CHAPTER 1

ACTION AND ADVENTURE AS GENRE

This book explores action and adventure as a mode of filmmaking and as a significant genre of American cinema. What we call "action" today has generic roots in a number of surprisingly diverse aspects of Hollywood cinema, from early chase films that crafted suspense to travel films that offered to audiences exotic and fantastic spectacles of other lands. Making sense of action involves taking account of these diverse origins; conversely, thinking about action as a genre allows us to see those origins in a different way.

Action is now a generic descriptor in its own right, one closely linked to adventure cinema; it is widely used to promote and distribute films in theatres and for home use. Yet, however familiar it may now be, this designation is relatively recent. Those earlier Hollywood genres that strongly emphasize action elements – including war movies, Westerns and thrillers – have their own distinct generic histories and conventions. It is not my intention here to suggest we think about all these movies as action, but rather to draw attention to action

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and adventure as long established features of Hollywood production as well as that of other national cinemas. In the process we will understand the longevity of action movies and how action emerges as a distinct genre during the "New Hollywood" of the 1970s, with its orientation around high concept, pre-sold blockbusters.

Associated with narratives of quest and discovery, and spectacular scenes of combat, violence and pursuit, action and adventure films have been produced throughout Hollywood's history. They are not restricted to any particular historical or geographic setting (which provided the basis for early iconographic models of genre). Indeed, the basic elements of physical conflict, chase and challenge can be inflected in any number of different directions. Action can be comic, graphically violent, fantastic, apocalyptic, military, conspiratorial and even romantic.

Action and adventure cinemas thus pose something of a challenge to genre theory as it has developed within film studies. Despite the recognizability of particular action or adventure cycles – Warner Bros. historical adventures of the 1930s, say, or the bi-racial cop movies of the 1980s – the genre has no clear and consistent iconography or setting. There *are* some broadly consistent and identifiable themes underpinning action: these include the quest for freedom from oppression, say, or the hero's ability to use his/her body in overcoming enemies and obstacles. And physical conflicts or challenge, whether battling human or alien opponents or even hostile natural environments, are fundamental to the genre in all its manifestations. Yet the very diversity of action and adventure requires thinking about genre in a different way than the familiar analyses of more clearly defined genres such as the Western, which has been fruitfully explored in terms of its rendition of themes to do with the symbolic opposition of wilderness and civilization, nature and culture (Kitzes, 1969).

Adopting a genre-based approach to action doesn't mean reducing this diversity to a set formula: as if *Star Wars* (1977) were the same as *Die Hard* (1988), or *Strange Days* (1995) the same as *Speed* (1994). Action and adventure as cinematic forms are manifest in a multiplicity of different genres and sub-genres that develop and change over time. As such, action and adventure provides a useful way into ongoing debates regarding the *instability* of genre and the extent to which individual films can be regarded as participating simultaneously in a number of genres. So, to take these examples, we might agree that

Die Hard is quite different from *Star Wars*, but note that both *Star Wars* and *Strange Days* make use of science-fiction conventions. Yet these two films do so in very different ways – notably in the presentation of violence – and in combination with other generic elements.

Star Wars exemplifies a resurgent adventure strand of the 1970s cinema, its Jedi knights and light sabers, as well as set-piece scenes such as characters swinging on ropes between platforms, recalling the swordfights of swashbuckling films. *Star Wars* also deploys western iconography via (admittedly alien) desert landscapes and in particular through Han Solo (Harrison Ford)'s costume and mannerisms. All this takes place in juxtaposition with the sort of science fiction evoked by the imagery of space travel as routine and spectacular space battles. *Star Wars* places its futuristic scenario in relation to genres defined by their pastness: "a long time ago…" *Strange Days*, by contrast, is set in the near future (now the past) of 1999. It employs intense mobile camerawork to evoke chase and pursuit in its action sequences. The futuristic technology portrayed is to do with vision and the recording of experiences; the film uses salacious imagery alongside its conspiratorial thriller and *film noir* elements. While both movies can be situated as part of action and adventure traditions, understanding the diversity of filmmaking styles is important to analyzing the genre.

Given action's diverse history and its complex relationship to other genres, such as the Western or science-fiction, this book considers action both as an overarching term and in relation to a series of subgenres. This chapter gives an overview of some of the main ways in which genre has been theorized in film studies and asks about how these different approaches might help in thinking about action and adventure. Since "action" *per se* has not been central to genre theory, this involves acknowledging the specific context used by critics (e.g., Bazin on the Western) while summarizing the relevance of these debates for an understanding of action as genre.

