1

Origins of the Action Film

Types, Tropes, and Techniques in Early Film History

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> Even though most movies are only marginally concerned with the art of the cinema, the notion of quality is difficult to grasp apart from the context of quantity. Comprehension becomes a function of comprehensiveness. As more movies are seen, more cross-references are assembled. Fractional responsibilities are more precisely defined; personal signatures are more clearly discerned … The trouble up to now has been not seeing the trees for the forest … therefore the first task of a theory of film history is … taking the moviegoer out of the forest and into the trees.
>
> —Andrew Sarris[1]

Introduction

Assessing the responsibilities of scholars interested in film history, Tom Gunning has stressed the importance of maintaining a "shifting focus" when attempting to reconstruct the past horizons of films from a contemporary perspective (Gunning, 1991a: 290). To Gunning's mind, the addresses of films throughout the history of cinema extend "beyond their original historical horizons to our own contemporary reception of them." However, the task of studying film history is a delicate one, for the attempt by the film historian to forge "a sense of tradition, of history which relates the present to the past," requires the recognition of both "the temporal distance these films have from us and our own historical position in reaching across that gap to understand them" (Gunning, 1991a: 292). In this chapter, I intend to reach across a gap that spans three different centuries in an effort to identify key developments in early film history that provided the means for the development of what we call, at present, the action film.

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Despite the fact that its roots go all the way back to the birth of the medium and its reach extends all the way to the present day, the action film has long been the black sheep of the film family. From the blogosphere, to journalistic reviews, to estimable academic publications, the action film has been perennially denied access to the exalted realm of "serious art" and relegated instead to the meager realm of "mindless entertainment." True to the spirit of the genre, the action film has nevertheless fought tirelessly to earn its academic stripes, and over the years it has won over a handful of influential scholars—a number of whom have authored chapters in this volume—who have succeeded in elucidating many of the pleasures of viewing and analyzing this dynamic and evolving cinematic realm. The attempt to study the action film in anything resembling a systematic manner, however, is fraught with methodological danger, not least because the conspicuous absence of scholarship on the genre in the film studies literature requires the establishment of a new field of research, one with the potential to, in Jean-François Lyotard's words, "change the rules of the game" for film studies.[2]

Miriam Hansen once tantalizingly postulated that the exact coordinates of the fractured histories of film are still "very much a matter of debate, if not invention" (Hansen, 1995: 362). This is an exhilarating and encouraging premise for scholars interested in the neglected genre of the action film. At the same time, however, the effort to identify a tradition of action runs the risk of, again borrowing from Lyotard, destabilizing an accepted position, namely the juvenile triviality of the ostensibly recent development of the action genre, a genre said to have been born of Reaganite capitalism and to have betrayed in pursuit of ever-increasing profits the promise of a once-noble artistic medium.[3] Encouragingly, many scholars are beginning to acknowledge that this "accepted position" is, quite frankly, unacceptable. One of the most convincing arguments against this position was made by Tom Shone (2004). In an attempt to counter "the 'Magic Bullet' theory of modern film history" according to which "all it took was a single shot from [George Lucas'] laser cannons to bring down the Camelot that was American film" (9), Shone attacks the hyperbolic manner in which critics and scholars have eschatologically lamented the "death of film" at the hands of the blockbuster action film. For Shone, the problem with such "death of film" arguments is that "they have an uncanny ability to resemble accounts of the birth of film." Indeed, as Shone asserts in no uncertain terms, "all silent movies were, by definition, action movies," and many were "straightforward thrill rides" (61). As he elaborates:

> In *The New York Times* in 1915, Alexander Woollcott wrote, "It is easy to predict that the cut-back, and similar evidences of restlessness, will fade gradually from the screens, to be used only on special occasions." It didn't, of course; the restlessness spread further, and movies got faster still … All in all, it hadn't taken long—just under 25 years—for the cinema to discover speed, for speed to give way to size, size to spectacle, hype to hoopla … To anyone who has sat through the last 25 years of American film, in fact, the first 25 years offer a strangely familiar landscape, a land of speed freaks and hucksters, teenage kicks and sensation merchants, all running to familiar rhythms and following much the same course. All the keys to the blockbuster era are to be found here. (62)

In this chapter, I will follow the path charted by Shone and search out the keys to the action genre in the first half-century of film. Over the course of my investigation, I will discuss a number of the most important and influential character types, narrative tropes, and visual techniques that came together in American cinema to form the foundation of what is now known as the action film.[4] From a methodological perspective, I will take Rick Altman's (1984) advice and endeavor to avoid the false sense of security that comes from spending time in the "seemingly uncomplicated world of Hollywood classics" where scholars are ostensibly protected from having to "reflect openly on the [generic] assumptions underlying their work" (6). Instead of taking the generic category of "the action film" as given or immutable, I intend to discuss in detail the most notable types (the cop, the gangster, the cowboy, the swashbuckler), tropes (foot and car chases, last-minute rescues, fight scenes), and techniques (camera movement to dynamize space, parallel editing to intensify time) in their original historical and generic contexts propaedeutic to a comprehensive understanding of the action film.

