

**The Ultimate Ride: A Comparative Narrative Analysis of Action Sequences
in 1980s and Contemporary Hollywood Action Cinema**

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Introduction

The action film genre has the dubious honor of being both the golden goose and black sheep of the contemporary American film industry. Immensely popular amongst an increasingly globalized audience, the American action film can be considered the most commercially viable of all film genres in today's Hollywood landscape (Purse). When taking a close look at the highest grossing films of the last five years, more than half in the list fit carry the label 'Action' on IMDb. At the same time, the genre is disliked by cinephile bloggers, professional critics and film theorists alike for a number of reasons. As Bordwell (104) summarizes neatly: "The action film has become the emblem of what Hollywood does worst". While this antagonism is present on different levels, one of the major grievances against the genre has been the supposed lack of narrative sophistication that characterizes the action film. Higgins (74) remarks that "In mainstream discourse, the genre is regularly lambasted for favoring spectacle over finely tuned narrative". These discourses and their disdain for the "anti-narrative" action film is noticeable in both popular film criticism and academic analysis, and often intersect with accusations directed towards the political-economy of Hollywood. Welsh (169) describes action films as "products designed by committees of writers and armies of technicians with one goal in mind: building bigger spectacle in order to generate millions of box-office dollars". The most avid contestants of the action film combine formal criticism with a type of ideological critique, as some authors consider such blockbuster-products to be the ultimate expression of Debord theories on spectacle society (Polan; Warner; Crary).

However, in the last couple of years a new tendency can be noted in film criticism and film studies alike to bring the action film genre under reevaluation. Anticipating the Academy Award nominations of 2018, a series of popular articles in magazines such as *Sight and Sound* (Pinkerton) and *Big Think* (Beres) addressed the longstanding bias against the action film amongst critics as well as award shows, and attempted the widespread acknowledgment of the

genre as political and aesthetic significance. Recent academic contributions from Jones and Kendrick contribute to a similar shift in discourse by noticing a greater complexity in the action film form and themes than traditionally assumed. Nevertheless, the other side of this debate is also accompanied by a new wave of commotion, one lambasting the contemporary action film for becoming increasingly chaotic and superficial. This article situates itself in the reconfiguring debates on narrative and spectacle in relation to action film by offering a comparative analysis of action sequences in two eras of action cinema. Firstly, the concept of action cinema is discussed and a synthesis is given of the relevant debates centering around the relationship between narrative and spectacle within the genre. Following this overview of contemporary debates, a theoretical framework is introduced that adopts a multiangular approach to action and narrative. After elucidating the research's methodology, this article investigates how the action film form has developed over two 8-year periods (1981-1988 and 2009-2016). These results will be further elaborated upon through a comparative case study of *Point Break* (1991) and its remake of the same name (2015). In doing so, the contribution of this article is threefold: Firstly, by constructing a multiangular approach to action and narrative new perspectives are revealed to look at old questions. Furthermore, by combining a qualitative and quantitative textual analysis this article widens the understanding of how narrative and spectacle operate in the action film by way of the action sequence. And lastly the comparative analysis and its complementing case studies provide an empirically grounded and lucidly illustrated overview of how action has changed in the action film genre over the course three decades. Before outlining these results and their theoretical implications, however, an overview of the concepts and discussions relevant to this article's research question is provided.

Spectacular Stories

A problem prior to discussing the action film lies with defining it. Whereas the action film has been a subject of scholarly debate since the 1980s, there's been a certain degree of dissonance between different authors as to how best approach this type of cinema. Arroyo (7) hints at the challenges of the debate by stating that the action film is something that "cannot quite constitute a mode but which exceeds the boundaries of a genre". As a category action cinema seem to be surprisingly ambiguous. At one side of the argument, Lichtenfeld argues the action film can be grounded in a set of generic components, and believes its inception can accordingly be traced to a specific period and production context in American film history. Such rigid categorizations have, however, been contested by authors such as Neale, Gunning and Higgins who point out that films have been described as 'action' or 'action-adventure film' as far the 1910s. Such tensions of generic hybridity hint at how mercurial 'action films' really are as a category of films. If they have to be approached as a genre, Jones concludes, they are not defined by a consistent visual aesthetic, not tied to a geographical setting of sort, nor to a robust narrative structure. This begs the question: to which standards and by which variables to define the action film? We all know action films feature chases, fights, shootouts, explosions, heroic stunts and nefarious villains, yet as Gallagher postulates there is something underlying that seems to set these films apart from other genres, and possible extend the reach of any classical generic category. Hinting at this defining component of distinction a number of theorists (Purse; Tasker; Jones; King) have looked at the use of spectacular action. Taves was one of the first to point out that action has to be understood as something resembling a "style of storytelling" that accentuates aspects of movement, speed, suspense and violence. Lichtenfeld too seems to agree that there's little use in denying action as the foundation in defining the action film, since many of these films are structured around acute moments of stuntplay, chase sequence and various forms of combat. Perhaps the most convincing understanding of the action film is offered by O'Brien (2), who notes that the action film "is

best understood as a fusion of form and content – a cinema of action. It represents the idea and ethic of action through a form in which action, agitation and movement are paramount”. More concisely, O’Brien defines the action film by its mode of address. Operating through sequences of spectacular action the action film aims to entice, enthrall and engage its audiences. Action should therefore be treated as more than a mere varnish, imbuing old stories with a layer of spectacle. It is at the very same time the crux of these stories, since spectacle is precisely what such films set out to offer.

