting, making and setting up such a battlefield might partly represent the drive to demonstrate knowledge and skill, the pleasure of creating a scene rather than destroying it. We have seen how war toys were vehicles for heroic adventures, important in practicing what it meant to be a man in boyhood. It's also interesting to consider if the amassing and arrangement of toy soldiers - miniatures - might also be an expression of Connell's rational masculinity.

Childhood objects such as toys are involved in the definition and performance of gender. In the context of this thesis, I have been concerned mainly with the nature of masculinity as it has been constructed for boys, and especially in terms of physical and rational dominance. Toy soldiers, the forerunners of action figures, can be understood as an element of the pleasure culture of war as adventure. I've demonstrated here how the nature of such war games may be influenced by boyhood identification with the figure of the adventure hero as it emerged over time. It seems that the representation of this type of figure adopts a visual language that prizes athletic vigour and dynamic movement denoting courage and bravery. In addition to this, I've outlined how a second form of masculinity based on rationality and knowledge may also be linked to toy soldiers in the need to collect and display figures, weaponry or other accessories as sets to create battlefield play.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.04+59

## **2. Knowledge is Power**

**2.1 Action Man, First-Generation**

**2.2 Join the Professionals**

**2.3 Know your Weapons!**

**2.4 Collect all the Stars**

## 2.1 Action Man, First-Generation

"Something very unusual happened to American youth during the 1964 Christmas vacation. As children explored the bounty of presents...one gift elicited such a reaction of rapture from the boys amongst them that it flew in the face of established behaviour. Amongst anticipated gender specific gifts... the one they unwrapped most fervently was...a doll."<sup>42</sup>

A new type of toy aimed at boys was to emerge during the late twentieth century: the Action Figure, or a 'doll' for boys. This development was the result of new plastic moulding technologies, the innovation of articulated joints in doll manufacture and the expansion of consumer markets.<sup>43</sup> GI Joe's twenty ball-and-socket metal pinned joints allowed for a complex range of movements. Although the market was very quickly filled with competitors, Action Man and his predecessor G.I. Joe were the first of this new type of toy.

Although this study is focused on Action Man, a British product, his story begins in the U.S. The toy company Hassenfeld Bros (later to become Hasbro) had been largely uncontested in their dominance of the market for plastic toys in the post-World War two period. However, their pre-eminent character, Mr. Potato Head, was challenged in 1959 when their competitor Mattel launched Barbie, a new type of fashion doll aimed at older girls. Ward identifies Barbie as a toy based on the "shaving razor business model" where the actual razor is only the beginning and "the real money is in the subsequent consumables...".<sup>44</sup> The idea here was that the purchase of a primary product would inevitably lead to the purchase of a series of related products – the doll was simply the start of a relationship between the consumer and her range of outfits and accessories. Hassenfeld Bros saw a gap in the market for a similar product targeting young boys.

Despite meeting some initial resistance resulting from the belief that "Boys will never play with a doll!",<sup>45</sup> Larry Reiner of the Ideal Toy Company floated the idea of a soldier figure to appeal to boys' interest in adventure heroes at the 1963 Toy Fair. His

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<sup>42</sup> Ward Arthur, *Action Figures, From Action Man to Zelda*, The Crowood Press, 2020, p.07

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p.7

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p.31

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p.35



idea resonated with Stanley Weston of the Weston Merchandising Corporation, who had been thinking of a Barbie style figure for boys to be based on the new T.V. series *The Lieutenant*. Presumably because they had already seen the potential of a relationship between T.V. and toys,<sup>46</sup> Weston approached Hassenfeld Bros with the idea for “a scale soldier figure that could support a wide range of accurate uniforms...”.<sup>47</sup> Although the idea for the toy’s relationship with the T.V. show was abandoned, the company immediately saw the potential in the idea for a boy’s Action Figure (rather than a ‘doll’) based on the Barbie model of consumption.<sup>48</sup>

The new figure was called G.I. Joe, the colloquial name used to describe an ordinary, rank and file soldier. He was available as a soldier, a sailor and an airman, reflected in the words of the highly successful advertising jingle, set to the tune of an already familiar World War one song Over There: “G.I. Joe, G.I. Joe, fighting man from head to toe! On the land, on the sea, in the air!”

Varney believes that there was a very significant distinction between genders with the introduction of the Barbie doll in 1959 and G.I. Joe in 1964. Both were “heavily imaged and the roles these toys played were determined and defined by new marketing and promotional methods. McCollum and Spielman both note in a marketing report that boys were inclined to prefer “masculine, invulnerable, invincible, strong-arm dominant action figures - rough and tumble characters who are on the side of cataclysmic struggles between good and evil and win.” On the ‘opposite’ end girls were said to “revere cuddly, cute, sweet and gentle creatures... or fashion figures.” The basic gender differentiation did not seem to depart from the models describes in the last chapter, rather as Varney has observed, it became far more distinctive. Girls’ toys became even more “soft, frilly, overwhelmingly pink...” and boys were given “heavily muscled, square jawed action figures armed to the teeth.”<sup>49</sup> Each depicted an exaggerated vision of gender roles, more related perhaps to those widely evident in the postwar period as women were coaxed into the domestic sphere and men were urged

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<sup>46</sup> Hassenfeld Bros' Mr Potato Head had been the first toy to be advertised on American T.V.

<sup>47</sup> Ward, op. cit. p.07

<sup>48</sup> Weston also sold the idea of an action figure that followed a similar model to the Ideal Toy Company. Captain Magic was a hero who could “adopt the guise of whichever champion was best suited to solve the challenge at hand” and was later renamed as Captain Action, Ibid, p.07

<sup>49</sup> Varney, op. cit. p.160

to reclaim the workforce, rather than in the increasingly questioning atmosphere of the 1960s, both in the U.S. and in Britain.

By 1966 Palitoy, a British company manufacturing plastic toys since 1920<sup>50</sup>, had become the UK licensee for Hasbro and as such was able to manufacture a British version of the G.I. Joe doll. The company were able to re-use the G.I. Joe patterns and moulds to produce a figure physically identical to the American toy but made other significant changes to his British counterpart.

Perhaps most obvious was the adoption of a new name, thought necessary because of the overly American connotation of G.I. Joe. Ward asserts that the name Action Man was thought appropriate because it reasserted the term 'action figure' (over the more feminine 'doll'), combining it with 'Man' in a bid to resonate with the British audience of the then popular T.V. series, *Danger Man*,<sup>51</sup> based on the very British James Bond-like character of Johnny Drake, secret agent. Bob Brechin, Palitoy's chief designer during this period, refers to the name change as also benefiting the model of consumption being followed. He remembered the change of name as "...a master stroke because it allowed us to make him a real man of action in other theatres than just the military."<sup>52</sup> Later, Palitoy went on to widen the scope of Action Man's character profile, including sports and adventure themes.

It's interesting to consider how physical changes were also made to Action Man over time – the introduction of 'gripping' hands in 1971 extended the sense of authenticity that went with the articulated figure, as did the replacement of moulded and painted hair with a flock version (1970) and the addition of a flock beard on some figures (1971). The costumes and accessories that had originally accompanied Action Man were largely American, but Palitoy went on to make him unmistakably British by designing outfits based on British regiments like the Famous British Uniforms range (1970). By 1973, the basic soldier figure was dressed in British uniform of wool jersey, fatigue pants and black beret and could be armed with specifically British weaponry. Ward has outlined how some of the additional themed sets were very

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<sup>50</sup> Founded in 1919, Palitoy was originally called The Cascelloid Company, manufacturing products made of the plastic celluloid. By 1968 it was a subsidiary of the U.S. based General Mills conglomerate.

<sup>51</sup> *Danger Man* was produced by the Incorporated Television Company and aired between 1960-62 and 1964-68.