Genre, Medium, Automatism

Embarking on a historical survey of the action genre necessarily raises the question, "*What is* the action genre?" I take the project of this volume as a whole to be a step toward an answer to that question. Even before that difficult question presents itself, however, a far more unsettling question precedes it: "What is a *genre*?" Leland Poague (1982) once postulated that "no concept in film study is more central or more problematic than the concept of film genre" (57), and this sentiment has been expressed by innumerable scholars over the years in a variety of critical contexts.[5] Interestingly, an avenue of thought that has yet to be explored despite its potential to fundamentally alter the ways we think about genres in film—and, indeed, the ways we think about film as such—is the avenue signaled by Stanley Cavell.[6]

In *The World Viewed*, a provocative philosophical treatise on the ontology of film, Cavell makes a point of ruminating on what he calls "ideas of origin." Cavell asserts that "it is inevitable that in theorizing about film one at some point speculate[s] about its origins" (1979 [1971]: 37), and he considers one of the unshakeable ideas of origin to manifest in the following question: Why, after the technological triumphs made by (among many others) Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers, did the new technology of film not begin and end with "actualities," the very brief, static, often single-shot visual documents that constituted the first cinematic achievements? The answer that suggests itself as to why film moved from a "cinema of attractions" (Gunning, 2006 [1986], 2009 [1989a], 2004 [1993]) to a "cinema of narrative integration" (Gunning, 1990 [1981], 1991a, 1991b) is that filmmakers "saw the possibilities" of the medium. But this answer does not satisfy Cavell. Instead, Cavell maintains that "the aesthetic possibilities of a medium are not givens" (31). As opposed to "applications of a medium that was defined by given possibilities,"

Cavell argues that filmmaking constitutes "the *creation of a medium* by giving significance to specific possibilities" (32).

Here, Cavell is making both a historical and an ontological claim about the cinema, and one that is significantly not a self-serving retroactive teleology tracing the path of "primitive" cinema to "proper" narrative cinema (Gunning, 1989, 1991a, 2004 [1993]). Cavell's "open ontology"[7] eschews essentialism and teleology; as Daniel Morgan relates, Cavell is in search of a way to think about film that is "marked by flexibility and openness" and "committed to ongoing developments in the fluid life of films" (Morgan, 2015: 163), and the royal road to this vision of film for Cavell is through a retooling of the concept of a *medium*. The idea of a medium, Cavell stresses, is "not simply that of a physical material, but of a material-in-certain-characteristic-applications" (Cavell, 2002 [1967]: 221), it is "something through which or by means of which something specific gets done or said in particular ways" (Cavell, 1979 [1971]: 32). He confesses that, although he is "trying to free the idea of a medium from its confinement in referring to the physical bases of various arts," the fact that he endeavors to use the same word "to name those bases as well as to characterize modes of achievement within the arts" courts confusion. However, Cavell maintains that "confusion here is caused precisely by the fact that this concept is justified in both places, and it will not be dispelled by redefining or substituting some labels" (1979 [1971]: 105).

Furthermore, a medium, as D.N. Rodowick (2007) attests, "if it is a living one, is continually in a state of self-transformation," and what Cavell identifies as *automatisms* are the types, tropes, and techniques "that arise creatively out of existing materials and material conditions of given artistic practices" (42). This is arguably the most important of Cavell's insights with respect to his concept of a medium: That all media are flexible and adaptable. The magic of film for Cavell is, in fact, the ability of filmmakers to innovate within traditions, to give "new wrinkles to old formats" (Cavell, 1979 [1971]: 69); as he postulates with respect to the emergence of automatisms and their transformative power on the media of film, "one might say that the [filmmaker's] task is … the task of establishing a new automatism" (103–104).

The appearance of an automatism, moreover, "generates new instances"; it "calls for them, as if to attest that what has been discovered is indeed something more than a single work could convey" (Cavell, 1979 [1971]: 107). This conception of the media of film requires a historical perspective astute enough to recognize traditions but flexible enough to accommodate innovations. Indeed, the specific conditions of traditions and the specific terms of innovations are overriding concerns for Cavell, for whom the elucidation of the automatisms of the different media of film is meant to register the fact that filmmakers, "exactly because [they are] devoted to making an object that will bear the same weight of experience that such objects have always borne which constitute the history of [their] art, [are] compelled to find unheard-of structures that define themselves and their history against one another" in their explorations of "whether, and under what conditions, [a given medium] can survive" (72).

The terms of Cavell's discussion of genre-as-medium in *The World Viewed*—a discussion to which he would return in his work on the classical Hollywood genres

of the "comedy of remarriage" (Cavell, 1981) and the "melodrama of the unknown woman" (Cavell, 1996)—signal a new avenue for thinking about genre relevant to the present consideration of the automatisms of the action film.[8] In line with Yvonne Tasker's (1993) conceptualization of the action film as a "mobile category" the bounds of which "cannot be clearly drawn" (55), the task of this chapter will not be to erect a stable and static category of the action film on the basis of immutable types, tropes, and techniques. On the contrary, I will endeavor instead to identify automatisms as they emerged and proliferated in some of the most important work in the first half-century of film and to indicate innovations in later action filmmaking of note for future scholarship on the history and the vicissitudes of the action film.

1895–1915: Chases and Rescues

If, as Tasker (2004) observes, the concept of "action" has come to stand metonymically for postclassical Hollywood filmmaking, then "one strategy for thinking about action and/as genre involves positioning it precisely within [a] historical perspective, emphasizing not so much its difference from but continuities with earlier patterns of filmmaking" (3). In an effort to bring conceptual clarity to the heterogeneous period of experimentation that ran from 1895 to 1915, over the course of which "practically every year … provides something of a milestone in the development of cinema" (Gunning, 1990 [1981]: 1), Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault (2006 [1985]) established, following David Bordwell's conception of "modes of film practice" (Bordwell et al., 1985), two different modes of early filmmaking.[9] On the one hand, there was the mode of attractions, which was dominant until around 1908 and is characterized by ostentatious and exhibitionist addresses to the camera/spectator; on the other hand, there was the mode of narrative, which supplanted the mode of attractions and is characterized by diegetic absorption, character psychology and development, and thematic coherence and closure.