As my attempt towards a categorization already demonstrates, it’s impossible to discuss the action film without stumbling against the concept of spectacle. It should therefore not be considered surprising that, apart from ideological analysis of the action film in relation to identity politics and representation, the largest amount of scholarly investigation had directed itself at analyzing the workings of spectacular action within these stories. Such type of research ties into a larger debate within film studies around the narrative/spectacle dichotomy. Spanning several decades, and scrutinizing spectacle and its significance from early cinema up onto blockbuster culture, this debate focusses on the connections and congruencies between spectacle and narrative. Running through the scholarly understanding of this relationship is an implicit assumption that spectacle and narrative are, at the very least, separate entities, and at the most entirely antithetical (Lewis). Because of the privileged place spectacular action takes within action cinema, these films have been repeatedly discussed as useful case studies in relation to the narrative/spectacle dichotomy. Needless to say, opinions on where the action film should be placed in this relationship largely depend on how this relationship is conceived. Research on action film form ranges from studies seeing this type of cinema as the deepest chasm within the fault lines between spectacle and narrative, to theoretical contributions that try to positively reevaluate the role of action by destabilizing the very concept. Not too different from the likes of King and Tasker, I opt to maintain the

concepts of spectacle and narrative since I consider them not only to be separate entities, but also as important working tools in the formal analysis of cinema. However, instead of approaching both terms as mutually exclusive, or spectacle a form of “excess” (Dixon), I opt for an integrative understanding of narrative and spectacle, and plead for action films as the ideal subject of scholarly inquiry to further investigate this symbiosis. A more extensive understanding of how action operates within the genre can help bridge the narrative/spectacle dichotomy. Key to this reevaluation is the formal component of the ‘action sequence’, since it contains the potential to be an expression of both spectacle and story.

Action film studies and its fallacies

When undertaking further analysis into the formal and narrative dynamics of action within the genre, it’s important to address some of the ongoing fallacies ruling research on action cinema and spectacle. The first of these misunderstanding relates to the metaphor of the action film as a type of (rollercoaster)ride. Higgins (74) detects an implicit disdain in this comparison and sees this ‘ride’ analogy as responsible for the general belief that “the creation of marketable thrills has replaced narrative coherence as the primary concern of popular American cinema”. The action film is indeed seen as all thrill and little tact in an approach that mistakes action cinema’s preoccupation with visceral address with the shock and sensorial stimulation of what Gunning types ‘the Cinema of Attractions’. While later somewhat refuting his statement, Arroyo (2) starts out his *Action/ Spectacle Cinema* edited volume by assuming that action films “lack coherence, balance, internal consistency and depth” in favor of a series of jolt and fairground-like sensations that “belong to a long history of the ‘cinema of attractions’”. In Stauven’s anthology *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* Tomasovic combines a literal categorization of action cinema as attractions with a problematization of the action film and its spectacular nature. Starting from Sam Raimi’s first two *Spider Man* films (2002, 2004), he sees these films as “results of the new Hollywood policy [...] The attraction is the golden rule.

It concerns the gaze (vertiginous effects, shocks of colors, speed of camera movements and editing, grandiloquence of special effects) and the body in exhibition” (313). A little further he marks out that “[u]ntil Hollywood frees itself from this crisis, popular cinema, never forgetting its fairground origins, continues to appear as a gigantic cobweb which keeps the captive spectator in its center, eyes wide open” (319). From an occupation with the formal workings of action cinema, such statements can be considered wholly unproductive, if not erroneous. As Higgins illustrates, reading the action film as a form of cinema of attraction can be problematic in part because it needlessly sharpens the edges of the narrative/spectacle dichotomy. Even Gunning himself has somewhat distanced himself from such analogies, stating that the Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola blockbuster is something more akin to a cinema of effects than a cinema of attractions.

A second fallacy relates to action cinema as being post-classic, or even post-narrative. Narrative coherency, character development and other aspects of classic Hollywood storytelling are here disregarded in favor of spectacle. In Bordwell’s (104) words: “In action films, we’re told, spectacle overrides narrative, and the result works against the “linearity” of the classical tradition”. Dixon (4), for example, sees contemporary action cinema as typified by “excess spectacle” and blames this hyperbole form on “a desperate attempt to mask the lack of content”. Considering spectacle as “the antithesis of narrative”, Darley (104), persists that “Spectacle effectively halts motivated movement. In its purer state it exists for itself, consisting of images whose main drive is to dazzle and stimulate the eye”. For Darley, the most obvious manifestation of contemporary fixation of the spectacular can be found in the blockbuster film: “technologically dense and laden with special effects, such films are, arguably, the principal emblem of the recent turn to image and form” (139). The presence of action sequences as featured in the action film genre is naturally responsible for the believed conflict between spectacle and narrative. After all, these moments seemingly offer a form of

“paucity” (Purse 21) to the narrative, since they are a form of strictly timed and instantly recognizable intermezzos. When criticism is directed towards the non-narrative nature of the action film, the presumably isolated and unmotivated nature of these action sequences forms the center of the argument. Yet, as Bordwell (105) convincingly argues regarding the presumed narrative incoherence of the contemporary action film, stating that these films are “more tightly woven than they need to be”.

