A Companion to the Action Film
A Companion to the Action Film

Edited by

James Kendrick
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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About the Editor</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Contributors</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The Action Film: “Over familiar and understudied”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Kendrick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part I  History  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Origins of the Action Film: Types, Tropes, and Techniques in Early Film History</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle Barrowman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 A Genre of Its Own: From Westerns, to Vigilantes, to Pure Action</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Kendrick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The New Dominance: Action-Fantasy Hybrids and the New Superhero in 2000s Action Cinema</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Purse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Around the World in Action</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Gallagher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part II  Form and Aesthetics  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 The Perpetual Motion Aesthetic of Action Cinema</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick Jones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Asian Action Cinema and Its Influence on Hollywood</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barna William Donovan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Comedy in Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Composite Body: Action Stars and Embodiment in the Digital Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Translating the Panel: Remediating a Comics Aesthetic in Contemporary Action Cinema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part III  Auteurs: Directors, Stars, Choreographers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Akira Kurosawa, Sam Peckinpah, and the Action Concept of Eastern Westerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The Martial Arts Supremacy: Action Film and Fight Choreography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>All Guts and No Glory: Stuntwork and Stunt Performers in Hollywood History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Hollywood's Hard Bodies: The Stars Who Made the Action Films Famous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The Strange Case of Carlos Ray Norris: Reactionary Masculinity and Its Imaginary Discontents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>New Action Realism: Claustrophobia, Immediacy, and Mediation in the Films of Kathryn Bigelow, Paul Greengrass, and Michael Mann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part IV  Social and Cultural Issues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Postmodernism in Action Movies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The 1980s Action Film and the Politics of Urban Expulsions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Infinite Crisis: Intertextuality and Watchmen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Blowing Up the War Film: Powerlessness and the Crisis of the Action-Image in The Hurt Locker and Inglorious Basterds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>X-Men/Action Men: Performing Masculinities in Superhero and Science-Fiction Cinema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yvonne Tasker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Unlikely Action Heroine: Melissa McCarthy Challenges Bodily Ideals in Modern Action Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jeffrey A. Brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>“I Am Become Death”: Managing Massacres and Constructing the Female Teen Leader in <em>The 100</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rikke Schubart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>A Digital Nature: <em>Lucy</em> Takes Technology for a Ride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lorrie Palmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>“I Feel the Need, the Need for Speed”: Prosthetics, Agency Panic, and the High-Tech Action Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Steffen Hantke</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Index 473
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The nearly four-year process of putting this volume together has been alternately exciting, exasperating, edifying, and revealing. I have learned much along the way, and as it was far from a solitary effort, there are many people who deserve much credit for the roles they played in bringing it into existence.

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faculty and staff in the Department of Film & Digital Media, who are consistently supportive of my work in all the best ways. I would like to extend special thanks to my department chair Chris Hansen for all his support and constant willingness to make sure I have all the resources I need. Many thanks are also due to graduate assistants Max Romanowski and Zachary Sheldon, who provided a great deal of editorial support in the final stages of the process, combing through the chapters, checking and cross-checking references, and ensuring that nothing had been left out.

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Introduction

The Action Film: “Over familiar and understudied”

James Kendrick

On April 23, 1969, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City issued a press release announcing “The American Action Movie,” a film series that was set to run from April 25 to June 6. The program of 30 films curated by art critic Lawrence Alloway included “popular westerns, thrillers and war films made from 1946 to 1964,” which comprised a “type of characteristic American movie, ‘at once over familiar and understudied’” (Museum of Modern Art, 1969). Descriptions of the series, such as the one included in the museum’s May–June 1969 Members Newsletter, emphasize that the selections were not, as one might expect of films programmed at a museum, “masterpieces”: “It is the conventions of the cinema that are being studied on the program, not qualities of masterpieces” (“The American Action Movie,” 1969: 14).