Theories of Genre: Author, Icon and Industry

The development of genre criticism represented a crucial stage in the emergence of film studies as a discipline and was particularly important in its attempt to engage with popular and especially Hollywood

cinema during the 1950s and 1960s. Given the typically low critical status accorded to action and adventure movies (a few notable exceptions aside) this is also a particularly important context for the subsequent emergence of scholarship around the genre. Seminal essays published in the 1940s and 1950s by French critic André Bazin and American writer Robert Warshow developed interest in genre via evocative accounts of the cultural work and relevance of the Western and the gangster film, both action-oriented genres.

These early essays are intriguing since they foreground the cultural significance of these genres, largely in terms of the assumed connections between genre filmmaking and myth. Thus, Bazin regards the Western as exemplifying American film in articulating values to do with "establishing justice and respect for the law" (1995: 145). For Warshow, the gangster film is significant not for any relation to social reality but as an *aesthetic experience* that speaks against what he regards as the compulsory optimism of American life: "the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself" (1964: 86). Approaching Hollywood films for what they can tell us about social values and systems of meaning – that is, myth and ideology – has proved central to writings on action. Indeed until relatively recently, an interest in the ideology of action has tended to be at the cost of more sustained discussion of the formal elements that make the genre so distinctive and, arguably, popular.

For Bazin the distinctive achievement of the Western lies not in action elements, though he acknowledges their importance, but in its articulation of myth. Thus he writes:

> It is easy to say that because the cinema is movement the western is cinema *par excellence.* It is true that galloping horses and fights are its usual ingredients. But in that case the western would simply be one variety of adventure story. (1995: 141)

Here, Bazin asserts unequivocally that the Western's significance lies not in its dynamic visual elements or in its adventure-driven narratives. Chapter 3 addresses in more detail the different ways in which critics have explored both the ideological work and, latterly, aesthetic aspects of action and adventure cinema. Here, we can note a persistent

feature of criticism surrounding action genres; an ambivalence about cultural value. While across decades critics have understood the exhilarating properties of action, disagreements proceed from what significance (and what value) should be accorded to such cinematic sensuality. For Brian Taves, for example, adventure cinema is "something beyond action," elevated "beyond the physical challenge" by "its moral and intellectual flavour." (1993: 12). By implication action is crude, a framework that requires gifted filmmakers and performers to transcend its conventions. Indeed for those writers, such as Wheeler Winston Dixon, who regret "the paucity of imagination and/or risk in Hollywood cinema," (1998: 182) action is among the forms of mega-budget, effects-heavy filmmaking that has come to symbolize what they regard as a loss of meaning and complexity.

By contrast, Warshow writes that "the gangster film is simply one example of the movies' constant tendency to create fixed dramatic patterns that can be repeated indefinitely with a reasonable expectation of profit," while being clear that this "rigidity is not necessarily opposed to the requirements of art." (1964: 85). Indeed thinking about genre, with its emphasis on formulae and repetition, has encouraged film scholars to give more attention to the commercial and institutional aspects of film production. Whether the focus is industry or aesthetics, critics tend to agree that genre is distinguished by patterns of repetition and difference. Thus genre critics are interested in the visual, narrative and thematic patterns that recur over time as well as taking account of the ways in which film texts vary those patterns.

Iconographic models of genre emphasized the continuity provided by recurrent scenes and signs. Colin McArthur's well-known work on the gangster film foregrounds (1972) processes whereby repetition generates familiarity, but just as importantly allows objects and actions to accrue meaning through that very repetition. So, for instance, genre critics have noted the resonance and meaning of signs such as landscape, horses and guns in the Western. For action the key sign is the movement of the body through space; the body is central to action whether it is superhuman or simply enhanced. Heroic bodies both withstand and inflict violence. They are juxtaposed with an iconography of violence stemming from the weapon as accessory. Both the action body and action spectacle is characterized by movement: from the lengthy depictions of pursuit and combat to the explosions that feature so

prominently in action spectacle. Explosions are a generic expectation of action turning on the movement of billowing flames and of the objects thrown up or buildings imploded by the blast. The familiar action image of the hero's body propelled by a blast effectively couples both forms of movement, his/her survival underlining their strength and suitability for violence.