Accusations of plot fragmentation and stylistic collapse are accordingly refuted by Smith (13), who argues that even the most spectacular of blockbusters contains “careful narrative patterning”. Among others, the research of King, Purse, Buckland, and Thompson discusses action films as a continuation of the classical Hollywood storytelling, and puts the dogma of narrative and spectacle as mutually exclusive under pressure. Rather than freeze the narrative, such as Neale states, narrative and spectacle can be integrated into one another. Arguably the most important contribution to the reorganization of narrative/spectacle dichotomy has come from King. Acknowledging that spectacle can also be a vehicle for narrative, King (4) argues that “In some cases spectacle reinforces, rather than interferes with, the narrative. Moments of spectacle sometimes help to move the plot significantly forward”. Such insights have been complemented with a more recent strain of research that is occupied with how melodrama operates in tying pathos (stemming from narrative dilemmas and character developments) and spectacle (stemming from action sequences) together. The work of Brewster and Jacobs, Eagle, Tasker, and Singer presents melodrama as the missing link between the realms of narrative and spectacle. Not entirely different from what King (3) terms the “explosive rhetorics of the contemporary action cinema”, melodrama is narratological system which elevates action as an expression of narrative events, underlying themes and character dynamics. Higgins develops the relationship between nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama

and action cinema by analyzing the role of situational dramaturgy in both. Arguing that action cinema is tributary to a form of narrative construction that predates and was integrated into classical Hollywood cinema, Higgins illustrates how these films make use of dramatic situations in structuring the narrative, whilst simultaneously providing the occasion for spectacular action. Considering dramatic situations as “discrete moments, often moments of suspense or deadlock when characters are arranged in seemingly inescapable dilemmas”, the concept of situational dramaturgy is exceptionally useful because it aids us in deconstructing the long-held belief that spectacle and narrative are opposites, and action film is in some way “nonclassical”. Just as its stage melodrama predecessors the action film invariably deploy a series of acute action-filled sequences of spectacle, such as chases, last-minute rescues and various forms of combat, and string these together in a classically coherent narrative. The implication to this melodramatic narrative system is that narrative motivates, constructs, accentuates spectacle, and vice versa. This insight is key to the argument I will further develop in the next part of my article, because it finds a way to integrate the paucity that characterizes action sequences in the wider context of narrative developments.

Anatomy of the action sequences

Having indicated that spectacle and narrative are more entwined than generally assumed, I will now take a look at how the action sequence operates as an intersection of both. Because spectacle consists of many different categories, most of them being irrelevant for this study, I will direct my analysis to a specific incarnation of spectacle, namely the ‘action’ component in the action film. Whereas spectacle is something abstract and often ambiguously defined (Brown 157), the concept of action can be concisely defined, as well as and easily operationalized for textual analysis. It’s perhaps out of fear of overstating the obvious that very few scholars have actually attempted to define what marks out an action sequence in an action film. As Lewis makes clear, we can all recognize such sequences of spectacular action;

they are the car chase, the train crash, the shootout, the daredevil stunt and many other forms of extraordinary events. Throughout the canonical action film *Lethal Weapon* (1987), for example, four different types of action events can be distinguished that reappear in different incarnations – fistfight and moments of pursuit being the most prevalent. Because these moments are structurally presented as a shift in events, tone and pacing, the unfolding spectacular action can be understood as a specific type of sequence. Action sequences are foremost characterized as sequences that showcase moments of spectacular destruction and sensational violence. For Gallagher action sequences are to be considered as such because they can be marked out from the more mundane components of these films. They are the larger than life moments rarely encountered in everyday experience. The extraordinary nature of these events in relation to other parts of the action film narrative has lead a number of scholars to looking at the action sequences as a form of symbolic transgression. Similar to Gallagher, King considers such sequences as a form of frontier experience. Jones (97) too notices that action sequences “open up a separate realm, one in which cultural anxieties can be dealt with in a fantasy mode”. They offer an reorientation of reality in which new possibilities are opened up and otherwise insurmountable obstacles can be triumphed over.

Despite that the action sequence evidently operates as a different mode of storytelling, these isolated moments of action are therefore not necessarily disconnected from the narrative. The paucity from another type of narrative these moment seem to imply, together with the transgressive force these sequences hold as mentioned above, have made it tempting to compare action sequences in the action film with the song and dance routine in the classical musical. King, Dyer, Arroyo and Bordwell all point at the resemblances in how spectacle and narrative operate between both genres. Following the analogy of the musical, but unsatisfied with the understanding of these moments as detached, King pinpoints how action sequences have the potential to steer narrative development forward (even a fight is a narrative event of

sorts) and develop thematic issues. Purse (30) follows this train of thought when she writes that these sequences have a narrative importance relating to how they “emphatically foregrounds the physical feats of the hero”. For Purse the action sequence is key to our emotional engagement with the protagonist and since many of these films are “narratives of becoming” dealing with the hero’s emotional and spiritual growth, the display of the hero’s growing capacities becomes a part of larger plot progressions. In this sense an action sequence is the necessary exposition of heroic capacities vital to success in the film’s plot. This is especially the case for the superhero genre in which many of the films action sequences revolve around the hero discovering and mastering his extraordinary abilities. Both King and Purse’s arguments are considerably helpful because they elucidate in a number of concrete ways how action too can be a type of narrative construct. However, I believe such readings also overstress the narrative importance of these moments by leaving out the many examples of action sequences as narratively unmotivated. Ironically, in their project to prove how action is tied to narrative both authors even reiterate a discourse underlying many treatments of spectacular action as disjointed from narrative. Despite their differences, both parties seem to agree that action is exclusively narrative when it can be sufficiently motivated by the overall story. Instrumentality therefore seems to be the defining characteristic to consider action as narrative. Yet Purse’s argument doesn’t hold up when we take into account the overall similarity of these challenges. If in *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* (2011) it’s already established by four action sequences (not to mention three previous installment), that Hunt (Tom Cruise) can overcome nearly all challenges laid ahead of him, the narrative doesn’t naturally require another action sequence that demonstrates his heroic capabilities. There’s no denying that action can be a vehicle for narrative development, such as plot progression and character evolution, or forms of thematic exploration, but that doesn’t effectively mean that every action sequences respectively is. A large amount of action sequences are a form of

narrative padding and do exist merely to showcase moments of sublime spectacle.