For the purpose of understanding the action film, innumerable scholars have brought up Gunning's influential articulation of the cinema of attractions, yet very rarely is this citation accompanied by a serious consideration of if/how it can/should be applied to the medium of action filmmaking.[10] Given that the cinema of attractions was a distinctive mode of filmmaking in a determinate historical period, the frequency with which scholars casually namedrop the term in discussions of action films seems dangerous for two reasons. First, it threatens to obscure the specific terms of Gunning's articulation with respect to early cinema, as a vast majority of the components of the cinema of attractions have no bearing on action filmmaking, and second, as Tico Romao (2004) soberly opined, the tendency to treat the action film as a "primitive" or "mindless" spectacle in line with the cinema of attractions both throws dirt on early cinema and "overstate[s] the non-narrative case by overlooking the inherent narrative dimensions of action spectacles" (142). Thus, as Geoff King (2000) assiduously argues, action filmmaking may be better understood as an

example not of a cinema of attractions but of what Gunning calls a cinema of narrative integration; that is, rather than conceptualizing the action film as a realm of mere spectacle, it may be more accurate and useful to conceptualize it, as King does, as a realm of "spectacular narratives."

The first narrative format to integrate attractions was what came to be known as the chase film. As chronicled by Charles Musser (1991), the chase films that were so popular in the early 1900s created an entirely new cinematic experience for viewers; "rather than having a lecture explain images in a parallel fashion [or] having the viewer's familiarity with a story provide the basis for understanding, chase films created a self-sufficient narrative in which the viewer's appreciation was based chiefly on the experience of information presented within the film" (260). Moreover, these self-sufficient narratives provided by virtue of their straightforward plots "a model for causality and linearity as well as a basic editing continuity" (Gunning, 2006 [1986]: 386). The chase format runs as follows: One person is chased by another person or a group of people from one location to another. Each shot of the chase holds on a particular space until the chased protagonist and the chasing antagonist(s) enter the frame from one side and exit from the other, and each subsequent shot begins with their reentrance in a new space, and so on and so forth until the chase is resolved, often by capture.

In contemporary manifestations of the action film, this format has persisted, albeit in various guises and with varying degrees of narrative and aesthetic complexity, from the foot chases of *Point Break* (1991; see Figure 1.1) and *Casino Royale* (2006) to the car chases of *Bullitt* (1968) and *The Dark Knight* (2008); the air chases of *Star Wars* (1977) and *Independence Day* (1996); and the hybrid chases of *True Lies* (1994), with Arnold Schwarzenegger on horseback in pursuit of a motorcycle, and *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007), with Bruce Willis in a big rig in pursuit of a hazmat truck while being pursued by a fighter jet. Prior to these more recognizable contemporary iterations, one of the earliest chase films was James Williamson's *Stop Thief!* (1901), a dramatic tale in which a homeless man steals meat from a butcher and is subsequently chased down for his crime. This very short and very simple film established an automatism that called for further experimentation. Inspired by Williamson's efforts, Wallace McCutcheon took up the chase format in *The Escaped Lunatic* (1903), a comedic tale in which a mental patient operating under the delusion that he is Napoleon escapes from an insane asylum and is chased by the guards.

Following the emergence of this new automatism and the pioneering work of Williamson and McCutcheon, other filmmakers around the world took up the chase format and introduced new and imaginative tropes and techniques. Arguably the most influential of these later chase films was Ferdinand Zecca's *The Policemen's Little Run* (1907). In addition to providing Mack Sennett with a veritable playbook for his Keystone Cops, Zecca's work is equally impressive for the skillful integration of trick shots on the order of Georges Méliès.[11] *The Policemen's Little Run* features a group of bumbling policemen chasing after a dog that has stolen meat from a butcher (a conspicuous retooling of Williamson's *Stop Thief!*). In one sequence, the policemen are shown scaling a building in pursuit of the wily dog. Although the painted



Figure 1.1 The legacy of the chase runs through the history of the action film. Source: *Point Break* (1991). Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Produced by Twentieth Century Fox/Largo Entertainment/JVC Entertainment Networks. Frame grab: author.

backdrop, shot from overhead as the policemen crawl across it on the studio floor, is an easy effect to spot today, Zecca's aesthetic imagination indicates the myriad routes that were made available to filmmakers courtesy of the automatism of the chase. Indeed, Zecca's trick work in *The Policemen's Little Run* is a clear progenitor of the special effects seen in contemporary action filmmaking, such as in, among the many possible examples, the imaginative hallway fight sequence in Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010).