<sup>52</sup> Ward, op. cit. p.101

localised to the British market – the production of an Action Cricketer Set and Action Footballer Set (1968). The Action Footballer range was later expanded to represent the popular British Division 1 teams such as Manchester Utd, Leeds Utd, Everton, Chelsea, Liverpool and West Ham<sup>53</sup> Although G.I. Joe was the first to speak in 1967, Palitoy adopted this technology shortly afterwards in 1968<sup>54</sup> In the British context, the talking action figure became inevitably very British. As Brechin asserted “Over the years we transformed the original G.I. Joe figure into a real British icon”<sup>55</sup>

During this phase of the toy’s history, the branding of Action Man, the creation of his character as both a toy and a man, included an impressive range of packaging, advertisements, equipment and training manuals, promotional materials, annuals and books.

## Designed to Move

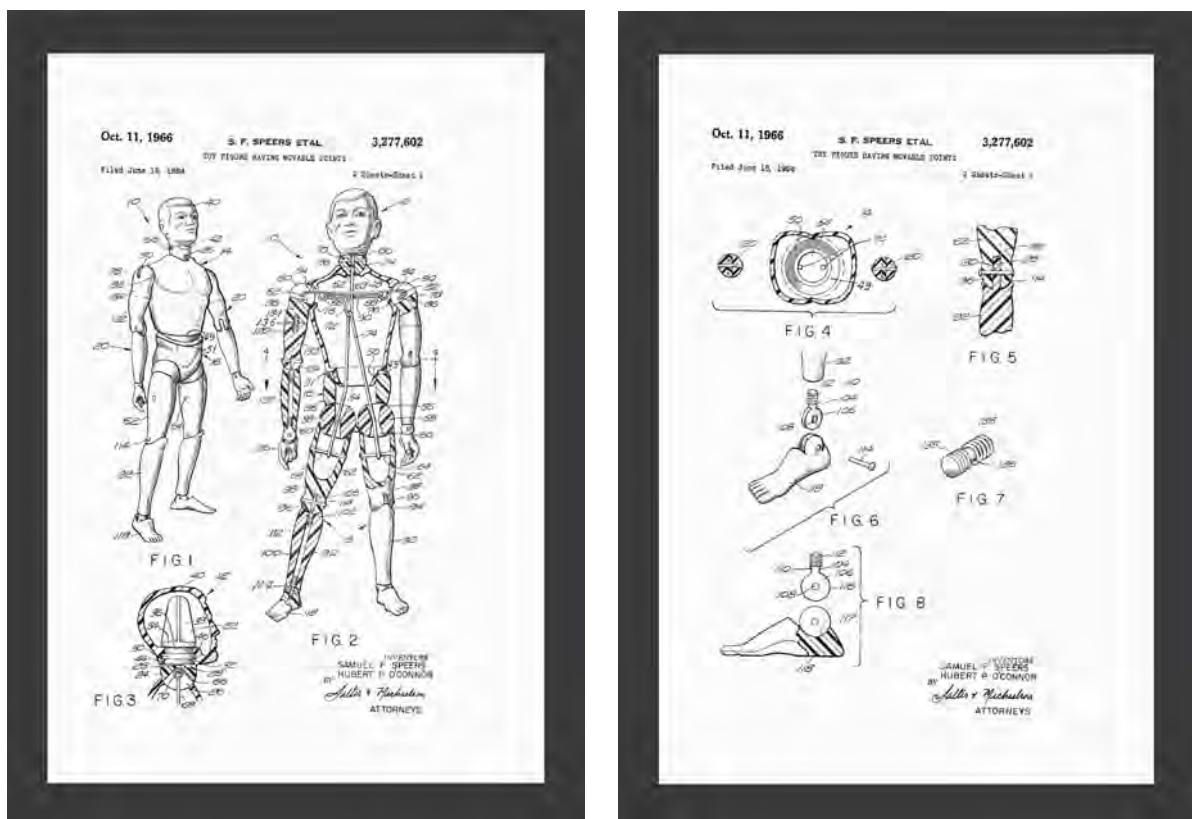


Figure 11 G.I Joe, Patent, 1966

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.actionmanhq.co.uk/figures/footballers/index.php>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.actionmanhq.co.uk/figures/talking-commander-1969/index.php>

<sup>55</sup> Ward, op. cit. p.101

G.I. Joe was differentiated from the only other male doll on the market, Barbie's boyfriend Ken, by being flexible, having articulated joints that meant he could be posed in a wide variety of positions (See Fig).<sup>56</sup> It's interesting that one of G.I. Joe's selling points was his pose-ability, and this continued with Palitoy's British version.<sup>57</sup>



Figure 14 Original Action Man box, Palitoy 1966



Figure 13 Action Man, Action Sailor box, 1966



Figure 12 Action Man, Action Pilot, 1966

As established previously, one of the key characteristics of hero figures was their athleticism and physical bravery. The first Action Man box (1966), places heavy emphasis on the idea of movement or action. Beneath the logo for the brand, the box shows an illustration of a soldier in action pose holding a gun. The figure is at a slight angle, filling the frame and giving him a larger than life feel. He's running at us, his pose indicating speed and strength. The dynamic pose seems to draw on the long tradition of visualising adventure heroes and war scenes, as discussed previously. The boxes for the sailor (using an image of a scuba diver) and a pilot in the same range (see figs 13,14) display similar illustrations with equally dynamic poses, where the

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p.42

<sup>57</sup> However, the idea of different poses or a movable soldier was not entirely new. For example, although Britains' early sets of soldiers were stationary, some sets were manufactured in more than one position, and their packaging clearly imagined them as real movable beings. This type of approach continued with the production of plastic toy soldiers in the twentieth century, and indeed until now. In addition to this, Sandor's *Unconscience Doll Exerciser* (1915), as referred to in Chapter 1, was designed to move.

figure appears at a sharp angle. The figures are painted in a realistic style that uses vigorous brush strokes reminiscent of the illustrations on the covers of pulp fiction adventure novels and popular film posters of the era (See fig 15)<sup>58</sup>, and repeated on later Action Man storybooks and novels. It's as if visual techniques associated with contemporary action-adventure genres continue those associated with previous incarnations of it. Superimposed on the main image of the Action Man boxes are two small illustrations of soldier figures in different poses beneath the copy "The movable fighting man...Move him into different positions." The word 'movable' is both suggested and emphasised by being set in italics, and the images recall the miniature toy soldiers familiar to boys since the nineteenth century.<sup>59</sup> The same effect is also visible in the many catalogues or other ephemera that promoted the action figure, such as equipment and instruction manuals (see fig 16).

The athleticism of the figures, with the visual language and motifs used on the box, create a sense of dominant physicality and fast paced action. Action Man's physicality is central to his promotion.



Figure 15 Pulp Fiction Magazine cover



Figure 16 Action Man Intelligence Manual, Soldiers of the century, p.04, Authors Own

Atfield has focused on the increased movability of boys' action figures compared to the relatively static nature of Barbie. It's interesting here to consider how Kens' ability

<sup>58</sup> The illustration was created by American artist Sam Petrucci and was identical to that used on the first G.I. Joe packaging.

<sup>59</sup> The box illustrations for the first soldier, pilot and sailor were later changed because they did not reflect the actual contents accurately. See <https://www.actionmanhq.co.uk/figures/action-sailor/index.php>

to move is like Barbie's.<sup>60</sup> The important factor here is not the gender of the play figure, so much as the gender of the framework of play. Barbie's and Ken's prescribed lifestyle of leisure is one that does not require body movement. The structures of play inform the design of their bodies, and the design of the body informs structures of play. The key point here is that Ken is intended for girls, an accessory to Barbie, and therefore his 'action' is not regarded as an important factor. Equally, Action Man must be able to move to be a real man in the framework of boys' play adventures.