Nevertheless, even if such films prioritize spectacle over narrative development, this doesn't entail that these moments can't be narrative in themselves. By freeing action sequences of the burden to be narratively useful, we open up a new way to look at these components, both in relation to the film's larger plot and to the action sequence as self-contained entity. To do so we firstly have to work in the direction of new definitions for action in relation to narrative.

Towards a multiangular approach to action and narrative

If we are to adopt a different take on the intricate workings of spectacle and narrative, an untangling of the different discourses at play in these perspectives seems necessary. I propose a three-part distinction, divided between I. action in narrative, II. narrative through action III. narrative in action. This tripartite delivers a higher degree of nuance, and with it a better understanding of action sequences as entities of narrative and spectacle. Each of these three discourses is built on an approach present within academic literature around the narrative/spectacle dichotomy, and is therefore tied to different research questions and methodological approaches. With 'action in narrative' I'm referring to the actual amount of action in the larger plot of the film. The distinction between the isolated action sequences and the larger narrative developments does not imply that action is essentially non-narrative, but much rather, as Gallagher attests, that we can mark out the action from the non-action in these films. The research question this category opens up is how much action does the action film exactly contain. Secondly, by looking at 'narrative through action', I stress how action sequences in themselves can be a vehicle for narrative development. This entails an investigation into what events actually take place in action sequences and how these events contribute to overall development of the plot, such as narrative exposition, character development and thematic inquiries (King). The third and final category, 'narrative in action', is not surprisingly the least investigated of the three, since it seems to put the discourses

around action and narratives in on themselves. Instead of investigating how action scenes are put into context with the wider narrative of the film, this approach wholly embraces the isolated nature of action sequences. This angle attempts to look at how the action sequence as an separate formal entity is constructed. Similar to the musical's song and dance routine, action sequences consist of a series of specific action and events united through narrative. If we distance ourselves from the wider plot in the film and take apart the action sequence in itself, it's possible to gain a wider understanding of the intra-narrative complexities of the action sequence. Higgins' notions on situational dramaturgy, for example, are incredibly useful for developing a deepened understanding of this approach, as his conception of dramatic situations shifts the focus of analysis to generative structures applied for action sequence plotting.

To test and illustrate the functionality of this distinction I conducted both on a macro and a micro-level narrative analysis of the action film genre. The macro analysis consisted of coding the amount of action sequences and their duration within 80 films. In doing so, it's possible to pinpoint when and how frequently action sequences are featured in the plot, as well as gauge how much action is present in the total duration of the film. A sample was compiled by selecting five films per year for a total of 16-years, split into two periods (1981-1988/2009-2016), on IMDb with the keyword 'Action'. To make sure the selection was representative of past and present significance, the films with both the highest box-office (indicating the popular of the film at the time of its release) and number of votes (indicating the films current relevance) were selected. The two timeframes of the sample were chosen to conduct a comparative analysis into how action in the action film has changed throughout the decades. The first period (1981-1988) was selected because the 1980s are widely considered as the formative years for the action film as genre (Tasker). The second period (2009-2016) is used as a point of comparison to examine if many of the concerns of spectacle as increasingly

dominating narrative in the action films are correct. Using the multangular approach to action and narrative as introduced above, I investigated how both time periods relate to another in a threefold of ways (I. action in narrative, II. narrative through action III. narrative in action). These quantitatively oriented macro-analysis was complemented by an in-depth case study of two individual action film titles (*Point Break* (1991) and its namesake remake (2016)) as to more comprehensively discuss the changes action film style underwent in the last decades and offer concise illustrations. The reason why I'm adopting remakes as case studies, is because, as Forrest and Koos discuss, comparative research between film remakes is able to reveal interesting formal and narrative developments between two time-periods. This micro-analysis was foremost conducted to provide suitable illustrations for claims coming forth out of the wider quantitative analysis. However, by delivering a close reading of action sequences and their narrative context, new insights are also revealed. Concise as both chosen time frames may be, I do want to stress that they should not be approached rigidly. Much rather, both timeframes stand to symbolize two eras of action cinema in an abstract manner. For this reason not all discussed films precisely fall in one of both categories, but do so enough to resemble the narrative structure of one of either categories.