The chase film, whether of the melodramatic or the slapstick variety, quickly became the most fertile arena for imaginative filmmakers to experiment with the spatial and temporal dimensions of film. In a recent account of space in action filmmaking, Nick Jones (2015) observes that the spatial logic of the chase—and the editing logic of chase sequences—"disguises or effaces the potential real-world geographical distances between the settings [and creates] a continuous environment unified through bodily movement" (50–51). This spatial logic has produced chases spanning New York City and the New York countryside, as in *Personal* (1904), to chases spanning different countries, as in *Jumper* (2008), and even chases spanning different dimensions, as in *Thor: The Dark World* (2013). In addition to spatial fluidity, filmmakers have also experimented with the temporality of chases, beginning with D.W. Griffith's utilization of parallel editing in the development of the last-minute rescue trope. Gunning considers Griffith's climactic last-minute rescues to

represent a "dialectical leap in the portrayal of space and time in early film" (Gunning, 1991a: 77). As he elaborates with respect to the significance of the last-minute rescue trope and its implications for editing in film:

> Film supplies a manipulation of time which the stage could not easily match … Parallel editing, like the continuous movement of the chase format, maintains a linearity of action … but by developing two trajectories of action at the same time and intercutting them, it complicates this simple linearity … [and] creates, as the rush to the rescue shows, an articulation of time, cutting it into discreet and often brief fragments. Parallel editing makes the progression of time palpable through its interruption, imposing a rhythm on the unfolding of events … [and evoking] the cutting edge of the instant; time is measured in moments, and the smallest interval spells the difference between life and death. (103, 105)

These principles of action are clearly at work in many of the accomplished short films produced by Griffith between 1908 and 1914, including *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), which chronicles a woman's plight as two thieves attempt to break in and rob her telegraph station. The film alternates between her attempts to hold off the thieves as she calls for help and her engineer sweetheart's efforts to rush back and rescue her. *The Lonedale Operator* was famously the subject of a meticulous shot-by-shot analysis conducted by Raymond Bellour (1990 [1983]), for whom Griffith's short film exemplifies "a fundamental form of cinematographic discourse: alternation" (360). Given that *The Lonedale Operator* is a short film, Bellour was able to map a series of alternations from the micro (discrete scenes) to the macro (the overarching narrative) to support his claim that the entire narrative is reducible to the logic of alternation:

> In one leap, true to the progression of the action, the hero reenacts the course followed in the initially calm period of the pre-drama. He thus puts an end to the alternation of the three terms … [which] come to be combined, and [resolves] the division posed by its premises: the diegetic couple, scarcely formed, only separates obviously to meet again, to strengthen its image by the test of a dramatized separation whose internal form is alternation, orchestrated at its multiple levels in order to serve the principle which carries the narrative, by its repetition, towards its resolution. (373–374)

In contemporary action filmmaking, where the running times of feature films prevent such neat and economical storytelling, this logic of alternation cannot be mapped quite so easily. However, Bellour's discussion of alternation can help us to understand the construction of delimited action sequences within larger narratives. Aaron Anderson (1998), for example, provides a detailed breakdown of the bar fight in the Steven Seagal actioner *Out for Justice* (1991), which he observes "has a clear beginning, middle, and end"; is "set apart and neatly book-ended with the same man's being shoved inside the same booth to the same sounds"; and "displays a definite tempo and rhythmic patterns characterized by a slow build to a climax, alternately syncopated and regular rhythmic beats, and self-referential patterns that

repeat within and between phrases" (3). Likewise, the pattern of alternation in the last-minute rescue structure of *The Lonedale Operator* provides a blueprint for the editing patterns of such later action films as Sammo Hung's *Wheels on Meals* (1984)—in which the climactic castle encounter where the three heroes arrive to rescue a kidnapped heiress alternates among three different fight scenes, the first between Hung and José Sancho, the second between Yuen Biao and Keith Vitali, and the especially memorable third between Jackie Chan and Benny "The Jet" Urquidez—and *Inception*—in which the characters delve deeper and deeper into levels of dreaming to the point where as many as four simultaneous strands of action are edited together in an extraordinarily complex pattern of alternation.

The automatism of the chase thus established a foundation on which subsequent filmmakers could experiment with the narrative and aesthetic possibilities of the cinema. Whether for dramatic or for comedic purposes, the chase format—and its later developments with respect to the trope of the last-minute rescue and the technique of parallel editing—proved to be an enduring automatism that would continue to be reinvented throughout the history of film, and in the medium of action in particular.

1915–1935: Laughter and Adventure

As described by Siegfried Kracauer (1997 [1960]), Griffith's transformation of the chase format enabled him to produce in his audiences "a state of acute physiological suspense" resultant from his adroit marriage of the "inner emotion" of the dramatic conflicts and the "exuberant physical motion" of their action-packed resolutions (42). At the same time as Griffith was expanding the chase format for melodramatic purposes, it was simultaneously flourishing in the burgeoning medium of slapstick comedy. Kracauer observed of the discourse surrounding slapstick comedy during the silent era that any film that opted to forego the chase would be committing "an unpardonable crime," for the chase was considered the ultimate climax for any slapstick narrative, "its orgiastic finale—a pandemonium with onrushing trains telescoping into automobiles and narrow escapes down ropes that dangle above a lion's den" (42). It is perhaps no surprise that the two masters of the comedic chase were also the two masters of silent comedy: Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. In their work, the chase is situated within a larger scheme of gags and stunts that would serve as inspiration for both the melodramatic action set pieces and the comedic showcases of later action films. As Donald W. McCaffrey (1965) put it, "the thrills of violent fights and wild chases [in slapstick comedy] was a forecast of a bright, lively future" for the cinema (2).