Of course as noted earlier, action and adventure are broad descriptors when set against even a genre as expansive as the Western. Eric Lichtenfeld rightly draws attention to the fascination with weaponry that characterizes gunplay-heavy contemporary Hollywood action, for instance, suggesting that an "enthusiasm for action film modernity" in John Wayne's *McQ* (1974) is typified by a "zeal for weaponry." (2004: 31) Modern Hollywood action and adventure is as likely to suggest a fascination at work with the body as a weapon – in part a consequence of the influence of Asian martial arts and the genres showcasing them – and the exploitation of fantastical/historical settings that require different forms of weaponry. The swordplay of *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) is different from, say, the stunts and digital effects conveying superhuman prowess in the same year's *X2*.

PLATE 1.1 Action cinema's characteristic "zeal for weaponry" (Lichtenfeld) and the weaponized body: Fox (Angelina Jolie) in *Wanted* (2008, directed by Timur Bekmambetov and produced by Universal Pictures, Spyglass Entertainment, Relativity Media, Marc Platt Productions, Kickstart Productions, Top Cow Productions, Ringerike Zweite Filmproduktion and Bazelevs Production).

Under the influence of structuralism in the 1970s, scholars explored genre primarily as a system built on repetition and variation (although the work of individual filmmakers – which auteurism construed in comparable terms of repetition and innovation – was still privileged). Anthropology was an important disciplinary context for this work, as film and the developing field of cultural studies looked to the work of Claude Levi-Strauss among others, arguing for a view of popular film (and popular culture more widely) as examples of myth and ritual. So Schatz theorized genre as myth, foregrounding "the various stories our culture tells itself to purify and justify the values and beliefs which sustain it" (1981: 263).

Action has been most often understood in this way, with critics foregrounding its significance as an ideological sign of the times. Indeed it was only with the establishment of a more anthropological interest in popular cinema – by which critics began to investigate popular culture as key markers of social and ideological values – that action and adventure, genres seemingly without clear claims to value on aesthetic grounds, could effectively enter critical debates. As I'll discuss in Chapter 3, many critics have seen the commercial prominence of action, and its emergence as a generic marker, since the 1980s as revealing of the ideological conservatism of Hollywood cinema. Action is read in terms of changes in the industry that saw increasing budgets in line with an emphasis on the blockbuster along with shifts towards new platforms and greater dependence on international box office.

The flurry of genre criticism that appeared from the 1960s frequently served as a sort of supplement to perspectives on film authorship; thus we see influential essays on John Ford or Howard Hawks' use of the Western, Ophuls' melodramas or Minelli's musicals. Thomas Schatz adopted Bazin's phrase the "genius of the system" to convey the aesthetic possibilities that genre cinema might offer to the filmmaker as auteur. In this view, genres were seen to provide filmmakers with a rich repertoire of images with which to work, allowing them to modify generic tropes and inflect familiar scenarios with subtle resonances.

Since neither action nor adventure has historically been seen as a strongly authored cinema, these cinematic traditions were effectively absent from such debates. Or, more accurately, critical discussion

centered on genres such as the Western with little reference to their status as action or adventure stories. More recently this has shifted with interest in action-oriented filmmakers including Kathryn Bigelow and Quentin Tarantino, whose status as *auteurs* of action and violence features in popular commentary. Other filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg, James Cameron, Peter Jackson, Joel Silver and Michael Bay are just as often discussed as symptomatic of the operations of the film industry as in relation to the (in any case rather dated) framework of authorial vision.

The scale, expense and technological complexity – as well as the commercial successes – of the most high profile instances of action and adventure cinema underline the industrial, collaborative aspects of Hollywood production. To some extent then, interest in these filmmakers lies in – or at least must take account of – their command of the business of filmmaking as much as older models of authorial criticism that emphasized the repetition of visual and thematic markers. Writing in the 1970s on adventure cinema, Jeffrey Richards noted that,

> Since the way a swashbuckler moves and looks is just as important as what it says, we must look to the art director, costume designer, fencing master, stunt arranger, cinematographer and actor just as much as to writer and director. For the swashbuckler is truly the sum of all their work. (1977: 10)

While there is less interest in director-centered auteurism in contemporary film scholarship, the direction that Richards indicates has not been particularly developed. Nonetheless, in addition to being commercially lucrative, when action and adventure movies secure awards it is most often in categories such as visual effects and sound editing, a tendency that underlines the pertinence of Richards' remarks on the creative labor at work in the genre.