A formal analysis of the Hollywood action sequence

In the macro-analysis the number of action sequences, as well as their duration, narrative context and timing within the film were all coded. Because no overall accepted definition seems to exist in academic literature on what qualifies as an action sequences, I developed a concrete definition to operationalize the concept for analysis. As already stated in the literature review the action sequence is primarily characterized by its events, since it takes the form of "a particular kind of scene or spectacle (explosions, chases, combat)" (Tasker 12). However, it's not so much the action in itself but more the narrative structure and formal register in which these events are embedded that defines the action sequence. According to

O'Brien an action sequence offers a confined moment of increased intensity in which spectacular events are not only featured, but also foregrounded. The action sequence strings together several of these spectacular moments by ingraining them in the same mode – a discourse of spectacular stunt work and violent destruction. Further defining this mode is a series of formal components that is activated once the action sequence commences and halts when the action sequence is finished. Upon this release of action a different style is set in motion wherein all the textual elements of the film are put into service of heightening the intensity of these – already intense – events. Aesthetically the action sequence can be considered the furthest threshold of what Bordwell termed “intensified continuity”. A higher editing pace and a greater degree of parallel editing, more expressive camera movement, larger amount of different shots and camera angles all contribute to what I consider as a ‘form of frenzy’ that imbues even the most simple action with forceful magnitude. Adding to these action aesthetics is the ubiquitous presence of bombastic music to underscore auditorily the sense of awe that should be experienced. Despite the criticism often directed towards action film for the formal incoherence such moments of action supply, I argue that – ironically – the opposite can be noted: there’s few forms so formally coherent and rigid in their mode of address.

When undertaking a narratological dissection of the action sequence and its context a strong narrative structure is immediately apparent. Not dissimilar from the Aristotelian model of narrative present in most Hollywood cinema, a three-act structure can be noticed to prevail in the action sequences. Nearly all action sequences are bookended by a preceding set-up and resolution, resembling something of a prologue and epilogue to the action that unfolds. While the action sequence itself is often initiated by a sudden burst of action, the majority of these sequences is actually carefully built-up in the narrative as to generate suspense. In the many action sequences layered in *Commando* (1985), for example, moments of anticipations are

carefully plotted before the action kicks off. When John Matrix (Arnold Schwarzenegger) follows one of the mercenaries that kidnapped his daughter through a shopping mall with his involuntary accomplice Cindy (Rae Dawn Chong) suspense is generated for a full five minutes because both protagonists are in silent pursuit of the villain. An additional layer of suspense is added when Cindy turns against Matrix and decides to alert the shopping mall security of his presence, triggering a planned ambush from the mall's many guards against her action hero captor. Action is thus carefully plotted and accordingly cued to the audience. We know an action scene is due because of generic conventions and the slow unraveling of events, yet do not know exactly when. Similar to thrillers, action films take great pleasure in tightening the strings of suspense coming forth from this dilemma of knowing/not-knowing, before finally unleashing the action as a cathartic explosion. The action sequence is thereupon initiated by a short instance of shock or surprise (a sudden act of violence such as a punch or gunshot, a sounding alarm, a screaming bystander, or a dramatic explosion). This change of modes is further cued by the introduction of a more dramatic and threatening musical score. Often action sequences are preceded by moments of silence, hence making the abrupt introduction of a heavy-handed musical score, combined with orchestra of action sounds such a gunfire and fiery blasts, even more of a violent intrusion. When the action sequence draws to a close, the music fades and the attention shifts to the aftermath of the spectacular events that took place.

Defining the formal and narrative characteristics of the action sequence in this manner allows for a clean separation of action and non-action. If we are to understand how much of the action film consists of this action, we need only to identify the different action sequences, count them and measure their duration. Having done so in a control sample of 40 films during the genre's formative years (1981-1988) the results reveal that the action film consists of surprisingly little action. On average the action film consists out of 20:26 minutes of action of

its average 108:05 minutes runtime. This means that roughly 19% of the average action film in this period consists of action. Even if we are to disregard the academic debate on the narrative/spectacle dichotomy, this account contradicts the existing concern that action films are all spectacle and no narrative. If only one fifth of the film's total runtime seems to consist of action, it's safe to say not much of the Classical Hollywood approach to storytelling is necessarily lost. Yet, as I indicated in the literature review, this is not the most productive question to ask. Instead, I'd like to direct the debate to how this action is packaged in action sequences and how these sequences operate within the larger narrative framework of the film. In order to do so, it's important to take the number of action sequences and their narrative context into account. The 20:26 minutes of the average action film is usually spread over six action sequences, making the average action scene last for 3:35 minutes. It's important to add that while this seems to be the dominant structure of the action film, there's also a number of variations to be noticed relating to the number of action sequences and their duration. The archetypal action film *Rambo: First Blood* (1982) largely adheres to the identified and consists out 21 minutes of action of its total 133 minutes running time, spread over six action sequences. However, other canonical action films achieve roughly the same amount of action over a significantly different amount of sequences. While both films equally contain 25 minutes of action, *Red Dawn* (1984) takes nine action sequences to achieve this, whilst *Commando* (1985) requires only four.

Within the wider narrative of the film action sequences come in all kinds of shape and sizes, and are spread over the running time of the film. A general distinction between short action-beats, and longer action arrangements is what drives the breakneck pacing of these films. The type of sequence is what Bordwell (211) refers to as the "whammo": "a burst of physical action, injected to keep things from turning into just a string of conversations". According to industry professionals such whammos are designed to maintain the action-packed animus of

the film and take place every ten minutes or so. My results show that these are indeed a formal archetype in the genre since all of the coded action films contained small action beats of maximum three minutes in time. This type of action sequences can be differentiated from the longer action arrangements that last from four to any number of minutes. These sequences appear less often than the more instrumental whammo and are occasionally used as a form of introduction or conclusion in one of the three acts of the film's plot. *Missing in Action* (1984) starts off with a seven minute action sequence in which Colonel James Braddock is introduced as a character and the narrative set-up of the film is provided. Moreover, it can be argued that these 'action-vignettes' function as a type of pallet cleanser for audiences, already giving them a taste of the spectacular delights to come. Other films such as *Rambo* and *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Die Hard* (1988) refrain from initiating an action sequences early on and wait for the end of the first act –around the fifteen minute mark– before introducing moments of action to the story. However, these films do illustrate a tendency of such longer action arrangements to function as a crescendo in helping to draw parts of the narrative to a satisfying close. *Rambo* ends all of its three acts with a longer action sequence (4:45, 3:28, 7:12) that either dramatically rearranges the narrative or closes the film.