One of the areas of film history where the influence of slapstick comedy's brand of action is most noticeable is in martial arts cinema. In fact, slapstick comedy provides insights not only into narrative tropes and visual techniques that would proliferate in later action efforts—namely continued reworkings of the chase format through tracking shots, handheld camerawork, and "intensified continuity"

(Bordwell, 2006)—but also into unique ways of handling characterization and performance. As postulated by Noël Carroll (1998 [1990a]), beyond both the structuring of their comedic narratives around chases and other gags and their developments of techniques for composition and editing, the work of Chaplin and Keaton also contains important developments in screen acting. For Carroll, silent film comedians exemplified "acting as action":

> When we think of "film acting," what comes first to mind, generally, are the pretenses, mannerisms, and implied motives that a performer employs to give substance to a certain fictional being. However, when applying the notion to [silent comedians] we must also bear in mind a much more basic sense of acting, viz., the sense of acting as being involved in a process of doings … one that calls attention to a dimension of human existence—what I call concrete intelligence—that is rarely explored in art. (44–45)

The kind of "concrete intelligence" exemplified in the work of Chaplin and Keaton has to do with experiencing the physical world as "a matter of weights and volumes, angles and balances, causes and effects"; in short, it has to do with a "special kind of human intelligence" that enables the accommodation of bodily actions to physical objects and forces as well as the accommodation of those objects and forces to bodily actions (45).

Examples of concrete intelligence abound in Chaplin's and Keaton's films. In *Easy Street* (1917), rather than allowing the sight of the monstrous villain bending a gas-powered street light to intimidate him into surrendering, Chaplin's character appropriates the light as a weapon with which to subdue his large foe, jumping on his back, slamming the light down on his head, and keeping him trapped until he passes out from the gas (see Figure 1.2). Similarly, in a chase sequence involving trains in *The General* (1926), Keaton refuses to allow the presence of large pieces of wood obstructing the train tracks to derail his oncoming train or scare him into ceasing his pursuit of the Union soldiers in the train ahead of him; instead, he hops off the train and onto the tracks to collect the wood, and even when he finds the first piece too heavy to dispose of in time to collect the fast-approaching second piece he simply uses the first piece as a spear and throws it at the second piece, "thus casting two worries aside with a single blow and 'inventing' the catapult in the process" (Carroll, 1998 [1990a]: 57).

Similar characterizations and displays of concrete intelligence are recognizable across the expanse of martial arts cinema. Bruce Lee, for example, frequently played characters for whom the mastery of the body and of physical space took precedence over the mastery of language and of social space. In *The Way of the Dragon* (1972), it is explicitly through physical combat that Lee's character ceases to be inhibited by his surroundings, demonstrating his successful adaptation to his new environment not through interpersonal interactions but through martial arts prowess.[12] Jackie Chan, meanwhile, took the concrete intelligence of Keaton's characterizations and expanded them across his many films. In *Mr. Nice Guy* (1997), Chan's character is a

TV chef who makes a living from his imaginative and fanciful cooking abilities. When his "wrong place, wrong time" character is forced to defend himself from violent criminals, he puts the same imagination he uses in the kitchen to use on a construction site, where he is forced to contend with and/or make use of, among other things, a table saw, a fire hose, and a concrete mixer.[13]

Another related medium of action in early film history in which the corporeal receives particular emphasis is the historical adventure film, the most notable variant of which was the swashbuckler. In addition to the hilarity of their gags, Chaplin and Keaton showcased tremendous daring in the execution of complicated and often dangerous stunts (as did Harold Lloyd, who arguably outpaced them both in the stunt department). Penelope Houston (1968) claimed that one of the predominant motive forces of silent film comedy was the comedians' "natural pride in letting the audience see that those leaps and falls and glissades of movement" were products not of cinematographic ingenuity/trickery, as if harkening back to the work of Méliès and Zecca, but were instead products of their authentic bravery, athleticism, and skill (65). In a similar vein, such swashbuckling luminaries as Douglas Fairbanks (see Figure 1.3), Rudolph Valentino, and Errol Flynn succeeded on the basis of their physicality, their athleticism, and, more scandalously than their slapstick counterparts, their willingness to show off their bodies onscreen. Fairbanks and Flynn demonstrated a form of heroism in which the success of their physical endeavors was



Figure 1.2 The Tramp shows off his concrete intelligence and turns a street lamp into a weapon. Source: *Easy Street* (1917). Directed by Charles Chaplin. Produced by Mutual Film/Lone Star Corporation. Frame grab: author.

predicated on the moral purity of their desires (Tasker, 2015: 72–73, 82–83). Valentino, on the other hand, traded more openly on his sexuality and offered a complex and multifaceted spectacle open to male and female viewers (Hansen, 1991: 245–294).

Interestingly, the development of the historical adventure film in the 1920s and into the 1930s points the way to the battle in the 1980s and 1990s over competing positions on the action film, particularly its male heroes. This competition is exemplified by Yvonne Tasker's (1993) conceptualization of the action film as a "muscular cinema" versus Aaron Anderson's (1998) conceptualization of it as a "movement cinema." For Tasker, the action film promulgates what she terms "musculinity," a "physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature" (3). Anderson, by contrast, fears that an emphasis on musculinity "denies the primacy of motion inherent in the genre's 'action' nature" (1). Whether or not there is a definable "essence" of the action film—and, in the event that there is, whether it is musculinity or movement—is less important at this point than recognizing the presence even as early as the 1920s of competing discourses on male action stardom. For as much as the swashbuckler featured attractive and muscular heroes put on display, it equally featured skillful heroes doing battle with swords, a valiant weapon—"more so even than Dirty Harry's fetishized .44 Magnum," as Dave Saunders (2009) avers—reserved "only for the skilled" (51) (see Figure 1.3).