As noted in the press release, the program was an intriguing mix of three primary film types that reflected the general consensus of what constituted the American action film by the late 1960s: thrillers, most of which would be recognized as film noir (The Killers, 1946; Out of the Past, 1947; The Lady From Shanghai, 1948; White Heat, 1949; DOA, 1949; Pickup on South Street, 1953; Kiss Me Deadly, 1955; Touch of Evil, 1958); Westerns (Hondo, 1953; The Naked Spur, 1953; The Last Wagon, 1956; Backlash, 1956; The Left Handed Gun, 1958); and war films set during World War II (House of Bamboo, 1955; Attack!, 1956). There are also a few outliers that don’t fit neatly into those categories, such as the political assassination thriller The Manchurian Candidate (1962), as well some that, at first glance, seem to make no sense, such as Douglas Sirk’s Technicolor melodrama Written on the Wind (1956) and Nicholas Ray’s noir-ish psychodrama In a Lonely Place (1950). The inclusion of those latter films harkens back to the series’ original organizing title, “Violent America: The Movies,” which had to be abandoned when one of the film distributors
refused to loan a print to the museum if the series was so named (Alloway, 1971: 7). Thus, the organization and justification of this program of action films emphasized primarily the role of violence and the films’ reliance on convention, both of which are central to their popularity with audiences and cause of their general disregard by the critical establishment: “The films that are being shown … have been selected to indicate some of the iconographical themes which regular filmgoers appreciate but critics neglect” (“The American Action Movie,” 1969: 14).

In those terms, little has changed in the terrain of the action film. The genre is more popular than ever, even as it remains critically underappreciated. Of course, to a modern viewer, most of the critically underappreciated films included in Alloway’s 1969 program would not immediately qualify as “action films,” which today tend to be understood as a more bounded category centered around a core set of characteristics: spectacular physical action; a narrative emphasis on fights, chases, and explosions; and a combination of state-of-the-art special effects and stuntwork (Neale, 2000: 52). In today’s action films, physical action is central, frequent, intense, and increasingly divorced from the laws of physics. Action is not a characteristic, but the characteristic.

Ironically, this intensive centrality of action harkens back to the earliest flickerings of motion pictures, a technological invention of the late 19th century whose very name suggests how its fundamental appeal lies in watching the illusion of motion—action in light and shadow. Because technological limitations kept the earliest of films at less than a minute in length, action had to be the central organizing feature. There wasn’t time for anything else—not story, not character, not theme. Granted, the earliest “actions” in the Edison Company’s Kinetoscopes and Pierre and Auguste Lumière’s actualities were those of the simple, everyday variety: blacksmiths pounding iron on an anvil, workers exiting a factory at the end of the day, a train arriving at a station, people walking down the street. Yet, it wasn’t long before nascent filmmakers began staging action for the camera, creating scenarios of increasing elaboration, intensity, and visual excitement. Writing in early 1941, Henry MacRae, an innovative producer and director of dozens of Westerns, adventure films, and serials from the silent era through the early 1940s, enthused about the genre as initially embodied in Edwin S. Porter’s proto-blockbuster The Great Train Robbery (1903), writing “Guns, horses, shooting, action, adventure—the screen hasn’t anything to compare with that formula when it comes to downright entertainment. Every boy from 6 to 60 loves a horse, a gun, the movement, the excitement, the thrilling chase” (MacRae, 1941: 7). MacRae may have been writing specifically about Westerns, but his words extend far beyond that genre to the whole of action films, whose appeal (and not just to boys, by the way) still lies in chases, blazing guns, near misses and last-minute escapes, vertiginous falls, violent clashes, and movement—always movement.

As far back as the late silent era, audiences and critics recognized the idea of certain films whose existence revolved around the presentation of action. For example, a review in Variety described the qualities of The Valley of Hunted Men (1928), a film from the aptly named production company Action Pictures, Inc., as follows:

Excellent action story for the daily changes, with Mexican border local, for fine picturesque effect and some stunning photography to give it punch. Scenic backgrounds
in which horseback pursuit is set and fighting between border patrol and outlaws is dandy detail…. Picture is action from start to finish, logical and well sustained.