## 2.2 Join the Professionals

The masculinities apparent in Palitoy's Action Man have resonances of the 'Empire hero'<sup>61</sup> described previously, particularly in the focus on physicality. But by this time there had been a shift towards the heroes of spy novels. The archetypal English hero of this type was Ian Fleming's character, James Bond (1958). Terrence Young's film starring the Bond character, *Dr No* (1962), appeared just four years prior to Action Man's emergence, with further films released in quick succession.



Figure 17 Action Man logo, original Action Man box, 1966, <https://www.actionmanhq.co.uk/index.php>

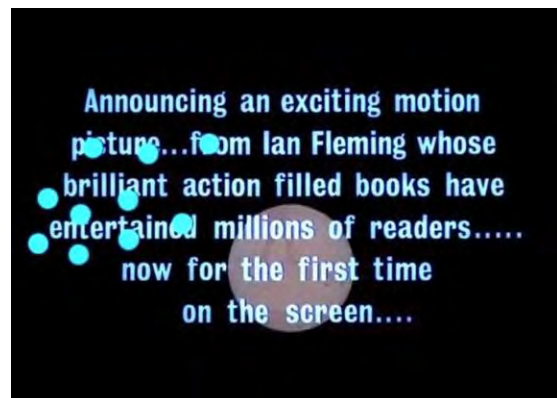


Figure 18 still of film trailer for *Dr No*, 1962

It seems to me that the influence of the James Bond movies is evident in relation to the visualization of Action Man. The first version of the Action Man logotype uses a heavy sans-serif typeface, the word 'action' being set in black upper-case letters and the word 'man' below in larger vibrant red (or blue) lower-case letters. An initial version includes a series of 'bullet holes' scattered across the logo making it look as though it has been shot at, a device which had been used in the title sequence and film

<sup>60</sup> Atfield, Judy, *Barbie and Action Man: adult toys for girls and boys, 1959–93*. In Kirkham Pat ed. *The gendered object* Manchester University Press, UK, 1996.

<sup>61</sup> Beardow, op. cit. p.83

trailer for the James Bond film *Dr. No* (1962, see fig.18). Furthermore, the *Danger Man* T.V. series, and later comic book covers, also bear similarities to this typographic voice (see fig.20). In contrast to that for Action Man, the logotype for G.I. Joe is set in a very military style stencil typeface, contains the character's disembodied face above the 'J' and does not use the bullet hole device.



Figure 20 Danger Man logotype, 1962,  
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053496/>



Figure 19 Original G.I. Joe logotype, 1966

“Today’s Action Man, ready to take up any position at your command... He’s a paratrooper, arctic soldier, infantry officer or frog man... Action Man is who you want him to be.”<sup>62</sup> A key attribute to the success of Action Man as a toy and a commercial product was his vast wardrobe of clothing, accessories and vehicles<sup>63</sup>, and his



Figure 21 Cover of Official Equipment Manual, 1977,  
<https://www.actionmanhq.co.uk/pages/equipment-manual-gallery.php>

consequent ability to change narratives and be every adventure hero. For example,

<sup>62</sup> Palitoy, Action Man, *Sharpshooter*, television advertisement, 1981

<sup>63</sup> The lack of accessories within other ranges of twelve-inch action figures such as *Tommy Gun* (1966) (Action Man’s rival) made them lose popularity quite rapidly, by comparison.

fig.21, a typical cover image for an *Official Equipment Manual* (1977) shows four of the Action Man character types including a soldier, sailor, green beret and pilot beside one another. This combined with the constant repetition of images of Action Man in different costumes (see fig.22) across promotional material and in more focused publication such as the series Action Man Books (1971) (see fig.23) reinforces this.



Figure 22 Official Equipment Manual, 1977.



Figure 23 Action Man books series, 1972, Authors own

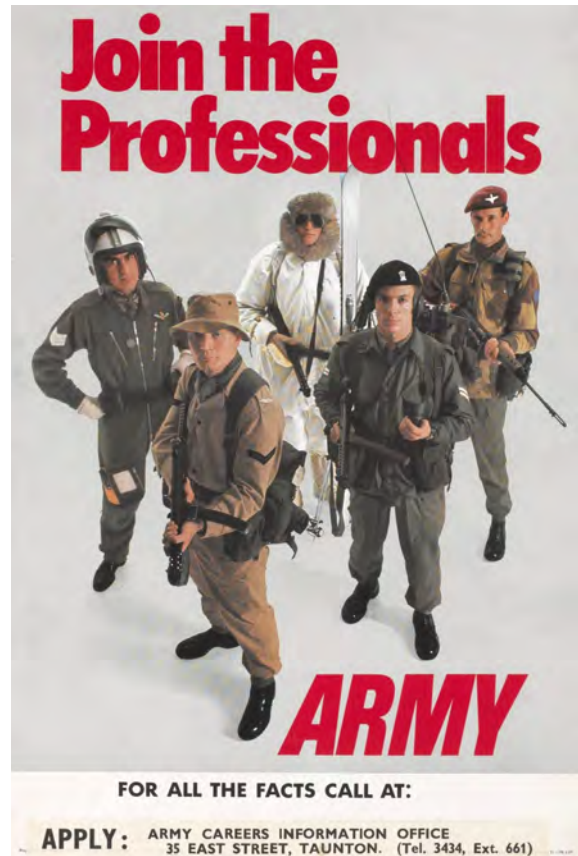


Figure 24, Join the Professionals , Recruitment poster 1970,

There seems to have been a connection between the construction of Action Man as a hero and actual army recruitment of the period.<sup>64</sup> *Join the Professionals* (1970) is a recruitment poster published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office. The copy line in red commands the audiences' attention, "Join the Professionals", communicating the idea of the Army as a skilled profession including responsibility, leadership and teamwork. "Army" is typeset in all red caps and its' italicisation references motion and urgency. Within this image we see an RAF pilot, an arctic soldier bearing a firearm and ski gear, a red beret, a communications engineer and a soldier in a tan uniform. All men stand in slightly exaggerated positions, as if they themselves are posed Action Men.

<sup>64</sup> One must remember that many recruitment adverts for the Cadets and the army itself appeared in the same comics that advertisements for Action Man also appeared in.



The rhetoric in this poster speaks to the experiences one might have as a member of the army, alluding to specification and expertise. It touches on the theme of adventure through the breadth of variety in uniform but its' messaging grounds it in the sphere of professionalism and urges men to recognise this position as a serious and skilled career option. It seems to me that the *Join the Professionals* poster, *Action Mans Official Equipment Manual* (1977) and the covers of *Action Man Books* (1971) are all following the same thread of communication<sup>65</sup>. The relationship between the character of James Bond, the focus on professionalism in the *Join the Professionals* poster and the construction of Action Man's character is made clear in an advanced poster for *Thunderball* (1965) (see fig.25). This poster shows Bond in action in two different costumes and four different settings. It's hard to ignore the similarity between James Bond as he's presented here and the image of the scuba diver on the first iteration of the Action Man sailor box (fig.13).<sup>66</sup>



Figure 25 Thunderball 1967, advanced poster, Sothebys

<sup>65</sup> This poster is part of a myriad of recruitment ephemera that have inspired young patriots to enlist in their respective armies and borrowing from the use of sans serif red typography. However, it abandons the Kitchener and Uncle Sam style of messaging and imagery, there is no figure of authority wagging his finger and drawing on words that inspire unification like "your country needs you." Lord Kitchener's eyes no longer "following you round the room like the Mona Lisa.",BBC, *Kitchener: The most famous pointing finger*, 2014, bbc.co.uk

<sup>66</sup> In fact, Gilbert produced a James Bond action figure to coincide with the release of *Thunderball* (1965),

James Bond was intended to embody masculine qualities of chivalry, skill-based professionalism and independence. Given the popularity of the Bond empire<sup>67</sup>, it would not be far-fetched to assume that the model of masculinity James Bond circulated had an impact on the reimagining of Action Man as adventure hero.