Every action film consists of a tightly structured composition of these short and longer moments of action. My analysis showed that the average action film consists out of six action sequences. Two take place in the first act of the film and are respectively the opening action vignette and a second smaller action scene intended as narrative padding. The middle act generally consists of three action sequences, two longer ones and one smaller, before ending with the final act action sequence, which is the longest of the entire movie. It's important to note that narratively the final action sequence is somewhat different since it can be split up into several parts. Because it's lengthy runtime and narrative significance the final sequence in *Rambo*, for example, allows for breathing spaces on multiple occasions. In these moments

narrative twists are introduced, such as the confrontation with Colonel Trautman, and the thematic core further developed, such as the films' exploration of the traumatic legacy of the Vietnam War.

Now that I've given an outline of the action sequence structure in the 1980s action film, it's possible to examine how these first eight years of action cinema relate to its contemporary counterparts. As already laid out, the common perception is that the action film underwent a turn to a greater degree in action, both in terms of duration as in its position in the film. To test this claim I will adopt my multangular approach to action and narrative, and discuss both the similarities and differences between both periods in light of this categorization (action in narrative/narrative through action/narrative in action). This way it's possible to address the role of action in relation to the film's narrative structure as well as discuss action sequences as a formal component in themselves. For each part my analysis will start off with tackling the wider (dis)similarities found through the macro-analysis, before illustrating this with the case study of *Point Break* and its namesake remake.

Action in narrative

When analyzing the sheer quantity of action in the contemporary action film, notions about the differences in the amount of action can be seen as seriously overstated. Figure 1 offers a clear illustration of how action sequences as a narrative unit, as well as their duration and the action film's overall runtime, change in the two investigated time periods. With 24:11 minutes of action of its total 118:53 running time, it's clear there's no significant growth in action to be noticed since the 1980s. In relation to the control group of the 1980s action film, only a 1% rise in action could be distinguished in the contemporary category. However, a slight change in the duration of the average action sequence could be noted. This is because of the fact that the contemporary action film structures its action through an average of five action sequences,

instead of six sequences, as is most common in the 1980s action film. Overall, relating to the duration of the total amount of action and the number of sequences, it's to be understood that the differences between both periods of action films are neglectable. Despite these overall consistencies, action cinema has underwent some changes, most notably in the difference in the length of individual action sequences. The average action sequence duration of the contemporary sample revealed itself to last almost a full minute longer than the 1980s sample. Not only do these sequences last longer, moreover, they seem to be more streamlined in size. As explicated earlier, the 1980s action film followed a consistent pattern of longer and shorter action sequences, all varying somewhere between one and any number of minutes. In the contemporary action film this distinction has almost entirely disappeared. Instead of diversifying in action sequence duration, the action sequence as a formal entity has become somewhat levelled. Apart from the odd outlier, a great number of action films seemed to be built from action sequences between three or four minutes.

Table 1: Narrative in action

| Time Period | 1981-1988 | 2009-2016 |
|--|------------------|------------------|
| Number of action sequences: | 6 | 5 |
| Amount of action: | 20.26 min | 24.11 min |
| Average action sequence duration: | 3.35 min | 4.27 min |
| Average film runtime: | 108.5 min | 118.53 min |
| Percentage of action: | 19% | 20 % |

A comparative analysis between both *Point Break* films underlines these results. What is immediately striking is that, in contrary of popular intuition, the remake even has a lower percentage of action than the original. Whereas a total of 21% of the original film is action, the remake contains only 18%. Moreover, both films count the exact same number of action sequences, yet again stressing the structural similarities of action in narrative between both time periods. When these action sequences precisely take place also corresponds. The two films immediately start off with a short action sequence and end with another. Action sequences are also spread over the total duration of the film with roughly the same intervals (+/- every ten minutes). All similarities considering, there does remain one drastic difference between both films: the duration of these sequences. Whereas the majority of the action sequences in the 1991 film last between one and five minutes, all but one action sequence of the 2016 remake last closely around two minutes. This insight follows our wider results – as discussed above – to a great extent. The ebb and flood of the 1980s action film has been exchanged for a more steady flow of action. If action in narrative in the original *Point Break* was situated in stormy seas, meticulously rushing the spectator to thrills both big and small, the remake navigates its spectator through much calmer waters in almost mechanical fashion.

