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Cultural ex-/ec-centricities

AFTER A FASHION: *DIE HARD*, CULTURAL MYTHOLOGY, AND THE VERTICAL FRONTIER

CHRISTIAN MORARU[1]

Abstract:
On June 27, 2007, actor Bruce Willis donated to the Smithsonian the undershirt he famously wore as New York police officer John McClane in the first movie of the *Die Hard* series (1988). While many have ridiculed the "donation," this essay argues thatthe item's place is indeed in a major U. S. museum, for the celebrated garment embodies a quintessentially American myth.

Keywords: popular culture; fashion; U. S. mythology; materialism semiotics; cultural difference; American Adam; American frontier

At a formal ceremony on June 27, 2007, actor Bruce Willis donated to the Smithsonian the undershirt he famously wore as New York police officer John McClane in the first movie of the *Die Hard* series (1988)[2]. Some have scoffed at the donation, arguing that, unlike objects such as the hat Abraham Lincoln wore the fateful night of April 14, 1865 and which is also on exhibit at the Smithsonian, Hollywood props and mass culture paraphernalia broadly carry scant historical value. It has also been pointed out, McClane is not a "real" person like Lincoln, nor is Willis, real and well known as he may be, a figure of Lincoln's stature. It would follow, along these lines, that the significance of items like the ruby slippers of *The Wizard of Oz*'s Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland), the "throne" of Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) from the 1970s CBS sitcom *All in the Family*, or McClane's undershirt is "anthropological" at most (Crawford, "*Die Hard* Donation"). To that extent, these articles' presence

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[2] Amy Crawford, "*Die Hard* Donation: Bruce Willis gives John McClane's blood-smeared undershirt to the Smithsonian." *Smithsonian*, http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/willis.html (accessed July 14, 2009).

in the Institute's collections ought to be accounted for or "interpreted within a larger historical context" lest they remain meaningless. Moreover, we are further warned, they could confuse the patrons, who may be led to believe that the little desk on which Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence and McClane's police badge (both also among the Institute's holdings) are on a par. Should that happen—should moviemaking be treated as historiography by other means—the Smithsonian would "dumb down our history" and defeat its own purpose in the bargain. The establishment's charge, we are sternly reminded, is not to lump together the significant and the trivial but, quite the opposite, to comb through the boundless American archive discriminately, sort the wheat from the chaff, preserve the meaningful, render it accessible to visitors, and thus educate them about U. S. history (Lanciotti 2008).

The case against the undershirt's historicity is then twofold: cultural and historical. On the one hand, *Die Hard* as a whole is deemed culturally inferior, too lowbrow, too plebeian to count as a cultural document and, by the same token, as a historical signifier. On the other hand, we also gather, whatever the movie shows, it does not exist in the sense in which things we touch and feel do. Even if mass-produced Hollywood stuff was ("serious") culture, the undershirt belongs to a subaltern ontology, to a fictional repertoire, and fiction cannot possibly be "actual" history. The item, critics reluctantly allow, might mean something solely in an analytically *historicizing* context, to wit, in an exculpatory, de-trivializing and legitimizing association or relation with other, non-cinematic, "truly" historical memorabilia, facts, or people. In and of itself, however, McClane's top tells us, the same commentators contend, little if anything about American history. Granted, it did surface within this history. For one thing, though, that did not happen "in reality" but ("just") in a movie. For another, the movie in question is not even "historical," featuring as it does no recognizable, major American events or personalities—a counterexample would be one of the Civil War, Pearl Harbor attack, or J. F. Kennedy films, historically dignified, presumably, by their subject matter.

In brief, according to its detractors, the undershirt falls outside the homologated national narrative and in consequence is merely, and worthlessly, clothing, soaked with Willis's own sweat and blood as it may be. Devoid of palpable ramifications into American society, it stays locked inside its own materiality, insignificant and ordinary; the "thing" may have secured a place in the footlights, but it has not earned a spot in the

museal limelight. Begging to differ, the Smithsonian flipped the argument around: since we are talking about one of the most popular action movies ever, the garment is a historical piece and, on that ground, the museum should be its proper home. The curators' underlying presupposition went something like this: wide cultural appeal indexes a history in the making and one day may well end up translating into history *tout court* given that box office hits such as *Die Hard* instantiate the culture category that usually leaves its imprint on how people view themselves, the world around them, and their place in it.