## 2.3 Know your Weapons!

The emphasis on the idea of professional expertise is a theme that runs through all strands of Action Man’s promotional image at this point. Action Man and his accessories came with an array of army, air-force and navy training manuals, as well as a variety of equipment and intelligence manuals (see fig.27). In addition to these, a series of short booklets including *Action Man Antarctic Explorer*, *Footballer*, *Parachutist* and *Underwater Explorer* were published in 1971. At the beginning of each of these books, the reader is introduced to historical and scientific knowledge on the topic of each theme. In *Action Man Underwater Explorer* (see fig.26), the first page presents us with factual knowledge: “The sea, which covers nearly three quarters of the earth’s surface, guards a rich strange world even now so largely unexplored”. This is complemented by a diagram that illustrates the depth of the sea, merging diagrammatic illustrations with images of Action Man figurines.



Figure 26 Covers on equipment and Intelligence manuals, 1967-1972

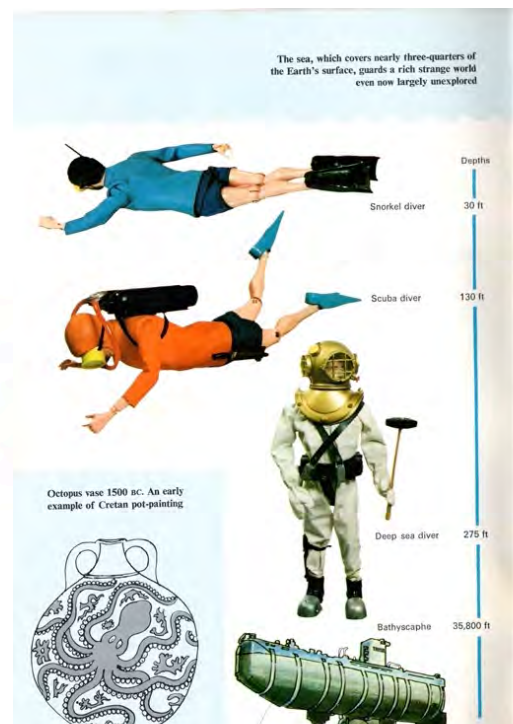


Figure 27 First page, *Action Man Underwater Explorer*, 1972, Authors Own

<sup>67</sup> It’s interesting to note that a James Bond action figure was also available during this period. Ward, op. cit.

In Varney's of Men and Machines, it's stated that three changes took place during the interwar years in the toy industry, one of these being that toys were beginning to be used and seen by manufacturers as educational devices where "boys tended to enjoy science and engineering."<sup>68</sup> The diagrams shown in the *Action Man Books* are synonymous with information graphics that one would see in an illustrated encyclopedia (see fig.28). A line runs the length of the page and pauses incrementally with information on the depth of the sea, "30ft" is suitable for Action man Snorkel Diver, "130ft" can be handled by Action Man's scuba diving apparel, "275 ft" is handled by Action Man deep see diver, whilst a whopping "35,800 ft" is managed by the impressive technologically advanced Bathyscaphe. Varney draws a connection between masculinity and machines in terms of masculine mastery of skills involving technology. The impression we are given here is that Action Man, and by extension the boy playing with him, are participating in generating knowledge towards creating an advanced and progressive world.<sup>69</sup>

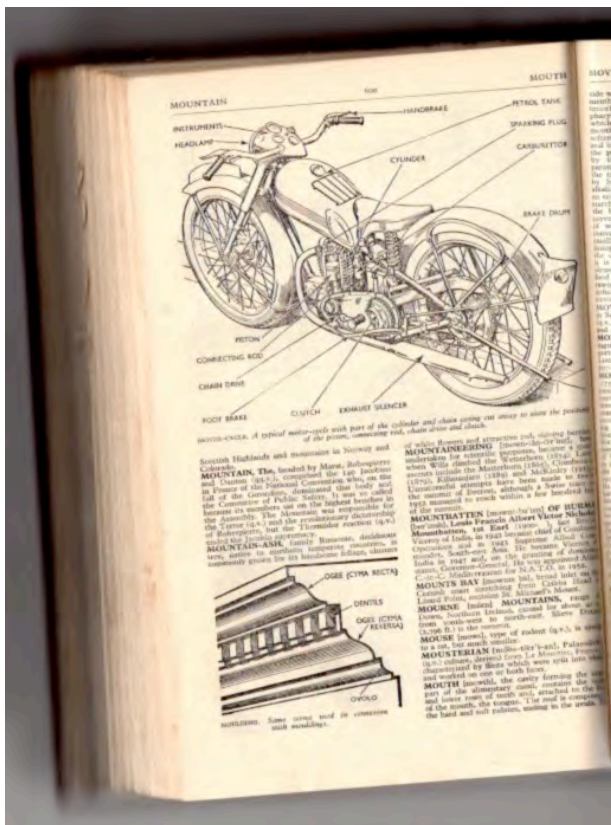


Figure 28 Encyclopaedia page, authors own

<sup>68</sup> Varney, Wendy; *Of Men and Machines: Images of Masculinity in Boys' Toys*, Feminist Studies Inc., 2002, p.155

<sup>69</sup> Varney, op. cit. p.153

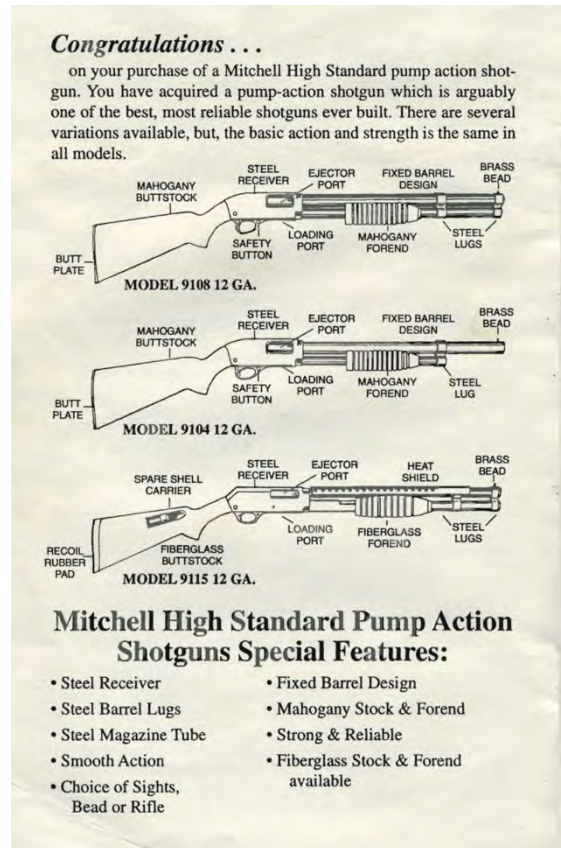
Another example of the use of informational matter within the visual culture of Action Man exists within the diagrammatic illustrations used in the *Action Man Soldiers of the Century: Intelligence Manuals* (1967-1972) that came with many of the Action Man figurines when they were purchased. They tell the young consumer to “Know your weapons” and provide information on real life weaponry used in real life wars.



Figure 30 Equipment Manual, 1967, p.02



Figure 29 Equipment Manual, 1967, p.08



Edley notes that the promotion of martial masculinity had been encouraged by institutions such as the Scouts and Boys Brigades which had a role to play in mediating knowledge about war and the expectations of men within it. In the UK the ‘Combined Cadet Force’ educated boys on topics of militarism including guns and how to use them. It’s entirely possible that same boys involved in the Scouts and Cadets force played with Action Man. The diagrammatic nature of the illustrations in Action Man Intelligence or Equipment Manuals are almost identical to those seen in an illustrated fire-arms manual.