Theorizing Genre History: Evolution and Industry

If genre has to do with repetition and difference, genre cinema also develops, changing over time as, through repetition, some conventions become clichés. In turn, in many ways genre criticism is fundamentally

a retrospective enterprise. Some genre histories are industrial in focus, others formal or cultural. In any case genre histories attempt to make sense of the ways in which movie conventions develop over time, become familiar through repetition, are inflected in new ways and – in some cases – seem to fall away. Evolutionary models of genre, such as that suggested by Thomas Schatz in his influential 1981 study *Hollywood Genres*, propose a movement by which genres are established, mature into a classic form and then shift to a mode defined by parody and self-reflexivity.

Schatz explores this cycle or pattern with reference to the Western, suggesting a redefinition of the genre shaped by the evolving historical context of the post-war period, often understood as a period defined by questioning as much as conformity.[1] The case studies presented here suggest a rather different model. Indeed action and adventure seem particularly resistant to this sort of evolutionary chronology; as I explore in Chapter 7, through a discussion of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), self-reflexivity has for decades been an important element in a genre that routinely recycles its own history, drawing on the conventions of other genres from horror to imperial adventure. Indeed as Brian Taves observes: "Because swashbucklers and pirate adventures often included humorous elements, the genre retains viability even as it is parodied" (1993: 81), a position he contrasts to that of the Western.

Historical perspectives on the "evolution" of genre are particularly interesting for thinking about action and adventure due to the longevity as well as the diversity of these forms. Ben Singer (2001) identifies action as a key element of silent cinema's chase films; as he notes, at the time these scenarios were termed melodrama. Steve Neale frames action-adventure as one of Hollywood cinema's major genres, underlining its long history as a counter to scholarly debates that have typically focused on a number of high profile titles released during and since the 1980s. Neale identifies the long standing use of action and adventure as promotional terms, indicating that "films in the action-adventure tradition have been a staple in Hollywood's output since the 1910s" (1999: 55).

[1] In his essay "The Evolution of the Western," Bazin too identified World War II as a significant factor in the development of the Western.

Insisting on the longevity of these cinematic forms, Neale's analysis helps to reposition debates about action, which assumed the genre to be a phenomenon that represented the New Hollywood rather than the old. In the process Neale also points out the generic diversity that characterizes action:

> With its immediate roots in nineteenth-century melodrama and in a principle strand of popular fiction, action-adventure has always encompassed an array of genres and sub-types: Westerns, swashbucklers, war films, disaster films, space operas, epics, safari films, jungle films, and so on. (1999: 55)

This very diversity has doubtless contributed to action-adventure's relative invisibility in genre studies – it lacks the clarity of definition that is so productive for writings on the gangster film.

Elaborating the distinction between semantic (focusing on, say, iconographic generic markers) and syntactic (concerned with deep structures of meaning) approaches to genre, Rick Altman points out how the genres most commonly discussed by scholars are those that lend themselves to both approaches; he singles out the Western, horror and the musical as genres that possess both "a high degree of semantic recognisability and a high level of syntactic consistency" (2000: 90–91). Neither action nor adventure can be said to conform to this sort of recognizability and consistency. Thus, while Bazin may have observed in the 1950s, not inaccurately perhaps, that "[t]here is no difference between Hopalong Cassidy and Tarzan except for their costume and the arena in which they demonstrate their prowess" (1995, 143), there are, nonetheless, specificities to the Western and jungle adventure respectively. Which is also to say that costume and setting are more than superficial elements; setting them aside does little to facilitate the analysis of such films.

Evolutionary models of genre are often underpinned by a sense of how the film industry works. Crudely, an understanding that Hollywood invests in those genres that attract audiences is as important as the notion that what sells (what is popular) can tell us useful things about social values at any particular point. Schatz suggests both that genres serve as forms of "cultural ritual" and the public's "collective expression" of values, but also that they exemplify mass (rather than

folk) culture (1981: 12). Industrial analyses of genre and film cycles are also instructive, as are an understanding of the limits posed by censorship and by technology (themes to which I return throughout this book). For example, Tino Balio's overview of the historical adventure cycle produced at Warner Bros. in the 1930s locates the development of these titles as, in part, the result of a series of circumstances. For some unknown reason star Robert Donat dropped out of Warners' production *Captain Blood* (1935), an adaptation of Sabatini's popular novel, and that the studio took a chance on the unknown Errol Flynn. On the back of the film's considerable commercial success, Flynn and Olivia de Havilland became stars. In turn, and in line with the developing logic of the industry, "Warners embarked on a cycle of costume-adventure pictures that combined the talents of Flynn with Olivia de Havilland and [director] Michael Curtiz" (1993: 203). The cycle includes *The Adventures of Robin Hood* that Balio, in line with the general view, regards as Flynn's finest film, in which the star "and his role were perfectly matched" (204).