Narrative through action

Whereas the angle of action in narrative did not hint towards a great number of dramatic differences, the approach of narrative through action reveals the first signs of a particular new form of action sequences. In many ways the 1980s action sequences adheres to the rules of Classical Hollywood storytelling. Action might be isolated in specific sequences, but in the wide context of the narrative these events are coherent, situated and – more importantly – narratively motivated. The events presented in these action sequences are preceded by a logically laid out setup preparing the spectator for the unfolding action and firmly embedding these sequences in the narrative. Additionally, the unfolding action has a significant effect on

the narrative course of the film. At the end of most action sequences the narrative seems to have altered. The general plot of the film is still the same, but the introduction of the events taking place during these very action sequences has influenced developments in the wider story. This greatly corresponds with the claims of King and Purse, who both argue heavily for the narrative relevance of action in the wider context of the plot and the film's core themes. Action here proves to be a loyal servant to the narrative, providing a pivotal catalyst for the unfolding and further developing of story. This contract between spectacle and narrative has in some degree expired when taking a look at the contemporary action film. Matching the concerns of authors seeing spectacle as subduing narrative, action sequences in the contemporary action film are more detached from the film's narrative. Here action stands as a more contained and self-serving event that has little or no effect on the plot.

To illustrate this, both *Point Break* films can once again be utilized as an example. The 1991 film is a textbook example of classical storytelling in its instrumental approach to action and narrative. All of the film's action sequences in some way or another contribute to the development of the plot. Either they are a display of skill (the opening action montage, introducing both protagonist and antagonist), a development of character relations (the skinhead fight at the beach, intensifying the relationship between both leads) or a narrative turning point (the post-bank robbery chase, climaxing with Utah blowing his cover). Sceptics might point out that some action is self-motivated because certain developments are initiated solely with the purpose of introducing action (the raid on the house of the falsely suspected skinheads), but even a red herring has a specific narrative function. It's safe to say that after each action sequence in *Point Break* the narrative is irreversibly altered. Moreover, the unity between action and narrative provides additional functions for the overall film by raising the stakes and cultivating suspense, thus tightening the screw on the spectator with every sequence. The relevance of action could even further be defended by considering how actions

sequences tie into the film's thematic arc. As Tasker (1993) argues, *Point Break* (1991) is all about the transformative nature of visceral experience. Action is here not only a jolt of spectacle livening up the narrative, it's the formal embodiment of what the film is about.

The remake stands in stark contrast with the action/narrative interrelationship described above. Action sequences in *Point Break* (2015) are more autonomous in the sense that there is little attempt made to organize the action within any type of narrative logic. Action is introduced as abruptly as it's terminated, and is rarely used as a vehicle for narrative development. This narrative fragmentation is complemented with a greater diversity in setting and in the types of action. A product of the contemporary globalized film industry and a competitor in the saturated blockbuster landscape, like many other action films the new *Point Break* tries to distinct itself with a vast array of spectacular stunts and exotic settings (the remake was shot in 11 countries spread over 4 continents, in contrast with the original, which was mainly set in Los Angeles, USA). When Utah infiltrates the criminal gang of Bodhi, he joins them in a series of daring stunts and heists spread across the globe. Each of these stunts, we are told in an early exposition scene, is an ordeal that helps complete an esoteric ritual that brings them closer to nature. For reasons left unexplained all these trials take place on different corners of the earth and are tied to the natural elements. This is an elaborate excuse for why the film cuts from a surf sequence to a wingsuit sequence, to a snowboarding sequence, to a motorcycle chase sequences, to a climbing chase sequence. By structuring the action sequences as trials that have to be accomplished, these sequences are less something logically integrated into the narrative, and more something akin to events that have to be checked off before the film can draw to a close. The majority of these sequences are in this sense decontextualized, since they are narratively unmotivated by not stemming from concrete events leading up to the action. As well as nonconsequential, often bearing little impact on plot developments and being redundant for the wider development of the film's

narrative. While in the 1991 version action evidently came forward from situations set up in the narrative, a reverse type of logic can even be noted in the remake where the larger narrative unfolds in function of providing the film with action sequences. As the story cuts from urban Paris to the Alps of Switzerland, to the Venezuelan Amazon, it becomes apparent that the action sequences are the main attraction of every location. Any form of narrative development is here integrated in the anticipation of the action, instead of vice versa. When Utah and Bodhi climb up to a snowy summit to complete another trial, they hold rest and exchange life philosophies and personal histories. This small moment of character development is immediately followed by the set-up for the next action sequences, hence illustrating how the narrative works around these moments of action instead of providing the circumstance for such sequences.

Narrative in action

If my account of narrative through action makes it appear as if the contemporary action film is considerably underdeveloped in terms of narrative compared to the 1980s film, it's because that angle and its matching discourse only allow to look at the relation between spectacle and narrative in one specific way. As I want to demonstrate with the final category of my typology, the contemporary action film is all but narratively inferior to its predecessor. Much rather than seeing narrative as being disregarded in these films, narrative complexity should simply be considered as having shifted directions. Within the contemporary action film the intensification of another type of narrative logic is noticeable: that of intensified situational dramaturgy. Higgins' account of stage melodrama's legacy helps us put the supposed non-narrative action film into perspective by exploring how action is a narrative component in its own right. Instead of investing in the integration of action within the films' wider plot and employing action in narrative developments, action sequences are in themselves a form of intricately organized micro-narratives that set up, play out and resolve scenarios in their short

running time. The contemporary action film can in this sense be considered something similar to a nesting doll, harboring narratives within narratives, each story structure firmly separated from the other as if in a state of vacuum.