Connell describes how, by the late twentieth century, both a dominant masculinity and one based on technical expertise were co-existing, albeit at opposite ends of the

masculinity spectrum.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, he suggests that these identities might both be hegemonic, and whilst they are sometimes in opposition to each other, they can also be layered together. *The Valiant* comic of the period is a prime example of a form of media where both masculinities co-existed, alongside each other, as short comic stories or even as advertisements. A weekly edition of muscular *Morgyn the Mighty*<sup>71</sup> and Charles Atlas adverts were printed side by side with a *What do you know about the Police?* quiz<sup>72</sup>(See fig.31). A large proportion of the advertisement sections are populated by those encouraging boys to collect stamps.

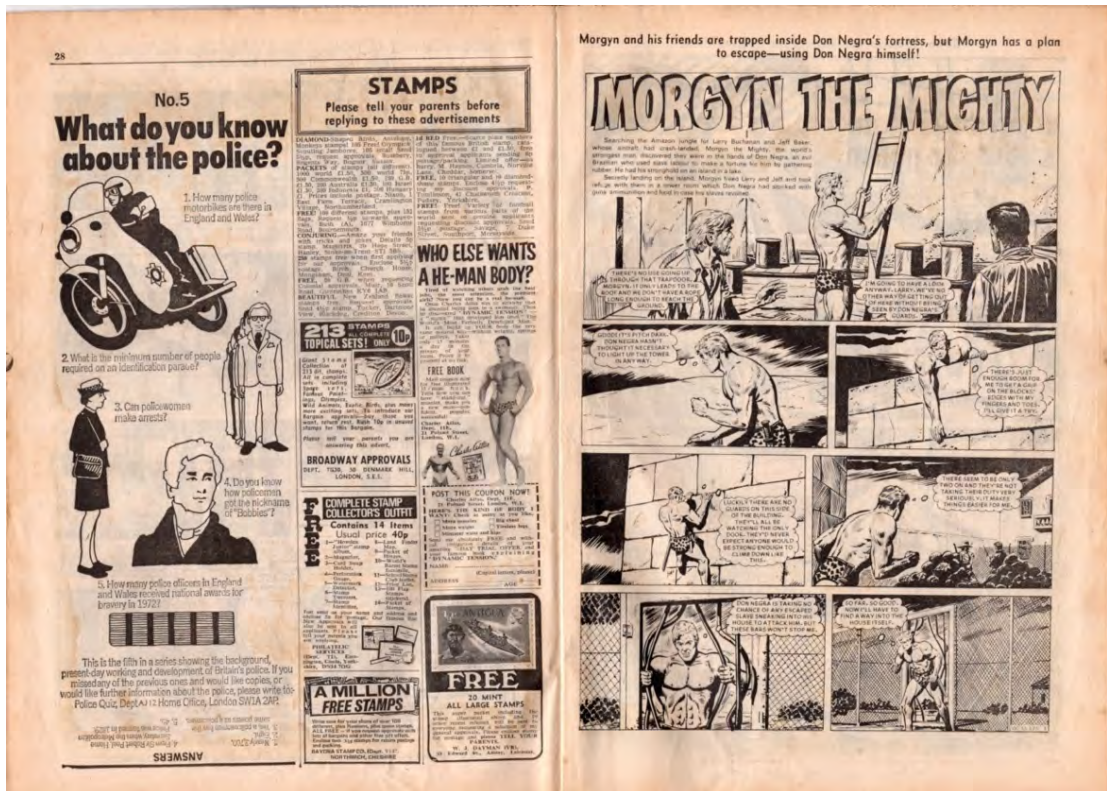


Figure 31 Victor magazine, sep 1980, p.28, Authors Own

A further expression of this focus on rationality can also perhaps be seen through the conception of the consumption of Action Man as a collecting activity.

<sup>70</sup> Connell, op. cit. p.194

<sup>71</sup> Victor; Morgyn the Mighty, March 15, 1975, p.29

<sup>72</sup> "How many police officers in England and Wales received national awards for bravery in 1972?" "Can policewomen make arrests?", "How many Police motorbikes are there in England and Wales?" Ibid. p.28

## 2.4 Start Saving Stars

I have already discussed how the model of consumption underlying toy figures like those of Action Man, G.I. Joe and Barbie involved an initial purchase ensuring the purchase of further related items. The need to continue to consume is made overt in the Action Man advert (1982) in fig.32 The advert relates to a competition in which one can win “all the Action Men you can carry.”<sup>73</sup> In the background the competition is represented as a military assault course, but the focus is on consumption as the boy in the image holds a plentiful collection of Action Man products. This message is also clear in an advertisement that promotes a star scheme in which each purchase was



Figure 32 Action Man, Assault Course Competition Advert, 1982, authors own



Figure 33 Action Man, Collect the Stars Advert, 1972, authors own

accompanied by a star which one collected to redeem a ‘free gift’ (see fig.33). However, it’s reasonable to suggest that the compulsion for young boys to consume was disguised as the hobby of collecting. This is evidenced by the way in which promotional ephemera was conceived and designed as being authentic army issue documents, such as the *Intelligence Manuals*, stamped “confidential” (see fig.) whereby the intention is that one would absorb all of the knowledge contained within. For example, the letter that accompanied the free-gift scheme is designed as a direct communication from the army to the boy consumer: It is stamped “priority immediate” and announces; “another Action Man reporting for duty.”

<sup>73</sup> Action Man, Assault Course Competition, 1982



Figure 35 Action Girl, Wardrobe box circa.1970



Airfix advert, Battle comic, sep 1972. Authors own

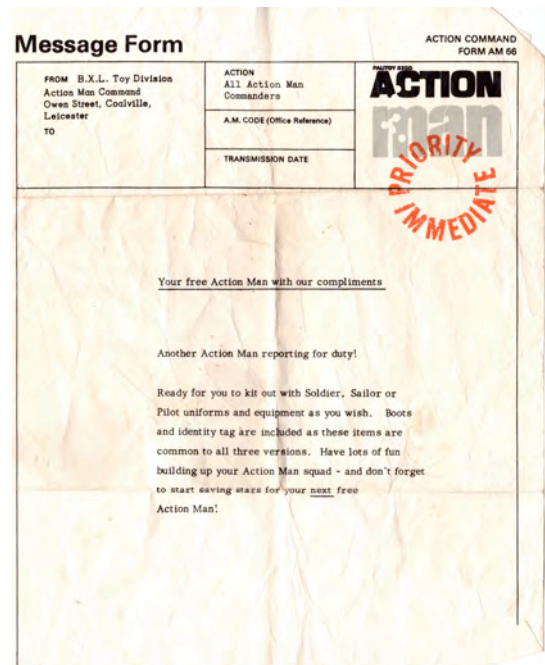


Figure 34 Action Man, messaging form, free Action Man, authors own

Holt and Thompson have observed that consumption can be a means of constructing masculine identity.<sup>74</sup> Belk and Wallendorf imply that the act of collecting removes artefacts from their intended purpose, and they are given some higher form of value.<sup>75</sup> This would suggest that constructing the act of consuming *Action Man* as collecting implies that it is above simple 'shopping' and relates to the more serious pursuance of knowledge. This is contrasted with contemporary *Action Girl* packaging that shows her "exciting world" as being in the frivolous consumption of leisure activities and

<sup>74</sup> Holt, Douglas B and Thompson, Craig J; *Man of Action Heroes; The Pursuit of Heroic Masculinity in Everyday Consumption*, Journal of consumer research, 2004, p.06

<sup>75</sup> Belk W. Russel, Wallendorf Melanie; *Of Mice and Men*; gender identity in collecting, Routledge, 1994, p.240

fashion (see fig.34). Masculine traits expressed in collecting include “aggressiveness, competitiveness, mastery and seriousness” whilst female traits include care, creativity, nurturance and preservation”<sup>76</sup> or in this case shopping and leisure. This relates to Connell's ideas on rationality as an expression of masculinity. This interest extends into male adulthood with the collection of vintage action figures evidenced in online forums dedicated to this pursuit.<sup>77</sup>

An interesting adjunct to this might be the display of Action Man, which seems to me to relate to ideas of the miniature as discussed previously. Screen advertising tended to present play scenarios showing the ‘giant’ boy orchestrating an Action Man adventure in various ordinary domestic settings: A jungle explorer amidst garden shrubbery or a deep-sea diver in the garden pond (See fig.37).