In the New Hollywood that follows the dismantling of the studio system, different factors come into play in deciding which films are made and how they are developed. Yet commercial logic and box office success remain key with unexpected successes and shifts in star persona contributing to the process. Thus Bruce Willis' success as action hero John McClane in *Die Hard* (1988) was a significant change from his earlier television persona. Likewise, Johnny Depp's quirky characterization of pirate hero Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films played a significant part in the series' success, the distinctive costume and style facilitating associated delivering merchandising. Eric Lichtenfeld's authoritative study of the action movie takes account of the work of a range of personnel from publicists to editors and producers, acknowledging that many action films form the anchor for commercial franchises in which the film itself is only one element. Since budgets for action movies have grown significantly – the production budget for *The Hunger Games* (2012) was moderate at around $78 million, as against the same year's superhero hit *The Avengers* at $220 million – and as a consequence commercial pressures on production teams are intense.

Altman argues that "Hollywood regularly eschews genre logic for production and publicity decisions in favour of series, cycles, remakes

and sequels" (2000: 115). These processes are certainly apparent in the history of action and adventure filmmaking, as several of the case study chapters make clear. *The Hunger Games* is an adaptation of the first book in a best-selling trilogy of novels by Suzanne Collins, the teenage readership a core target for the film. *The Avengers* brings together a number of Marvel comic characters featured in print and in prior movies. Both films are then effectively pre-sold. Nonetheless the series, cycles, remakes and sequels explored in this book also make sense within a larger generic context. Indeed I argue that while Hollywood's industrial logic frames the action cinema, it nonetheless remains a productive critical endeavor to explore the formal commonalities and the broader social significance of action and adventure as genres.

Action: Elements of Genre

So, how should we best make use of concepts of genre to make sense of action and adventure? One strategy is to approach the question historically, as the next chapter aims to do. Another is to identify a set of recurrent themes and formal elements. I've already drawn attention to thematic/narrative elements of conflict, chase and challenge. In trying to pin down the constituent formal elements of the action, it is useful to refine our use of the terms action and adventure, effectively distinguishing between action *sequences* and adventure *narratives.* Action is associated with a particular kind of scene or spectacle (explosions, chases, combat). Adventure, by contrast, implies a story (typically, though not always, the quest narrative) often located within a fantasy or exoticized setting. The search for mythical objects or fabulous treasure in films such as *King Solomon's Mines* (1950) or *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) provide good examples.

While there may be no consistent iconography across the diversity of action and adventure films, set design and special effects – from stop-motion to digital imagery and innovations in 3D – have a privileged place in these genres. Effects are exploited (and in some instances specifically developed) to evoke fantastic worlds and to represent astounding, at times implausible, physical feats. The action movie typically downplays dialogue and complex character

development or interaction in favor of spectacular action set-pieces. (Having said this, verbal banter and witty one-liners do play an important part in some action movies.) Indeed it is arguably the case that the emergence of action as a recognized genre descriptor has much to do with such a foregrounding of both visual spectacle and rich sound in blockbuster hits of the 1970s such as *Star Wars*.

Some critics take spectacle to be not only the defining feature of the action blockbuster, but the key to the commercial logic of Hollywood movie-making since this period. Typically this reading is a negative one. In an oft-cited piece screenwriter Larry Gross observes:

> Whatever you call this genre – the movie-as-Theme-park, the movie-as-Giant-Comic-Book, the movie-as-Ride – I call it simply the Big Loud Action Movie. For better or worse it has been a central economic fact, structuring all life, thought and practice in Hollywood at least since the late 70s. This will not change soon. (2000: 3)

For many critics the emergence of the action cinema is cause and symptom of the dominance of the blockbuster, in turn credited with squeezing out smaller more innovative productions despite the evidence that independent productions have thrived in the blockbuster era.

Action films are indeed typically spectacular, they are often expensive to produce and they showcase technology via the very spectacle that defines them. For Gross, the commercial successes of filmmakers Lucas and Spielberg represent a reification of Hollywood's longstanding action tradition. While this argument certainly has purchase, it is worth underlining that not all action and adventure movies are mega-budget affairs deploying cutting edge technology. The development of effective action scenarios through thriller scenarios and suspenseful editing is displayed in an impressive number of lower budget films including the original *The Terminator* (1984) as well as movies made outside Hollywood such as the German arthouse action movie, *Lola Rennt/Run/Lola, Run* (1999) or, decades earlier the trilogy of Italian Westerns directed by Sergio Leone: *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966).