(“Film Review: Valley of Hunted Men,” 1928, 15)

Such action has long been used as a selling point, as seen in an advertisement for 

_Comes on Marines_, a Paramount film in production, in the 29 March 1932, issue of 

_Variety_, which promised “Action! Adventure! Beautiful girls! Handsome fighting men! Romance!” The aesthetic appeal of beautiful movie stars engaging in both violent action and romantic entanglement remains fundamental to the movies. Pauline Kael titled her third book of collected film criticism _Kiss Kiss Bang Bang_ after seeing the words on an Italian movie poster and being struck by how they constituted “perhaps the briefest statement imaginable of the basic appeal of movies. This appeal is what attracts us, and ultimately what makes us despair when we begin to understand how seldom movies are more than this” (Kael, 1968: no page).

And it is true that many action films provide little more than _kiss kiss bang bang_. Yet, they remain perennially fascinating for the ways they tap into our most primitive desires for fantastical violence, cathartic retribution, unbelievable speed, and exotic worlds of intrigue, and at their best they convey in no uncertain terms the greatest aesthetic potential the cinematic medium has to offer. They also remain a deep well of social, cultural, and political attitudes, their subtext often brimming with era- and location-specific concerns regarding family, identity, gender roles, race, issues of power and authority and the law, class conflict, individuality versus community, and the simultaneous appeal of and revulsion to criminality.

The modern action film is a relatively new development, having taken shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s by fusing the moral landscape of the Western with the urban settings of crime thrillers and police procedurals. It arguably wasn’t until the 1980s that it became a fully recognized and immensely popular cinematic form, and since then it has grown into the dominant mode of mainstream Hollywood cinema, at least in terms of box office success. Since the mid-1990s, the US and global box office charts have been topped virtually every year by a US studio-produced action film of some kind. Although the action film is now clearly a distinct genre, in which physical action and violence have become the primary organizing principles—from plot, to dialogue, to casting—and has become a staple of the major Hollywood studios and numerous international film industries (particularly Asian cinema), the genre remains difficult to define in absolute terms because it also overlaps to varying degrees with numerous other genres, including fantasy, science fiction, and war films. If an action film is simply a film in which physical, violent action is the central organizing principle, then it can be set anywhere and at any time, feature almost any plot, and utilize virtually any character type. That is why, throughout this volume, films as seemingly disparate as _Easy Street_ (1917), _The Adventures of Robin Hood_ (1938), _Seven Samurai_ (1954), _Dirty Harry_ (1971), _Rambo: First Blood Part II_ (1985), _Die Hard_ (1988), _The Matrix_ (1999), _Watchmen_ (2009), _The Wave_ (2015), and _Spy_ (2015) are discussed and put into dialogue with each other. The action film is a broad landscape across which numerous subgenres and film types move about, rising and falling in popularity, revising and then reverting to old forms, even as the
basic component of the genre—the action—remains a constant demand of moviegoers worldwide. They don’t call them movies for nothing.

This volume is divided into four parts, each of which focuses on a different element of the action film. Part I: History opens with “Origins of the Action Film: Types, Tropes, and Techniques in Early Film History,” in which Kyle Barrowman explores some of the genre’s most important and influential character types (the cop, the gangster, the cowboy, the swashbuckler), narrative tropes (foot and car chases, last-minute rescues, fight scenes), and visual techniques (camera movement to dynamize space, parallel editing to intensify time) as they emerged and evolved over the course of the cinema’s first 50 years. In my chapter, “A Genre of Its Own: From Westerns, to Vigilantes, to Pure Action,” I trace the four decades between the late 1950s and the late 1990s when the action genre truly came into its own as a recognizable entity, most clearly seen in the emergence of the so-called pure action film in the 1980s and its subsequent box office dominance into the 1990s. Along the way the chapter looks at how the Western, which in the 1950s was the most popular form of action-oriented cinema, gave way in the 1970s to police thrillers, disaster films, and science fiction. Lisa Purse picks up the genre’s history from the 2000s onwards in “The New Dominance: Action-Fantasy Hybrids and the New Superhero in 2000s Action Cinema,” which looks at the intersection of commercial, technological, and artistic imperatives in action-fantasy blockbusters, whose expansive forms of spectacle constitute the dominant mode of current global cinema. While these initial three chapters focus primarily on the development of the action genre within Western cinema as embodied by Hollywood and its various offshoots, Mark Gallagher’s “Around the World in Action” expands the discussion by concentrating on contemporary international action cinema, ranging from Southeast Asia, to Russia, France, and Brazil. He draws attention to relevant trends across US and global film history that inform twenty-first-century film production, circulation, and reception, in the process showing how the action genre’s most salient feature is its pervasive internationalism.