These competing discourses of display versus performance would return in the 1980s and 1990s; as Harvey O'Brien (2012) expounds, "there is a qualitative difference in musculature between the hyperbolic, bemuscled Stallone and Schwarzenegger body and the leaner, more agile Chuck Norris, Jean-Claude Van Damme, or Steven Seagal variety, let alone the visibly aging, more 'traditional' (and arguably 'Western') body of Charles Bronson and Clint Eastwood" (45). Further interrogations of these discourses and of their implications for theories of spectatorship have the potential to illuminate both the history of action filmmaking and the history of film more broadly.[14]

1935–1955: Gangsters and Cowboys

In the historical timeline of the action film provided by O'Brien (2012), he chronicles the action film's emergence "through a prism of other genres," and he discusses in particular the influence of the crime film and the Western (12).[15] Scholarship on the action film in relation to these comparatively established media is familiar territory in the extant academic literature. Thus, rather than mere recapitulation, I would like in this final section to explore some of the more marginal areas of these well-worn media in an effort to point towards new avenues of action scholarship.

One area in scholarship on the action film that has been virtually ignored is the complex historical period in the mid-1930s when the gangster film splintered as a result of the ideological overhaul mandated by the institution of the Motion Picture Production Code.[16] In the wake of the extreme popularity of—and subsequent



Figure 1.3 Douglas Fairbanks displays his swashbuckling masculinity and Arnold Schwarzenegger takes up the mantle of the classic swashbuckler. Sources: *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924). Directed by Raoul Walsh. Produced by Douglas Fairbanks Pictures/United Artists; *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). Directed by John Milius. Produced by Universal Pictures/Dino De Laurentiis Company. Frame grabs: author.

controversy over—such films as *Little Caesar* (1931) and *The Public Enemy* (1931), Hollywood was in search of a way to have its cake and eat it. The solution the studios devised to the censorship problem plaguing their lucrative gangster films was to have iconic gangster figures like Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney trade their gangster stripes for police badges. The studios believed this would allow them to both retain the most popular elements of the gangster film, particularly its violent sequences of action, and condemn the figure of the gangster by according preeminence to the lawful protagonists responsible for bringing their criminal quarry to (violent and action-packed) justice.

This negotiation of generic elements and social concerns produced a unique cycle of films beginning with *"G" Men* (1935) and extending through such films as *Whipsaw* (1935), *Bullets or Ballots* (1936), *Special Investigator* (1936), and *I Am the Law* (1938), all of which feature complex and often times contradictory ideological examinations of legality and criminality in the modern, urban world. Thomas Schatz (1981) dubbed this the "gangster-as-cop formula," owing to the transparency with which the gangster was recast as an agent of social order tasked with reconstituting democratic law and order in the face of violent criminality (101–102). Schatz, however, finds it to be merely a "watered down" variant of a once-virile and challenging genre (99). Fran Mason (2002), on the other hand, sagaciously discerns in the gangster-as-cop formula "a different enunciation of the mutable conventions and iconographies that the gangster genre makes available" (39), and one of the conventions in the gangster-as-cop formula that has since become a staple of the action film is the convention of the lone hero facing off against a corrupt system.

In the gangster-as-cop formula, the lone hero constitutes "a development of the earlier gangster movies in which the gangster takes on society as a way of proving both his masculinity and the power of his individual will" (Mason, 2002: 34). This development, however, opened the door for contradictions that are part and parcel of the fascination of this formula and the subsequent emphasis it would receive in what Neil King (1999) calls "cop action." Not only do the lone heroes have to be even more violent than their unlawful adversaries, but more often than not they are required to bend if not break the law in order to vanquish their enemies (Mason, 2002: 38–39). The films of Steven Seagal feature arguably the most consistent and ambitious elaboration of this ideologically nebulous thematic thread (Barrowman, 2013), though it features prominently in an array of action films from *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* (1971), through *Raw Deal* (1986) and *Demolition Man* (1993), all the way up to Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy: *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) (see Figure 1.4).[17]

Similar to the proliferation of the chase in both melodramas and comedies, the lone hero archetype was present in both crime films and Westerns. In the history of the Western, the lone hero was initially represented in accordance with a Manichean "white hat/black hat" logic where the hero was righteous and pure and the villain was evil and corrupt. Important early Westerns that sought to deconstruct this logic included such films as *Hell's Hinges* (1916), in which William S. Hart plays a conflicted hero who upholds the law but seeks moral/spiritual guidance, and *Straight*



Figure 1.4 Batman saves Gotham and disappears into the night. Source: *The Dark Knight* (2008). Directed by Christopher Nolan. Produced by Warner Bros/Syncopy/DC Comics/Legendary Entertainment. Frame grab: author.

Shooting (1917), in which Harry Carey is hired by an evil rancher to run a family off of a farm but changes his ways upon falling in love with the farmer's daughter. Over time, these anomalous characterizations of the Western hero, which stood in marked contradistinction to the cowboy archetype promulgated by Tom Mix, became the norm; just as the gangster film underwent transformative ideological and thus generic shifts, so, too, did the Western.

In his nuanced assessment of the post-World War II Western, André Bazin (2005 [1955]) argues that what emerged in place of the classical, Manichean Western film was what he called the "superwestern" (150). To Bazin's mind, *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953) are the two Westerns that "best illustrate the mutation in the Western genre as an effect of the awareness it [had] gained of itself" (151–152). *Shane*, in particular, is singled out by Bazin as "the ultimate in 'superwesternization'" (152), for it not only subjects the myth of the Western to sustained interrogation over the course of its narrative but also enriches the myth by virtue of its originality on the level of characterization, its "psychological flavor" providing a taste of "individuality" (155) generically distinct from, but historically related to, the individuality of the gangster-as-cop.

