Through Doug Liman’s reimagining of the Patrick Swayze vehicle Road House (1989), Amazon Prime is trying to draw a distinction between “toxic” hyper-masculinity and “useful” hyper-masculinity. Hyper-masculinity refers to the exaggeration of stereotypical masculine traits and behaviours, emphasising physical strength, violence, aggression and sexuality.

Road House tells the story of Dalton (Jake Gyllenhaal) a down on his luck former Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) fighter who takes a job as a bouncer at a Florida Keys roadhouse. He soon discovers that the roadhouse is at the centre of a power struggle between gangsters, corrupt cops, and its charismatic owner Frankie (Jessica Williams). And guess what? Dalton’s the only one who can sort it all out.

The film plays out as a western, and it’s a bit meta about it too. Charlie (Hannah Lanier), a teenager that Dalton befriends, continually reminds us that Dalton’s life mirrors the stranger archetype of the wild west genre. “Your job,” she tells him, “it’s like something out of a western. You’re the Lone Ranger walking into a lawless town, bringing order to chaos.”
If you like action films, and you have your tongue firmly in your cheek, then you'll probably like this. Road House is packed with fun, fighting, fast cars and frivolous funnies. But what makes it interesting is the not-so-subtle exploration of what it means to be a hyper-masculine hard man in the 21st century.

**The hardmen of Prime**

Over the past few years, the Amazon Originals slate has heavily invested in hyper-masculine stories, with several films dedicated to adrenaline-fuelled muscle men kicking butt and taking names.

With prominent action hero productions such as Reacher (2022), The Terminal List (2022), and the forthcoming *God of War*, it is not much of a stretch to suggest that Prime Video is fast becoming the new home for the hyper-masculine hardmen of the small screen.

The Amazon Studios inclusion policy and playbook claims that: “Amazon Studios has long prioritized telling innovative and inclusive stories from a diverse range of creative talent.” So why, then, are the 1980s calling and asking for their action genre back?

The 2024 Road House is in keeping with the Amazon Studios’ playbook in that diverse casting is front and centre in the story – but at its core it is a portrayal of hard-bodied hyper-masculinity and its associated ultra-violent behaviour.

**Masculinity in Road House**
From the outset, masculinity in the movie is associated with drinking, gambling, aggression, social dysfunction and thoughts of suicide. Dalton is a loner, who lives in the shadows and makes his money by hustling at underground mixed martial arts fights. He has few possessions and nowhere to live.

Yet, for all he is disempowered financially, he is empowered by the physicality of his body. His existence is defined by and dependent on his hyper-masculinity. You can stab him, beat him up, hit him with a pickup truck and he’ll just keep coming back.

Frankie harnesses Dalton’s hyper-masculine aggression to sort out the trouble at her roadhouse, which is overrun with thugs who are chasing off her customers. She can’t get help from the cops because they’re corrupt. So, she hires a harder man to sort out her hardman problem. And it works. Dalton’s hyper-masculine aggression is presented as functional. Given a purpose, Dalton becomes a useful tool. His hyper-masculinity is deployed for good.

It is up to Knox, played by former UFC champion Connor McGregor, to represent the “toxic” side of hyper-masculinity. As the only antagonist capable of challenging Dalton, Knox’s aggression has no real purpose. His violence is uncontrollable, unpredictable and sexually aggressive. He is the dark mirror of Dalton and as the story progresses, the boundary between the two men becomes less clear. To overcome Knox, Dalton must embrace the darkest aspects of his own hyper-masculinity.

Dalton’s hyper-masculinity is ultimately tragic. Once he has defeated Knox and solved the problem at the roadhouse, he is of no more use to the community of Glass Key and must move on.

So, does this mean that Road House is problematic in its messaging? Well, that’s up to the viewer to decide. The story is ridiculous, and it doesn’t pretend otherwise. It’s a guilty pleasure. A pastiche. So, in that sense, probably not. But then again the character of Knox cuts close to the bone in light of McGregor’s real life legal troubles, which include allegations of assault, reckless driving and robbery, which he has denied – all of which are featured in Road House. And these are characteristics that probably aren’t worth celebrating.
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