And yet, one wonders, was the decision to display the controversial accouterment taken for a reason not only right but also sufficient? In other words, did the critics have a point, after all—though not necessarily the point they thought they had—when they pressed for a rationale susceptible to spell out the historicalness of those exhibition segments that seemed superficially moored in U. S. history? In deriving historical import from cultural impact, the Institute was by and large correct to assume that popularity was predicated on a response in turn symptomatic of a nascent history, of an evolving configuration of desire, judgment, and self-expression bearing if not on how people were already behaving and fantasizing, then conceivably on how they might do so in the future. But, sound as it is, this reasoning raises another cluster of questions: What made John McTiernan blockbuster a heist classic and Willis a huge celebrity in the first place? Why is it that people have responded so strongly to *Die Hard*, to McClane's attire (or lack thereof) particularly? More to the point: What is their response a response to?

One takes nothing away from Willis's knack for being "in" character if one sheds light on that which, "in" McClane, affords his mass appeal besides the actor's bad-boy charm, that is, on the cultural baggage the hero lugs around. This baggage is mythical. If Willis plays McClane, McClane plays a myth. The star is "in" a cool character; the character, "in" a national myth. Responding to McClane, we also react to a late twentieth-century recycling of this myth. In fact, McClane resonates with us because, in him, the myth calls out to us. But, as we have often learned, this call resembles more to a half-hearted whisper, to a facetious interpellation. For the myth does not tip its hand entirely. It references and simultaneously effaces itself *qua* myth so as to dissimulate the pressure it applies on us to play along, to "respond" in a certain way. To deflect this pressure, counter-mythography must first bring the myth into view fully, and to do so it must work through the movie's material semiotics. This is

where McClane's undershirt comes in.

In *Die Hard*'s cinematic architecture, the top functions as a hinge joint where the two performative layers of Willis's acting articulate. As suggested previously, one has to do with his individual talent, is personal, and unfolds in the present although it may well refashion this present and history largely as more and more fans mimic Willis's tough-guy deportment. At this level, the film deploys McClane's "wife-beater" as "dress code" for an emerging, rough-and-ready paradigm of American masculinity. Here, history is history *in potentia*, for this maleness "style" may or may not catch on. Beneath and, in effect, underwriting this surface level is another, less visible, culturally thicker and wielding more leverage in *Die Hard*'s symbolic economy. This is the collective level of performance where the myth plays out and, to a considerable degree, provides for Willis's own role-playing, so much so that, on closer inspection, McClane's machismo itself proves a stand-in for an older ideal in which gender and culture models become quasi interchangeable, viz., for the myth as embodied in the collective imagination by heroic figures such as gunslingers and mobsters. Here, history is already present, as Willis himself acknowledges. "You can draw," he tells a journalist, "a straight line from westerns and cowboy movies, to military movies and gangster movies, to what they now call 'action movies'—they're really just about good triumphing over evil. They're morality stories that sometimes work and sometimes don't, and these films just seem to work" (Amy Crawford, "*Die Hard* Donation). *Die Hard* has definitely worked—directed by Noam Murro, a fifth installment is underway at the time of writing—and may wind up making history literally because, on one side, as Willis notes, the movie *is* made of history, comes from the past and drags it pyrotechnically into our time, while, on the other side, even the "universal" moral conflict the actor credits is, as we will see right away, *culturally qualified* according to the taxonomy built into the myth's grammar. Likewise, recent box office history and the cultural history his play-acting might set in train can too be adduced as an argument, but, once again, even stronger is the argument from the cultural history McClane already enacts; as a male icon, McClane may be something today's American men still dream of becoming, but as an American, McClane is something Americans, men and women, have always been one way or the other, at least in their eyes, namely, "Adamic." Indeed, McClane is just another American Adam, in the sense explored by R. W. B. Lewis in his classical study (Lewis 1984).