Showing Action Man in these settings was also used as a device in external publications (see fig.36). It appears that even home-made accessories followed this pattern. A Sirdar knitting pattern, *Guys and Dolls* (1979) shows a female doll dressed in leisure wear against cultivated greenery contrasting with the male mountain climber



Figure 37 Still from Action Man advert, 1982



Figure 36 Sirdar, *Guys & Dolls*, 1979, authors own

against a wilder outdoor scene.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p.242

<sup>77</sup> *Action Man HQ*, a collectors interest group, offer historical information, collectors items for sale and an online forum for discussion.





Figure 38 Action Man Underwater Explorer, p.26-27, authors own

The Action Man books develop this theme further with the inclusion of activities such as ‘Make your own Action Man Antarctic Station.’ (*Action Man Antarctic Explorer*) ‘Make your own Action Man Under Water Tableau’ (*Action Man Underwater Explorer*). It combines the technical craft and know-how of model making with the drive to create scenes in miniature. Like the diagrams in the equipment manuals, the underwater tableau is presented as a technical challenge through diagrammatic drawings. (See fig.38)

In this chapter I’ve considered the relationship between first generation Action Man and the nature of masculine adventure heroes. I’ve established that Action Man relates to the changing nature of British hero types, whereby he both represents aspects of older models of adventure hero in terms of physicality and courage, but in a way that correlates with the image of popular contemporary characters like the expert special agent James Bond. Related to this was the change in conception of the army as an expert profession rather than a job. This connects to the construction of Action Man as a form of masculinity that emphasises rationality, alongside the accumulation of knowledge and technical expertise. Connected to this is the way in which the consumption model associated with action man is constructed as a collecting practice,

achieved by adopting a visual strategy that focused a sense of authenticity and in which the visualization of play scenarios can be understood to be akin to a display of miniatures.

### **3. Man of Action**

#### **3.1 Action Man, Second-Generation**

#### **3.2 Man of Action**

### 3.1 Action Man, Second-Generation

Palitoy's design department was closed in the mid 1980s, following their parent company, General Mills, decision to extract itself from the toy industry entirely. It was under the U.S. based Hasbro label, the original manufacturers of G.I. Joe, that a new generation of Action Man was to emerge between 1993 and 2006. The new Action Man was fundamentally different to his first-generation ancestor in important ways for the discussion of gender and play.

Initially, a series of G.I. Joe figures were simply given new head mouldings and re-packaged as Action Man by Hasbro. There seems to have been less emphasis on the functionality of the doll's body. Even as the new series developed, hands did not grip in the same way, accessories were not to scale, feet were out of proportion to bodies and they were not as well articulated as their Palitoy predecessors.<sup>78</sup> Joints on feet and legs seemed not to rotate but only moved up or down from the ankle, and waists too had less rotation. Although there was variation with some figure types having more movement than others, the new action man was generally less active in real terms.

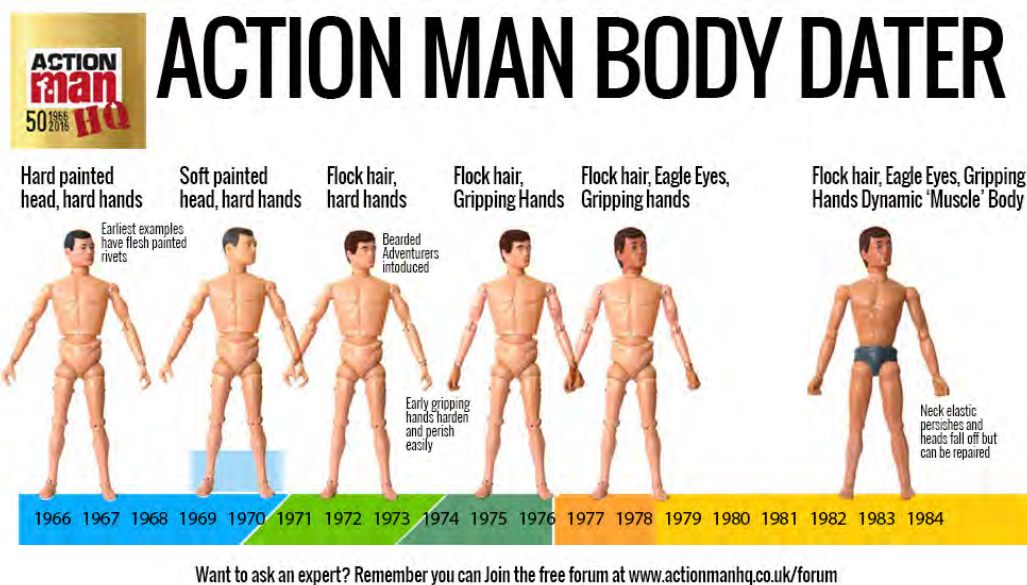


Figure 39 Action Man body development graphic

Parallel to this, it's clear to see that body moulds also became more muscular, with limbs increasing in size. There had been some movement towards this as early as 1978

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.actionmanhq.co.uk/pages/history.php>, 18,01,2023

during Action Man's first phase when figures were given more defined muscle tone (see fig.). A contemporary T.V. advertisement stressed this, saying:

"As storm clouds gather over Mrs. Roger's Garden, the Action Man gang assembles for the big parade. It's an impressive display of military muscle.... Chest out and eyes right...They know that Action Man, with his dynamic new physique, is ready for action!"<sup>79</sup>

It's also interesting that when a special 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition Action Soldier was launched in 1996, new moulds were used which made him "...somewhat larger, with bigger hands and a beefier physique."<sup>80</sup> However, the later second generation figures seem to have bypassed these entirely, with body moulds showing far greater muscle definition, as well as larger arm and leg measurements (see fig.39).<sup>81</sup> Facial moulds also changed: Action Mans' jaw became more pronounced, for example, the overall impression is of a doll that is closer to a super hero than his more realistic predecessor. It's also worth noting that the basic model of consumption changed at this point. Rather than following the previous model of an initial purchase, which then necessitated further related purchases, Hasbro introduced complete playsets. These saw figures being sold in larger boxes, complete with weapons, other accessories or



Figure 40 Action Man face, Hasbro, 2003

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<sup>79</sup> Ward, op. cit. p.104

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p.115

<sup>81</sup> **This is confirmed in a wider way by a medical study which tested action figures manufactured over three decades. When waist, chest and bicep measurements were recorded, it was found that such figures had become more muscular, beyond the norm in even "...the largest human body builders."** Pope HG Jr, Olivardia R, Gruber A, Borowiecki J. Evolving ideals of male body image as seen through action toys. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. 1999 Jul;26(1):65-72

other characters. The official Hasbro/Action Man website describes this in positive terms as being “...inventive and spectacular, and most sets were bought as a complete item, with no emphasis to mix and match with accessories.”<sup>82</sup>



Figure 41 Action Man, Mission Amazon box, 1993



Figure 42 Action Man, Final Combat box, 2003

These playsets were often based on versions of the prescribed narratives contained in associated comics and cartoons. The Action Man character initially included both soldier/military and other character types but based often based on less realistic adventure scenarios. Action Man Mission Amazon (1993) demonstrates some of these factors. He comes complete with all the accessories for this adventure including weaponry and a rainforest tree. The box shows the new Action Man logo in the top left-hand corner, the A and M contained in a circle and outlined by silver, gives the impression of machinery. The box is predominantly a luminous orange and yellow, the logo appearing in a black italicised angular sans serif typeface also outlined in silver. The box window reveals the stationary doll and accessories beneath which we are presented with an illustration in the style of animated cartoons of a soldier in action firing weaponry. In a way initial sets are somewhat transitional: in this case Action Man still wears military uniform (American in style), and despite a changed physique (see fig.41), the jungle setting of his adventure is similar to those imagined in some generation one television adverts.