PLATE 1.2 Despite an association with mega-budgets, lower budget action scenarios successfully exploit suspense and editing: Lola's (Franke Potente) exertions organize the action in *Run Lola Run* (1999, directed by Tom Tykwer and produced by X-Filme Creative Pool, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) and Arte).

While for some it defines Hollywood cinema since the 1980s, spectacle based around movement on screen and rhythmic editing has undoubtedly been an important element, and a central selling point, of American films for decades. Indeed for this reason David Bordwell (2002) talks of "intensified continuity" in his characterization of contemporary film style, emphasizing that features such as rapid editing enhance rather than replace classical technique. The relationship between narrative and spectacle in action cinema has consistently been a topic of critical commentary with several exploring the notion action cinema as ride. Richard Dyer writes with respect to *Speed*: "This is the movie as rollercoaster: all action and next to no plot." Yet Dyer is quick to qualify this statement since, as he makes clear, next to no plot is not the same as no plot at all. Audiences, he observes, typically "want the exhilaration and rush" that such movies offer "embedded in a fiction" (2000: 17). Narrative contextualizes spectacle, giving it meaning as writers such as Geoff King and Lisa Purse have explored in detail. Neither are action sequences or scenes of spectacle simply separable from the narratives in which they appear. They move the narrative

along, contributing not only to the tone of the film – excitement, tension and suspense – but to the construction of character.

In *Mission: Impossible,* for example, Ethan Hunt's (Tom Cruise) realization that he is suspected of being a double agent is conveyed in accelerating close ups and dutch angles, culminating in a spectacular explosion that both facilitates his escape and underlines his effective (temporary) separation from the agency for which he works. This combination of speed conveyed via the editing of images that are themselves slowed highlights the visual and thematic juxtapositions so characteristic of action cinema. *Mission: Impossible* exemplifies the 1990s action film in its stylized visual compositions, its generation of excitement and suspense through editing and its use of effects to both slow down and speed up onscreen events. The elements of visual spectacle used here such as exploding glass, points of intense or vivid light against a dark background or the rapid movement of the hero through obstacles, are common within the genre. These devices foreground the particular terrain the hero must navigate in the action film – everyday spaces rendered uncanny sites of violence. In her analysis of the formal qualities of action sequences, Lisa Purse argues that an emphasis on speed, however disorienting visually, is geared towards a theme of mastery of space. She writes that "the thrill of risk is followed by the thrill of mastery," (2011: 63) locating the viewer's experience of both as rooted in the action body.

Sound plays an equally important role in this sequence, just as silence will in a well-known (and much parodied) scene from later in the film in which Hunt is lowered into a vault and must avoid either the slightest sound or increase in temperature that would trigger the alarms. Sound is an aspect of film aesthetic in which action has been at the forefront of innovations from technical developments (THX) to innovative sound designs that extend and deepen visual spectacle. Purse's detailed analysis of action cinema's sound design foregrounds its work in establishing meaning and characterization, noting how different, for example, the exertions of the male and female action hero *sound* in contemporary Hollywood action (2011: 71–75).

Violence and pursuit – the chase – are the two scenarios in which narrative concerns and spectacle most obviously coalesce. These forms allow the elaboration of a number of dynamic patterns: the conflict of hero and villain, the hero pursued and the hero as pursuer. It is likely

the preponderance of action sequences that has come to define the genre for contemporary audiences (that is, "action" has to do with both style and content). Arroyo (2000) compares the appearance of action set-pieces to the timing of numbers in the musical, while Lichtenfeld regards the regular timing of action sequences as a formal characteristic of the genre in its modern form. He writes of *Dirty Harry*, the film that for him effectively initiates the modern action movie: "The violence of *Dirty Harry* erupts on a cycle. Each action sequence begins almost exactly ten minutes after the previous one began" (2007: 28).