Part II: Form and Aesthetics shifts focus to the formal qualities of the action genre, beginning with Nick Jones’s “The Perpetual Motion Aesthetic of Action Cinema.” Jones shows how the contemporary action film always relies upon a register of movement and dynamism, and he traces how this perpetual motion has developed over the last 30 years and also how contemporary action aesthetics rely upon visual and aural strategies of neo-baroque abundance and industrialized immersion to situate the viewer within an energetic urban mise-en-scène of threat and possibility. Some of those aesthetic developments have been clearly influenced by Asian cinema, a topic that Barna William Donovan takes up in “Asian Action Cinema and Its Influence on Hollywood.” Donovan’s chapter shows how the most indelible influence on Hollywood action has always come from Asia, with Japanese auteur Akira Kurosawa’s samurai films giving way to Bruce Lee and the martial arts craze of the 1970s, which would eventually lead to the balletic, bullet-riddled crime thrillers of John Woo and the physics-defying martial arts fantasies of Zhang Yimou and Ang Lee in the 1990s. Cynthia M. King’s chapter “Comedy in Action” applies drama and humor theories in reviewing the theatrical and cinematic history of
humor and peril spanning a range of dramatic genres. She also looks at issues of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality as they relate to the buddy action comedy and reviews concerns regarding the potential social and cultural impacts of humorous violence and stereotyping. The last two chapters in this section focus specifically on digital technologies and their impact on the visual aesthetics of the action film. Drew Ayers’s “The Composite Body: Action Stars and Embodiment in the Digital Age” traces a history of the action body from the 1980s hard body, through the 1990s postmodern body, to the informational body of today’s digital culture and argues that the embodiment of action stars in contemporary cinema is marked by their ability to merge seamlessly into digital environments and visual effects images. That emphasis on the merging of physical action bodies and digital visual effects also plays an important role in Joshua Wucher’s “Translating the Panel: Remediating a Comics Aesthetic in Contemporary Action Cinema,” which focuses on how the action genre, through the seemingly limitless possibilities of digital manipulation, has been uncoupled from the laws of physics, an aesthetic logic that has long been exploited by comics. Wucher outlines the history of the aesthetic relationship between comics and action films and theorizes how it has worked in the past and continues to evolve.

Part III: Auteurs: Directors, Stars, Choreographers considers a wide range of artists in front of and behind the camera who have indelibly influenced the development of the action genre. This section leads off with Stephen Teo’s “Akira Kurosawa, Sam Peckinpah, and the Action Concept of Eastern Westerns,” which elaborates on the complicated issue of the cross-cultural influence of Kurosawa’s “Eastern Westerns,” which were then remade as Hollywood films and whose influence was deeply absorbed in Peckinpah’s films. Although often thought of primarily in terms of their explicit violence and genre revisionism, Teo shows how Peckinpah’s films were particularly adept at conveying various Zen philosophical concepts, a synthesis of East and West that continues to impact the action genre today. Paul Bowman’s “The Martial Arts Supremacy: Action Film and Fight Choreography” also looks at the meeting of East and West in its examination of the impact of fight choreography in the films of three stars: Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Chuck Norris. As Bowman shows, although each of these stars brought something new to the genre, their contributions have ultimately been absorbed by the Hollywood action film, making the essential features and key ingredients of martial arts films a generic norm. In “All Guts and No Glory: Stuntwork and Stunt Performers in Hollywood History,” Lauren Steimer examines the oft-neglected history of stuntwork in American action films by identifying key shifts in expertise, industrial logics, and the contributions of prominent stunt performers. Despite the prominence of computer-generated imagery in the action genre, stuntwork has remained an important element, and Steimer’s chapter addresses changes in its history in relation to “technologies of stardom” and industrial changes in the star system. The next two chapters focus on the importance of particularly Hollywood action stars on the genre. Susan Jeffords’s “Hollywood’s Hard Bodies: The Stars Who Made the Action Films Famous” discusses the role of hard-body action stars—Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, and Mel Gibson—in shaping the action film. Jeffords outlines the key
characteristics of the “hard body,” the heroic icon that defines the action film, and
examines the intersections among the characteristics and the political dynamics that
surround them. Tony Williams makes an even more direct star–politics connection
in “The Strange Case of Carlos Ray Norris: Reactionary Masculinity and Its
Imaginary Discontents,” which focuses on the career—both cinematic and political—
of martial arts star Chuck Norris, whose indelible star persona in film and television
embodies a particular strain of reactionary conservatism in American society.
Finally, Vincent M. Gaine’s chapter “New Action Realism: Claustrophobia,
Immediacy, and Mediation in the Films of Kathryn Bigelow, Paul Greengrass, and
Michael Mann” examines the “new action realism” that is so central to those film-
makers’ careers. Gaine shows how this aesthetic has developed with the rise of digital
film to express contemporary fears of globalization and post-9/11 society through
its obscured images and prevalent pessimism.