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.actionman.com/>

A decade later, packaging demonstrates a more dramatic change. Fig. shows a box containing two figurines, Action Man and Dr X. It is part of the Action Man collection *Final Combat* (2003).<sup>83</sup> The box is predominantly orange which is contrasted with accents of black. The Action Man logo dominates the bottom left-hand corner of the box, and the phrase “Final Combat” sits on the opposite side of the box, adding dramatic effect. Again, the logotype is in italics with serifs that create a sense motion, it feels hard edged and fast moving. There is a film strip that echoes the feeling of dynamism and motion in the logotype which links the figures very clearly with the animated series with which this play set was associated at this time. The sense of comic style animation is reinforced by the action bubble, which calls to mind the idiom of superhero comic books. This is reinforced by the inclusion of the comic style illustration of Action Man in a combat stance with his arm raised attacking Dr X, echoing the poses of the figurines themselves. The muscularity of Action Man’s figure in the package discussed is clear. His jaw is chiselled and square and his neck is abnormally large for his head. It’s almost as if Dr X in cyborg form is an extreme version of Action Man himself. The figures are posed in a fighting formation. Action Man’s right arm is wrapped in a bloodied bandage. The style of illustration here is far more pronounced here, drawn from current styles of animation (see fig.44) which seem to reduce the sense of realism producing the effect of a cartoon character. There seems to have been a more general move towards this, including in dolls aimed at girls



Figure 44 Action Man Comic, 1998, authors own



Figure 43 Bratz doll box, 2022, Walmart

<sup>83</sup> Hasbro, *Action Man Final Combat*, packaging, 2003

(see fig.43). It was likely this was influenced by the need to perform in a trans-medial context.



Figure 45 Action Man: Advert Mission - Volume 1." YouTube.com

The impressions conveyed by the Action Man Final Combat packaging are extended by the television adverts that accompanied this set. In the adverts we are introduced to the world of Action Man and his enemy Dr X. Footage of “Sweltering jungles, frozen waste... land, sea and sky”<sup>84</sup> cut quickly between each other in dramatic fashion. Action Man in these adverts is played by a real man who reflects much of the qualities the figure has, such as his muscular form, square jaw and dark hair. He moves in an exaggerated way, mimicking the nature of the figure’s poses within the box. Dr X also appears as the realistic version of his toy figure and much like the cartoon and film strip imagery on the box, is dominated physically by Action Man. Ideas about the body are centre stage with the Hasbro Action Man that ideas of the body are centre stage. The dialogue in the video is peppered with words like “pursuit” “hunt” and “destroy” which reinforce ideas behind the body and its’ abilities. Action Man’s physical appearance and bodily attributes are rarely literally addressed but are alluded to through his appearance. By demonstrating the challenges he can overcome with his body, we build an image of the masculinity he represents.

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<sup>84</sup> Action Man: Advert Mission - Volume 1." YouTube.com



The style of the advert is in keeping with its' Americanised tone of voice, in that it uses a Hollywood style blockbuster movie aesthetic, narrated by a fast-paced throaty masculine voice. The style of the advert of Action Man Final Combat and the detailing of a film strip on the box, strategically references the medium of film and immediately transports the consumer or young boy to the realm of popular filmic media and culture. The use of a photographic image that portrays a violent encounter between both protagonist and antagonist within these film strips speaks directly to the genre of action films. The visual culture of masculinity that is evoked in this advert is in parallel to the popular series of Rambo films (1982<sup>85</sup>, 1985<sup>86</sup>, 1988<sup>87</sup>, 2008<sup>88</sup>, 2019<sup>89</sup>) which star Sylvester Stallone as the warrior hero. Rambo is often a popular cultural reference for a masculinity that prizes endurance physicality and aggression. Amongst boys this has become the dominant form of masculinity and may well be experienced as hegemony by those outside of it.

### 3.2 Man of Action



Figure 46 Still from Kotcheff Ted's Rambo First Blood, 1982

In Ted Kotcheff's' Rambo First Blood (1982) Rambo is described in the trailer as “one man who’s been pushed too far”<sup>90</sup> and “an expert in Guerrilla Warfare.”<sup>91</sup> He appears physically similar to Action Man. Narrated by a deep-throaty voice also heard in the advert for Action Man Final Combat, the trailer for Rambo First Blood (1982) also

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<sup>85</sup> Kotcheff, Ted, *Rambo First Blood*, Orion Pictures, 1982

<sup>86</sup> Cosmatos, P. George, *Rambo First Blood, Part 2*, Orion Pictures, 1985

<sup>87</sup> MacDonald Peter, *Rambo, Part 3*, Tri Star Pictures, 1988

<sup>88</sup> Stallone, Sylvester, *Rambo*, Lionsgate, 2008

<sup>89</sup> Grunberg, Adrian, *Rambo Last Blood*, Lionsgate, 2019

<sup>90</sup> Kotcheff, op. cit. 1982

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

shows cutting footage of Rambo scaling mountain-scapes, evading capture and utilising his combat and survival skills. Both Action Man and Rambo embody the qualities of agility and aggression and tend to be faced with challenges of entrapment, rescue and escape, always willing to sacrifice themselves to evade or defeat evil. It has been argued that men became more sedentary (domesticated) they turned to characters who embodied qualities such as “rugged individualism, an adventurous spirit, risk-taking, displays of physical prowess, and most of all a high degree of personal autonomy.”<sup>92</sup> Holt and Thompson also look to the ideals of the ‘Breadwinner’ and ‘Rebel’ as models of masculinity and argue heroic masculinity sits between these models. The Breadwinner, involving characteristics of; respectability, organised achievement and civic virtues recalls perhaps some of the qualities in Action Man generation one. Meanwhile the Rebel involves, rebellion, untamed potency and self-reliance. The Man of Action Hero embodies elements of both including “The rugged individualism of the rebel while maintaining their allegiance to collectives as required breadwinners.”<sup>93</sup> It seems to me that Action Man generation two might be representative of the Man of Action Hero.



Figure 47 Still from Macdonald Peters' Rambo, Part 3, 1988



Figure 48 Action Man, jungle dart box, hasbro 1999, ebay.com

<sup>92</sup> Holt, Thompson, Craig, op. cit. p.427

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p.427+428

Autonomy and individualism are reflected in the description of Rambo in the First Blood trailer as “One Man”, and the essence of Action Man’s individualism is reflected in his name. My feeling here is that although Action Man has the same name as his predecessor in generation one, it perhaps carries a different meaning in generation two. Whilst the first Action Man seemed to refer to a range of adventure heroes, the name in generation two seems to me to refer to the only man who can get it done. He, like Rambo, is one singular man, living and dying for the ‘greater good’. Ruggedness is expressed through their very design. Action Man usually bears a scar on his cheek while a large open wound runs down the Rambo’s face. The ruggedness they employ speaks of their determination and ‘allegiance to the collective’. The appearance of Action Man and Rambo’s physicality in fig.47 and fig.48 is uncanny, both have large muscular necks, abdominal and pectoral muscles one might see on an oiled-up body builder at a Mr. Universe competition. Action Man is covered in camouflage war paint, Rambo with two large scars on his chest. Their naked torsos are a trope in the action film genre, clearly meant to demonstrate their muscularity, and therefore their dominance.