The analogy often drawn between the action set-piece and the musical number can be understood at a thematic as well as a structural level. That is, action set-pieces play an important role in dramatizing the themes of a movie and drawing audiences in emotionally. In Kathryn Bigelow's war drama *The Hurt Locker* (2008) tense and exhilarating action set-pieces variously convey the bonds between military men, the dangerous conditions in which they work – seen in the abrupt and violent deaths of characters played by Guy Pearce and Ralph Fiennes – and the starkly drawn opposition between the military forces

PLATE 1.3 Violence is both a central theme and pleasure of action: the possibility of violence structures the diverse action sequences of *The Hurt Locker* (2008, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, produced by Voltage Pictures, Grosvenor Park Media, Film Capital Europe Funds (FCEF), First Light Production, Kingsgate Films and Summit Entertainment).

of the United State and the Iraqi citizenry. Along with vivid images of spectacle, the film deploys action sequences of varying pace that achieve different sorts of dramatic effect. They include: a prolonged gun battle in the desert (also staged as a waiting game), race against time sequences in which the team defuse (or, as in the opening sequence, fail to defuse) explosive devices, disorienting chase and urban combat sequences through city streets and buildings, and a drink-fuelled fistfight between comrades. Violence or the threat of violence is thematically central to all of these sequences. As a consequence these action set-pieces centralize themes not only of war but of the body, violence and masculinity (see Atakav and Tasker, 2010). In action movies such sequences involving violence and/or destruction can function as celebrations of physical strength and human agency; but they can equally work to dramatize the limits of the body as individuals are subjected to forces over which they have little or no control. Action is then not an interruption of cinematic story-telling, but part of it.

Action and/or Adventure

"Action" and "adventure" are often used together as terms and are even on occasion treated interchangeably. I've suggested here that, quite apart from whether we think about them as separate genres, we can usefully distinguish between adventure narratives and action sequences: adventure as a kind of story and action as a way of telling stories. Obviously the presence of either an action sequence or an adventure narrative does not in itself mean that an individual film is an example of either the action genre or the adventure cinema. Yet these elements provide starting points. In this book, I argue that the very diversity of the films in which action features as a significant element means that it is most productive to think about action genres. In this way it is possible to keep in view the elements held in common at the same time as we can explore the aesthetic and ideological aspects of the different action types. The book aims to present a range of examples conveying something of the historical development of Hollywood action; it also discusses in detail examples from some of the major action genres and trends in action cinema including war films, urban crime thrillers, espionage and superhero action.

How have scholars approached these questions of definition? In elaborating his definition of historical adventure, Brian Taves seeks to distinguish adventure from action. Action, he writes, is best understood as a "style of storytelling," one which "runs through many genres" and enacts "a male-oriented approach dependent on physical movement, violence and suspense, with often perfunctory motivation and romance" (1993: 5). While there are problems with the designation of a male-oriented approach and the associated idea that some types of film are more appropriate for men and some for women (I take up some of these issues in Chapter 3), Taves' emphasis on energy and movement captures the extent to which action involves a way of handling the narrative and a distinctive set of visual pleasures.

At the other end of the spectrum, Ian Cameron refuses to narrow his study of adventure to "the most obvious adventure movies, the sword-and-bosom epics" suggesting that "[T]he cinema has a facility for turning everything to adventure" (1973: 16). Taves finds this wide-ranging application of the term adventure "so generalized and vague as to be meaningless" (1993: 4). Instead as the starting point for his authoritative study, *The Romance of Adventure,* Taves defines adventure as historical adventure, explicitly excluding fantasy films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* since they involve supernatural rather than human agency.

For Taves, in contrast to other action-oriented genres that may be more contemporary, adventure "requires a setting remote in time and space" (1993: 92). Cameron too, although his model of adventure is very different, notes that "the accepted setting is another time and, for most audiences, another place" (1973: 71). Not only is adventure removed from the everyday, it is, both writers concur, a genre defined by a positive emphasis. While he refutes the existence of such a clearly defined entity as the "Adventure Genre," Ian Cameron nonetheless writes of the "positive feeling for adventure" that emerges "both from the exhilaration of the action itself and from the provision of identification figures among the leader characters" (1973). The positive quality of adventure is for these writers in large part connected to the characterization of the hero and his capacity to act positively in the world.

Taking *Robin Hood* as his exemplar of the adventure hero/film, Taves argues that the genre "deals with the valiant fight for

freedom and a just form of government, set in exotic locales and the historical past. This is the central theme of adventure, a motif that is unique to the genre" (1993: 4). Differentiating adventure from both action and fantasy, Taves argues for the specificity (and in effect the purity) of historical adventure. Adventure takes place in a space that is temporally and geographically removed, he argues, but not one that is fantastic in character: "Unlike adventure, fantasy presents a netherworld where events violate physical reality and the bounds of human possibility, trespassing the laws of nature and mixing the otherwise separate world of the natural and the supernatural" (1993: 9).