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2008) note a similar trajectory in the Western genre. Although they do not use Bazin's terminology, they discuss *The Searchers* (1956) in light of what Bazin refers to as superwesternization, and they do

so by way of a comparison between it and the early Ford film *Straight Shooting* vis-à-vis the enduring automatism of "the conflict between civilized order and the lawless frontier" represented by the hero's position between the two (328–329). The five-reel *Straight Shooting* devotes nearly an entire reel to the hero's deliberation at the end of the film as he struggles to decide whether to stay with the farmers in civilization or to go back out and brave the frontier. Significantly, this automatism reemerges in the post-World War II superwestern, only it is tinged with a greater sense of melancholy and moroseness, for the hero is no longer in a position to make decisions. In such superwesterns as *Shane* and *The Searchers*, the heroes—in the former, an outlaw who has given up on the idea of reform, and in the latter, a violent racist who has never even entertained the idea—learned long ago that they do not belong in civilization, and while they can be of help to the civilized, they know that they belong to a different world.[18] Contemporary action films have built off of this template, first with what O'Brien calls the "urban westerns" of the 1970s such as *Billy Jack* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974), subsequently in what King calls the "cop action" films of the 1980s and 1990s, and even into the present era of the superhero wherein, as Todd McGowan observes, superheroes are forced to struggle over the same issues as their cowboy, gangster, and cop antecedents, namely "the problem of exceptional violence that resides outside the legal order and yet is necessary for the existence of that order" (McGowan, 2012: 128).

The action film in particular has traded on both the ambiguity of the gangster-as-cop formula and the melancholy of the superwestern. With/in titles such as *Lone Wolf McQuade* (1983), *The Last Boy Scout* (1991), and *The Expendables* (2010), action films frequently foreground heroes whose positions of exemplarity preclude their integration into society yet whose commitment to honor and duty requires them to risk everything, up to and sometimes including their lives, to protect that very society. Examining these types and tropes in their original historical and generic contexts, as well as juxtaposed with their more contemporary manifestations, promises fascinating insights into the many forms these automatisms have taken throughout the history of film.

Conclusion

In his consideration of the challenges presented by film history, Andrew Sarris (1996 [1968]) allows an imagined interlocutor to express a sentiment in opposition to the desire to escape from the forest of the cinema and to venture into the trees of films: "Why should anyone look at thousands of trees if the forest itself [has been] deemed aesthetically objectionable?" (20). The action film was determined long ago to be aesthetically objectionable, and for years the "critical traffic," as Tom Shone (2004) laments, only went one way:

> Critics get to excoriate [the action film] … but nobody ever says of *Five Easy Pieces* [1970], "Great, as good a chamber-piece on the disintegration of the American family

> as could be imagined, but it could have done with an aerial dogfight or two." We're all too scared of being kicked out of film class [but] now we know better: If it's historical precedent you're after, it doesn't come much better than the origin of the medium … [The action film, then,] didn't betray cinema at all: [it] plugged it back into the grid, returning the medium to its roots. (63–64)

For too long, the action film has been denied serious consideration by the minds best-suited to unearth the abundant wealth of its aesthetic and thematic composition, and this has left film studies considerably impoverished as a discipline. However, if credence is given to the "general rule" wryly observed by Andrew Britton (2009 [1992])—that "today's high culture is the 'entertainment' of yesterday" (25)—then it may simply be a matter of time before film studies enters the era of the action film, in which case this chapter can hopefully serve as a useful contribution to film studies' (re)assessment of the action film as it moves from out of the forest and into the trees. There remains, of course, a tremendous amount of ground to be covered, but as Tom Gunning (1990 [1981]) once remarked, "the burden and anxiety of wading into the morass of anonymous or little-known films" ought to be a challenge welcomed by film scholars rather than an obstacle to be avoided (1). Indeed, given the fact that "comprehensive film scholarship from primary sources depends for its motivation upon a pleasurable response to the very act of moviegoing" (Sarris, 1996 [1968]: 19–20), scholars interested in the history of the action film should rejoice, for our work on the action film has only just begun.

Notes

1. This epigraph is a patchwork of remarks made by Andrew Sarris "toward a theory of film history" (1996 [1968]: 19–20, 25).
2. In his "report on knowledge," Lyotard (1984 [1979]) avers: "It is necessary to posit the existence of a power that destabilizes the capacity for explanation manifested in the promulgation of new norms for understanding, or, if one prefers, in a proposal to establish new rules circumscribing a new field of research … Of course, [a new field may be] ignored or repressed, sometimes for decades, because it too abruptly destabilizes the accepted positions … [in which case it is likely] to be denied the minimum consensus, precisely because it changes the rules of the game" (61–63).
3. As Neil King (1999) corroborates: "Many critique the genre as hiding its politics; and most find [action films] to be in some ways racist, homophobic, individualist, pro-Reagan, capitalist, or misogynist. Some analysts seem to have fun finding loopy subtexts, homoerotic mainly; at least as many seem offended by the movies … [and] even when analysts do find 'critical' impulses … they argue that forces of 'hegemony' or 'recuperation' blunt them to the point of uselessness or nonsense" (viii–ix). For a more detailed critique of the flawed philosophical premises subtending such anti-action positions, see Barrowman (2013).
4. It is important to emphasize here that my architectural metaphor does not presuppose, with reference to the "foundation" of the action film, a single generic "building." Rather, I am invoking Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1980 [1930]) notion that what is of interest is not

the construction of a single building, but rather, "having a perspicuous view of the foundation of possible buildings" (7e). As for my decision to focus primarily on American cinema: even though contemporary action film scholars have made convincing arguments for the necessity of moving beyond America and Hollywood in searching out signposts in the history of the action film (Morris, 2004, 2005; Tasker, 2014), my reasoning for remaining within the confines of American cinema is as follows. First, it is a matter of pragmatics. With a limited amount of space, it would be Quixotic to try to cover every development across the international cinematic landscape over the course of the first six decades of the cinema. Second, even though I will have occasion to discuss important international contributions to film in general and the action film in particular, I will emphasize American films and filmmakers because of the rapidity of their codification and elaboration of international visual and narrative developments as well as the almost immediate and long-lasting global dominance and influence of America and Hollywood on film at large and especially on the action film.