Part IV: Social and Cultural Issues is the largest section of the volume, comprising
nine chapters on a wide range of issues that demonstrate how varied, mutable, and
complex the contemporary action genre has become in terms of its broad intertext-
uality, its representations of gender, and its politics regarding space and various
technologies. Micheal McAlexander’s “Postmodernism in Action Movies” leads off
this section with a discussion of how a wide range of postmodern concepts—inter-
textuality and pastiche, over-the-top violence, meta-narrative, temporal disorder,
paranoia, hyperreality, gender role-reversal, antiheroes, and globalism—inform the
contemporary action film. Jon Kraszewski follows with “The 1980s Action Film and
the Politics of Urban Expulsions,” which takes up the intersection of class and urban
space to show how 1980s action films engage in a cultural dialogue about social
expulsions and social justice, with one set of films using spatial metaphors, the phys-
icality of the hero’s body, and history to justify expulsion of the working class from
global, post-industrial urban spaces, while a second set of films uses those very same
elements to resist it. Matt Yockey’s “Infinite Crisis: Intertextuality and Watchmen”
looks at how the graphic novel adaptation Watchmen (2009)’s reflexive consolida-
tion of the history of the superhero as a mass culture sign with American history
simultaneously stabilizes and interrogates the crisis mode that both the superhero
and the nation depend upon to affirm collective and individual identities. Yockey
argues that, through digital technology, the film confirms both the stasis and muta-
bility of the superhero as a means of addressing a comparable dialectic that defines
the relationship of the individual to the nation. Paul Gormley looks at a different
kind of crisis in “Blowing Up the War Film: Powerlessness and the Crisis of the
Action-Image in The Hurt Locker and Inglourious Basterds,” which explores questions
of race, American cultural identity, masculinity, and affect to suggest that the new
geopolitical situation of the twenty-first century has produced particular challenges
for Hollywood, specifically in relation to the war film. Gender is the dominant issue
in many of this section’s chapters, beginning with Yvonne Tasker’s “X-Men/Action
Men: Performing Masculinities in Superhero and Science-Fiction Cinema.” Tasker
explores two distinctly twenty-first-century action subgenres—the superhero film
and the fantastical science fiction film—to explore various types of action
masculinities, which are demonstrated to be both adaptable and “a function of fantasy open to multiple modalities.” Jeffrey A. Brown’s “Unlikely Action Heroine: Melissa McCarthy Challenges Bodily Ideals in Modern Action Film” discusses McCarthy’s recent emergence as an unlikely action heroine in several comedy/action hybrids that both adhere to and parody mainstream action formulas. McCarthy’s function as a “female grotesque,” who can ridicule and critique the genre’s gendered fantasies and perfect bodies, confronts cultural expectations of gender and beauty in a uniquely provocative way. Rikke Schubart turns to television and a very different kind of female action hero in “‘I Am Become Death’: Managing Massacres and Constructing the Female Teen Leader in The 100,” which analyzes the relatively recent phenomenon of the female teen leader in various fantasy-action narratives. Using an evofeminist approach, which combines evolutionary and biocultural theories with a feminist perspective, Schubart shows how such characters develop from an interplay of concepts drawn from research in age and play and social and military psychology. The intersection of technology and gender is at the heart of Lorrie Palmer’s “A Digital Nature: Lucy Takes Technology for a Ride,” which adopts technofeminism (via science and technology studies) to illustrate how the diegetic digital gaze of the heroine in Luc Besson’s 2014 film honors the action genre’s focus on “becoming” while simultaneously revealing technology, the feminine, and nature as mutually shaping. Technology and the body are also central to Steffen Hantke’s concluding chapter, “‘I feel the need, the need for speed’: Prosthetics, Agency Panic, and the High-Tech Action Film.” Hantke examines the action film through the concept of “agency panic,” which arises from a perceived loss of autonomy or self-control. He connects this concept with a trio of action films from different decades that revolve around military airplanes, “in which cinematic and military technology intertwine in the difficult task of mapping out agency panic in the context of industrial modernity.”