This version of Action Man differs to his earlier iterations that didn’t rely as heavily on physicality. Hoberman differentiates between Rambo and Tom Cruises’ character in Top Gun (1986) “What Rambo lacks is the cannon fodder glamour; no one will ever mistake him as an officer and a gentleman. By contrast Cruise and his cohort are looking good, having fun.”<sup>94</sup> James Bond-like chivalry and professionalism don’t seem to exist within the prescribed narratives of the later iterations of Action Man. With the re-emergence of the Action Man franchise The British National Toy Council report which addresses sexism and aggression in toys noted that

“After a period in which violence associated with male heroes was disguised as antics of humorous ‘Teenage Turtles’ portrayed through fictional monsters and fantasy cyborg ‘terminators’ the reappearances of the ‘realistic’ Action Man in battledress armed with an electronic weapon has been interpreted as a revival of interest in the macho image.”<sup>95</sup>

Varney states that

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<sup>94</sup> Hoberman J, *Make My Day, Movie Culture in The Age of Reagan*, The New Press, 2019

<sup>95</sup> Atfield, op. cit. p.85

“Children enter a world that is heavily reliant on technology in both a physical and cultural sense. Although the technology is instantly accessible to the senses and omnipresent, questions of who designed the technology, and in whose interests, are essentially absent, leaving its technology and its’ social infrastructures seem natural.”<sup>96</sup>

Hasbro’s re imagination promotes an image of American perceptions of heroic masculinity. Its’ new themes depart from Palitoy’s military/ adventure focus and inherits a fantastical, action/ adventure approach. The threat of other nations is replaced by the villains Professor Gangrene and Dr X. Action Man’s duty no longer looks to the missions of an older World War Two narrative but to the ‘greater good’ ridding the Universe of evil terrorist threat. Hasbro’s Action Man was existing in a world far more globalised than its’ predecessor’s, therefor the forms of masculinity expressed in Hasbro’s action man were digested globally and not detached from the rest of the world.

Oakley notes that as toys became increasingly mass-produced and commercially viable, Licensing of merchandise became “essential” and this led to increased characterisation, as a lot of programs for children of the late 70’s and 80’s were based on toys. The success of this business model relied on “a compelling and attractive character.”<sup>97</sup> The trans-mediation of Action Man reflects Barthes ideas of naturalisation where “mythical images rely on other representations in order to achieve this naturalization...” Hasbro’s Action Man existed as a character who referenced a lexicon of mediated themes such as military, action, adventure and sport. Action Man being a trans media figure also extends his own “reservoir of images and themes”<sup>98</sup> across elaborately designed packaging, ubiquitous comic books and tv sets with far more channels and variety than television of the sixties and seventies.

In this chapter I have discussed the change in Action Mans’ licensing which along with cultural and historical contexts had an impact on his developments. This change in licensing saw significant stylistic changes to the mould of his body, his branding, and a gradual change in his narrative from military/ adventure hero to superhero

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<sup>96</sup> Varney op. cit. p.154

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p.160

<sup>98</sup> Barthes Roland, *Mythologies*, Translation (c) 1972 by Jonathan Cape Ltd. The Noonday Press, 1991

ridding the world of 'evil'. Although we have established Action Man generation-one and Action Man generation-two's affinity to the 'greater good', the masculinity Action Man evokes is far more reliant on survival and dominant physicality than the specialist knowledge and James Bond-like chivalry of his predecessor. Ideas of Action Mans' loyalty to the greater good changed across historical and cultural contexts.

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the nature of the masculinity surrounding Action Man, the boy's action figure. Informed by concepts of gender differentiation and performance, I traced how the material and visual culture of childhood is involved in defining key markers of gender, that these emerge in specific contexts and change over time. Popular perceptions of what it means to be a man are articulated in the construction of hero types – the adventure hero became a widely understood ideal of masculinity from the nineteenth century onwards, particularly in the imaginary world of boyhood. The nature of these heroes is sedimentary, being formed in one context and becoming layered as those contexts change. One expression of this was in the figure of the soldier. Action Man belongs to a genealogy of war toys and games, most importantly the toy soldier who became part and parcel of a 'pleasure culture of war', a key element of boyhood play. I discussed two distinct forms of masculinity, one that is centred on physical dominance and another that looks to the construction of men as being rational rather than emotional beings.

An exploration of the first phase of the Action Man figure (1966-1983) traced his beginnings in the U.S. based G.I. Joe, the first action figure of his type, and his migration to Britain under the Palitoy label. It seems to me that Action Man went on to become a very British type of hero, absorbing elements of the Empire hero which were combined by that time with those of a new type of gentleman spy hero. I have suggested that this is apparent in the figure's branding, which echoes the visual style of screen-based adventurers current at that time, and in the way in which he is represented visually as athletic and physically courageous. This seems to draw on a long tradition of representing war heroes that places emphasis on dynamic movement and combines this with techniques of representation in action genres in print. These concerns with a masculinity that prizes physicality are interwoven with a second strand of masculinity underlying Action Man as a boy's toy. This second form of masculinity is concerned with the accumulation and display of knowledge and technical expertise, represented by a focus on Action Man as a toy which was to be collected rather than consumed, and built into the conception and design of both the accessories and ephemera associated with the figure. This is expressed in the sense of authenticity built into them, and in the focus on factual knowledge and expertise,

communicated in a visual style associated with didactic literature. I connect this to ideas about the miniature and display.

An analysis of the second generation of Action Man (1993-2006) tracked the toy's movement back to an American context, albeit in what was by then a globalised and heavily mediated market. I have demonstrated how this incarnation of Action Man became increasingly aligned, both materially and visually, with a physicality that was far in excess of his predecessor. I found that during this period, Action Man became a 'Man of Action' hero type, a very American perception of heroic masculinity. This Action Man displays a wilder, more muscular ruggedness and engages in reductive, fantastical narratives that pit good against evil. This seems to have looked to the display of physical dominance then current in action hero movies, replicating their visual style across screen advertisements, cartoons, branding and packaging.

Because such toys come with defined narratives, we play with those narratives as much as we play with the toys themselves. It's easy to understand the alarm that such a movement towards an increasingly hegemonic form of physically dominant masculinity might cause, particularly in the context of rising levels of violence against the individual and the experience of war.

However, it is far more difficult to discern whether children adopt the narratives presented to them by the prescriptive texts of their toys or whether they depart into some other fantasy. How might other elements of their identities and experiences be felt? How might a child growing up in Belfast during the Troubles perceive or play with his Action Man? One child might view Action Man's physically dominant and muscular body as violent and threatening, another might see it as beautiful and empowering. When a parent can't afford the newest set of Action Man accessories, a boy might knit a costume or borrow one from his sister's Barbie, applying new meanings to those prescribed structures of play. It's entirely possible that the complex articulated joints that improve movability in Action Man and differentiate him from his female counterpart might make him an interesting model on the kitchen table catwalk or the next Billy Elliot on the bannisters. Whilst powerful toy and media industries should be accountable for the ideas they circulate, those involved with children also have a responsibility to help them to question those prescribed narratives. Narratives may be prescribed but you don't have to subscribe to them.

Imagination, once unleashed, is an aspect of the self that cannot be tamed.

There's far more at play.



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