The distinction between the operation of fantasy (with its mystical worlds and magical devices) and adventure films in which the "everyday is replaced by an enlargement of life through imagination" (1993: 12–13) is no doubt a useful one to draw. The impulse to place generic limits around such a potentially diverse body of texts is understandable, and yet *Raiders* feels like an adventure film in the broadest sense of the term. This is not to do with its historical setting, although this is precisely identified. The film is concerned with a quest, with travel and a developing moral sense of the hero's place in the world and his responsibilities to it – all characteristics of adventure. For these reasons, I tend to use adventure in the broader sense that Taves argues against, although in discussing the *Adventures of Robin Hood* (in Chapter 4) I select an example from Taves' more precise category of historical adventure.

In turn, Lichtenfeld argues that action is a genre that emerges with the structures and commercial patterns of New Hollywood. As such he excludes from action the genres – notably the Western and swashbuckler – which he also casts as precursors to modern action. "Obviously," he writes, "the foundation for defining the action movie must be that the films showcase scenes of physical action, be they fistfights, gunfights, swordfights, fights against nature, or other derring-do." (2007: 5) Conceding that there may be an intuitive quality to the criteria, Lichtenfeld too argues that there is a need to draw limits around the category action in order to make it meaningful. The problem in defining both action and adventure then stems from the ubiquitous nature of these sequences, settings and narratives within Hollywood cinema.

Hybrid Genres

Writing on television and genre, Jonathan Bignell summarizes contemporary perspectives on genre when he observes that: "all texts participate in genre to some extent, and often participate in several genres simultaneously" (2008: 117). With its diverse range of settings and styles, such an understanding underpins the analysis of action genres. Altman argues that while reviewers typically seek to pin movies down to particular genres, studio promotion demonstrates a desire to avoid singularity, marketing films via appeals to multiple genres as well as previous successes.[2] Romance features as an element across most genres for example, moderating and interacting with other plotlines whether of adventure, comedy or threat. Once again, this sort of juxtaposition is particularly important for action and adventure since (like romance) both are descriptors most commonly allied to other terms in promotional and reviewing practices.

The films discussed in this book demonstrate that if action *is* a genre – in the most conventional sense of that term, that of a recognizable form of cinema that accrues depth of meaning through the repetition and variation of conventions – it is one that emerges from and participates in any number of allied genres and sub-genres from imperial adventure to science-fiction, to martial arts and war movies. Thus it should be clear that theories of genre hybridity and multiplicity are central to an understanding of action and adventure. Indeed it is no coincidence that critical interest in action and adventure has developed alongside these more flexible models of genre. It might even be argued that critics developed such flexible models in response to the increasingly apparent generic hybridity on display on cinema screens. Altman, for instance, argues that Hollywood films are characterized by "polygeneric strategies," making use of "interlaced narratives characterised by multiple intersections and juxtapositions" (2000: 136). Horror tropes, for example, can be played out in different ways to different effects – in comic, grotesque, effects-led or suspenseful fashion. I don't argue in Chapter 7 that *Pirates of the Caribbean* is a

[2] Altman analyzes a series of posters from classical Hollywood movies that make clear the reluctance to "explicitly [identify] a film with a single genre" (2000: 57).

horror movie, but I do suggest that it draws on the sort of effects and imagery exploited in an earlier blockbuster horror action hybrid, *The Mummy* (1999). *Pirates* stages a particular intersection of swashbuckling adventure with horror and romance; making sense of the movie in generic terms means acknowledging those connections rather than erasing them in favor of the designation action-adventure. Similarly, *Rambo: First Blood Part II,* discussed in Chapter 8, is a defining 1980s action film. Yet, as various critics have acknowledged, it also clearly incorporates elements from war movies, jungle adventure and POW narratives. Altman's observation that, "not all genre films relate to their genre in the same way or to the same extent" (2000: 221), is surely relevant here.

Another way of thinking about these questions of genre hybridity and the diverse movies in which action plays an important part, is to talk about action as a mode as well as a genre. As a mode action has as much to with a way of telling a story – or perhaps more exactly visualizing that story – as the *kind* of stories that are told. Both action sequences and action films emphasize the dynamism of the moving image, whether that is expressed via movement within the frame or an accelerated pace of editing. Music and sound play an important – and relatively underexplored – part in the action sequence/film, anticipating and complementing the sense of urgency expressed through character and vehicle movement. Such an emphasis on speed, conflict and movement is routinely juxtaposed with an aesthetic that celebrates scale, one that invites viewers to contemplate – even immerse themselves in – the effects, sets and spectacular scenes.