Again this dynamic is apparent in the selected case study. If the previous perspective pointed out that the action sequences of the remake became increasingly detached from the film's narrative, the angle of narrative in action indicates that these sequences have themselves become more narratively elaborate. All action sequences of the original film are defined by one, or maximum two, types of spectacle-laden situation that function as coat hanger for the unfolding action. The events in these sequences limit themselves to either a stunt, a chase, a robbery, a shootout or a fistfight, but hardly move beyond the boundaries of this one action event. In *Point Break* (1991) one action sequence equals one dramatic situation. Some sequences may be longer than others, or deliver variations on these presented actions, but in essence the action taking place is defined by a straightforward simplicity. The film neatly sticks to its promise of which action it will deliver and neatly follows a formula. When comparing this with how action is structured in the remake, the two couldn't be further apart in terms of how action events are employed. Similarly to its predecessor, the action scenes of *Point Break* (2015) start from the premise of delivering one of the archetypes in spectacular action (i.e. stunts, chase, fight, shootout etc.), however, it never takes long before the film deviates from this action by tying in other situations and narratively complicating the event first presented. Instead of offering one dramatic situation, action sequences here build from this moment and strings together a multitude of dramatic situations. The action sequence that closes the second act starts off with a chase scene that quickly transgressed in a jeep to jeep shootout. This is arguably the first chapter of the sequence since it sets up and plays out the dramatic situation of the chase/robbery/shootout. The second chapter kicks in when the team has succeeded in overtaking the convoy they were in pursuit of, and Utah's moral

consciousness makes him turn against his teammates. After this situation the action is once again prolonged when a timed explosion triggers a rock avalanche and pushes both Utah and Bodhi to flee for survival. The dramatic actions of chase/hijacking by car here evolve into one of escape/survival by bike as Utah attempts to avoid the falling debris all the whilst following Bodhi. After a series of motorcycle stunts in which the two maneuver through a forest, both crash-land on a riverbed and the action sequences climaxes with a final dramatic scenario: the standoff.

Such intricate interaction between stunt play, spectacular action and event-like plotting is nowhere to be found in the original *Point Break*. A diverse set of dramatic situations are mechanically placed into order and narratively plotted in a manner that the end of each situation triggers the start of another. Therefore, not only is the presented action more complex, it's also more narratively disciplined. Action sequences have become micro-narratives in their own right that place a series of action-related plot points into order and employ narrative techniques to intensify the amount of suspense and spectacle. Further evidence of this lies in how these sequences are built to include breathing space within the action, instead of between the action – as was the case in the 1980s sample. The self-sustaining micro-narratives that are action sequences here include dialogue, exposition and complications in function of their own progress, allowing for more flexibility in the structuring of these situation. Starting from the concept of situational dramaturgy, the action sequences of *Point Break* (2015) should be comprehended as presenting action as a self-sustained narrative entity. Detached from the wider narrative as they may be, these sequence do exhibit complex variations of narrative plotting.

In general terms I can conclude that the action sequence has become a considerably more self-conscious component of the action film. Such new species of action sequences add up to a type of 'setpiece cinema', in which variations of dramatic scenarios play out in increasingly

spectacular and elaborate fashion. Here action is at once the underlying backbone structuring the narrative, responsible for directing the protagonist towards different locations, as a form of narrative padding for the larger events of the story. In signifying an ever more central component of these films, action sequences now show the need to be more stable in duration, yet more diverse in content. Moreover, detached from the wider narrative as they might be, the modern action sequence is in constant competition with itself. Every action sequence in the film is designed to outdo its predecessor, stringing together ever more spectacular series of events in a diverse set of locations and circumstances.

Conclusion

It's ironic that a genre often accused of relying on hyperboles is mostly discussed in hyperbolic fashion. As the cliché goes, the action film is often conceived as big, loud, fast and rather stupid in its prioritization of spectacular action over character driven narrative.

However, such derogatory notions should be considered wholly unproductive because they “have the potential to close down useful avenues of reflection and analysis” (Purse 23). For too long prejudices have halted a deeper analysis of the action film and its narrative workings.

Such crass accusations stem from an insufficient understanding of how narrative and spectacle operate within the genre. This article deconstructed some of the dominant ways in which narrative and spectacle are often considered and redirects this debate towards a more nuanced and comprehensive account of action in action films. This theoretical orientation was complemented with a comparative formal and narrative analysis of action and narrative in action film's formative years and its contemporaries.

Both my theoretical framework and textual analysis illustrated that comparing both eras of action cinema demands an analysis on several levels. Using a multangular approach to narrative and action I made the distinction between three different perspectives of the interrelationship between both components. Putting the relationship between action and narrative in two eras of action cinema side by side reveals a series of stark resemblances and striking differences. On the one hand, it shows that concerns relating to a dramatic decrease of narrative in favor of action are overstated. Against common belief the contemporary action film showed to be not significantly more action-packed than its 1980s predecessor. On the other hand, how action is structured in the genre-defined action sequences, as well as over the larger course of the narrative, does show considerable signs of change. Both the results of my macro-analysis and specific case study stress that the contemporary action sequence has become a more streamlined and tightly structured component of the film. The crucial

difference with previous generations of action films lies with these sequences and their overall detachment from the wider narrative, alternatively having become self-sustaining micronarrative that are more enclosed from preceding and following sequences. Whereas some of these tendencies could already be noted in the 1980s, this new type of self-conscious 'setpiece cinema' is now the norm. Action sequences are not necessarily foregrounded in favor of the wider narrative, but have become defined by a separate mode of address that runs aside from the film's unfolding plot. It's exactly this treatment of action as simultaneously an isolated agent of the spectacular and an underlying driving force of the narrative that distances setpiece cinema from its 1980s counterparts.

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