I have worded the last sentence advisedly. McClane is not *the* American Adam but another Adamic avatar. He marks a moment in a series coextensive with the history of America and its letters from revolutionaries such as Thomas Jefferson to Ralph Waldo Emerson and the American Renaissance generation to Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and their Huck Finns, Gatsbys, and Nick Shays to politicians like Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama[3]. All of them have made in their time, to the country and to themselves, a promise "as old as the country itself: to wipe clean the slate of history and begin again from scratch" so as to start anew, over and over again, no historical strings attached (Judis 2008: 23).[i] The paradox on which the myth and its incorporations rest becomes thus immediately apparent: no longer had the American Adams made this extraordinary promise than they summoned a whole order, an entire line of actual and imagined people who had made the same promise before and thereby had already set in motion a tradition, had inscribed a culture complete with its idioms and ideologies on the country's slate. This holds true for founding fathers like British-born Paine too, whom America's "circumstances" struck "as in the beginning of a world" (Judis, "American Adam," 23). Adamism may then view itself as an exception to history and more broadly as an exceptionalism (Brdige 1992: 187)—the Adam type may be or see itself as uncommon among other cultural categories and cultures—but within the U. S., Adam or, more accurately, Adamism as cardinal American project and self-perception is endemic; no wonder critics keep calling McClane "everyman cop."[4] And vice versa: John is a regular Joe—

[3] On representations of Adamism in Fitzgerald and DeLillo, see Joanne Gass, "In the Nick of Time: DeLillo's Nick Shay, Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, and the Myth of the American Adam," in Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman, and Irving Malin, eds., *UnderWords: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's* Underworld (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 114-29. A more sweeping perspective offer the essays in Viorica Patea and María Eugenia Díaz, eds., *Critical Essays on the Myth of the American Adam* (Salamanca, Spain: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2001). For a pre-U. S. history of the theme, the reader can consult Anthony D. York, "From Biblical Adam to the American Adam: Evolution of a Literary Type," *University of Dayton Review*, 21, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 103-24.

[4] Eric Eisenberg is one of the many critics who have called McClane an "everyman cop." See his article "Bruce Willis is Doing Die Hard 5 to Make Fun of It," http://www.cinemablend.com/new/bruce-willis-is-doing-die-hard-5-to-make-fun-of-it-17201.html (accessed February 21, 2011).

at any rate, he looks the part—but this ordinary guy is also an American Adam exemplar; if we have trouble "getting it," the undershirt makes sure that we do.

It goes without saying, this is not the garb's only message to us. However, this is not, in McClane's appearance, the only element feeding into this message either. For instance, he also walks barefoot virtually for the entire movie. Ideally, and to drive home the film's Adamic point unambiguously, the protagonist should have been completely naked. If he is not, that is not just out of ratings considerations. Willis seems reasonably fit—his physique is and must come off as "average," and therefore he cannot "ripped," a machinic body worked over by technology. Besides, the competition from the Sylvester Stallone-Arnold Schwarzenegger direction, which has put its own spin on Hollywood Adamism, was getting overwhelming at the time (Wimmer 1989: 184-95). Furthermore, technological know-how and the cultural sophistication usually tied into it, more precisely a certain perceived, "over-the-board," flamboyant savoir-faire and worldly refinement in matters ranging from hi-tech dexterity to plurilinguism, elocution, social etiquette, and couture, are exactly what the character battles throughout and, more generally, what the life philosophy he instinctively bodies forth disparages. I might add, McClane is not utterly unskilled in such respects either. Fundamentally autonomous and independent, he must shun dependence apriorily, ergo he cannot depend on technology. Marked German or Japanese in the movie, technology comes before as well as from the outside, makes for the postlapsarian burden of sorts that he must overcome, the tainted anteriority and the exteriority he and the national culture he dramatizes must forsake time and again as a premise to an identity enactment orchestrated, along the lines of the Adamic imaginary, as self-enactment that cannot act out prior or alien cultural scripts. To be sure, McClane's mythical mandate is an ever-reiterated self-invention that must also be valiantly and patently self-sufficient, and for this reason his reliance on technology is or is at least made out to be minimal and, much like his overall cultural-aesthetic adroitness, blatantly reactive and "commonsense," pragmatic and bare bones to a brutally virile, "characteristically" American extreme. So, to get things done, he makes do and improvises. He retools things. When he has no other choice, he uses the "terrorists" own machineguns and explosives. Tellingly enough, he employs computers as Molotov cocktails. In his hands, the devices, appliances, gadgets, supplies, and other slick appurtenances of