As one can readily see from that brief rundown of the 24 chapters that make up this volume, the action genre is a massive, widely dispersed, globalized phenomenon that reflects back to us a wide range of social, cultural, institutional, and moral issues. The action film is still typically considered a “low culture” genre, one that often and even unapologetically appeals to the lowest common denominator of the mass audience and therefore holds little interest for “serious” filmgoers. Action films are often panned by mainstream critics during their initial theatrical runs, although such critical disdain has had little effect on the box office: since 1990, 20 of the 27 top-earning hits worldwide have been action-oriented films; the majority of the outliers have been animated films such as Aladdin (1992), The Lion King (1994), Toy Story (1995), Shrek 2 (2004), and Toy Story 3 (2010), all of which (not so incidentally) happen to feature major action sequences. The immense popularity of action films around the globe can also be gauged via numerous Hollywood-produced action films that did not fare as well as expected domestically but became enormous hits in Europe, Asia, and Russia (as just one example, the 2014 remake of RoboCop earned only $58 million in US theaters, far below its reported $100 million budget, yet it pulled in another $184 million overseas).
The popularity of the action film is currently at a worldwide all-time high; as I write these words, the latest entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Black Panther* (2018), has blown past $1 billion at the global box office, while in 2017, 8 of the top 10 highest-grossing films worldwide were action films: *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, *The Fate of the Furious*, *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, *Wolf Warrior 2*, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, *Thor: Ragnarok*, and *Wonder Woman*. The fact that all of those films are sequels or are part of an ongoing franchise tells us much about what is currently appealing about the genre, as does the fact that four of the films are comic book adaptations and all but *Wolf Warrior 2* are Hollywood studio productions.

Even though action films then and now have often been dismissed by critics for their visual excess, simplicity of plot and character, and regressive surface politics, the genre has proven to be a rich well of cultural significance and expression for those who are willing to delve beneath the obvious. And, as the genre itself continues to evolve, we are continually in need of taking stock of where we've been and continue mapping out new avenues of critical study for the future. That is, in short, the goal of the present volume, so that, while the action film may remain “over familiar,” it will not be “understudied.”

**Note**

1. In the Museum’s *Members Newsletter*, a brief article described the program as comprising, “All genres that deal with the show of violence … even family chronicles and soap operas of the period, which sometimes exist on the edge of violence” (“The American Action Movie,” 1969: 14).

**References**


MacRae, Henry. 1941. “‘Bill, you and slim go thataway, me and Sam'll take the short cut and head 'em off’: Mesa metiers through 30 years.” *Variety* (8 January). https://varietyultimate.com/archive/pdf/195021.pdf#navpanes=0&toolbar=0&messages=0&statusbar=0. Access via subscription.


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Origins of the Action Film

Types, Tropes, and Techniques in Early Film History

Kyle Barrowman

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

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.
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. 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. 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. 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” 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