5. For a short and by no means exhaustive list, see Buscombe (1970), Ryall (1970), Braudy (1984 [1976]), Schatz (1981, 2010 [1988]), Altman (1984, 1999), Britton (1984), Neale (1990, 2000), Wood (2002 [1977]), Naremore (2008 [1998]), and Grant (2007).
6. For his most sustained considerations of the perplexities and vicissitudes of genre, see Cavell (1979 [1971], 1981, 1996). Additionally, the first steps down this road of rethinking genre in film *avec* Cavell were taken by D.N. Rodowick (2015), to whom I am indebted for providing the inspiration to follow suit.
7. The notion of an "open ontology" in genre theory was postulated by Ben Tyrer (2012). For a more elaborate discussion of this concept and its utility for theorizing genre, see Barrowman (2014a).
8. Interestingly, Cavell's pursuit throughout Hollywood history of the comedy of remarriage more recently brought him into action film territory as he has written insightfully about *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005), a hybrid action film of remarriage. For the implications of the comedy of remarriage in action film scholarship, see Cavell (2005). My thanks to D.N. Rodowick for bringing this essay of Cavell's to my attention.
9. Gunning and Gaudreault established these modes together but developed them separately. With respect to the mode of attractions, which they originally dubbed "the system of monstrative attractions" (Gunning and Gaudreault 2006 [1985]: 373), Gunning would subsequently drop the notion of monstration in his elaboration of what he would eventually come to call the cinema of attractions (2006 [1986]) while Gaudreault would go on to develop the notion of monstration in relation to his theories of narration and narrative (2009 [1988], 2011 [2008]).
10. For examples of this tendency, see Hunt (2003), Bean (2004), Flanagan (2004), Teo (2011), Palmer (2012), and Tasker (2015). For more nuanced considerations of the cinema of attractions and its (in)compatibilities with action filmmaking, see Anderson (1998), King (2000), Romao (2004), and Higgins (2008).
11. In his chronicle of Mack Sennett's pioneering work in silent comedy, Brent E. Walker notes that, according to Edward F. Cline (an important figure in silent comedy in his own right who got his start with Sennett), Sennett "went so far as to hire a French translator to synopsize French farces for him in the early days" (Walker, 2010: 28). For more on the importance of the "Red Rooster" films made by Pathé Frères in the early 1900s, see Abel (1999). My thanks to James Kendrick for bringing Zecca's work to my attention.

12. Lee's character in *The Way of the Dragon*, in fact, channels in a number of interesting ways the characterizations favored by Chaplin and Keaton, in particular Chaplin's enduring outsider status and Keaton's perennial obliviousness. For more detailed discussions of these elements of characterization in the films of Chaplin and Keaton, see Carroll (1998 [1979, 1990a, 1990b]). For more detailed discussions of Lee's characterizations, see Barrowman (2012, 2014b).
13. For more detailed discussions of Chan's unique brand of action filmmaking, see Anderson (2001) and Zhou (2014).
14. For interrogations of the male action hero, see, among others, Hansen (1991), Tasker (1993), Jeffords (1994), Gallagher (2006), Yu (2012), and Wong (2015). For interrogations of the female action heroine, see, among others, Tasker (1998), King and McCaughey (2001), Mainon and Ursini (2006), Schubart (2007), Morris (2012), and Funnell (2014).
15. O'Brien also discusses the influence of the war film. Unfortunately, I do not have space to consider the war film here. However, for insightful considerations of the war film in relation to the action film, see King (2000: 117–141), O'Brien (2012: 28–32), and Tasker (2015: 89–105).
16. For information on the history of and the consequences stemming from the censorship battles fought in the 1930s over gangster films, see Munby (1999), Mason (2002), and Phillips (2008).
17. Another element that has often been overlooked with respect to the gangster-as-cop formula is its influence on martial arts films. Mason (2002) observes how Cagney's character in *"G" Men* (connecting back interestingly to the discourse of authenticity in relation to silent comedians and swashbucklers as per Houston) inaugurates a new heroic archetype: "[Cagney] is an 'authentic' man who doesn't just use a gun to express masculine power but [also] relies on his body" (36). For a more detailed consideration of Cagney's position in relation to developments in martial arts cinema, see Barrowman (2015a, 2015b). Additionally, for more detailed discussions of authenticity and realism in action and martial arts cinema, see Bordwell (2008 [1997, 1998], 2000), Anderson (1998, 2001), Hunt (2003), Bowman (2010, 2015), and Barrowman (2014c, 2014d).
18. For an earlier and more extensive treatment of this thematic trajectory than the one offered by Bordwell and Thompson, see Cadbury (1982). According to Cadbury, the pattern of "the disreputable one [passing] the torch to those who profit by his sacrifice" was Ford's—and the Western's—pattern "from the beginning" (Cadbury, 1982: 82).

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