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## Spectacle in Contemporary Mainstream Action Cinema

### 1. Historical Development of the Notions of *Attraction* and *Spectacle* in the Context of Cinema

It was Sergei Eisenstein who in 1924 introduced the term “attraction” into the theoretical discourse of cinema. In *The Montage of Film Attractions*, he described an attraction as an object, phenomenon or action that is “proven” to exert a certain influence on the emotions of the audience and which combined with others (through the process of montage) may steer them in a specific direction (Eisenstein, 1998, p. 41). By juxtaposing what Eisenstein considers universally pleasant or disturbing phenomena (i.e. kittens and drunken bouts) with images of the proletariat or white officers, cinema may create specific emotional associations in the minds of the audience and hence achieve a truly agitational quality. For Eisenstein, specific attractions need to possess utilitarian value and must thoroughly embody the idea they are supposed to represent – he claimed a car is a more efficient representation of the idea of transportation than a cart (Eisenstein, 1998, p. 57) – a notion he extends to the realm of actor movements which are, ideally, expressive and exert “the same real, primarily physical work on their material – the audience.” (Eisenstein, 1998, p. 56). Finally, Eisenstein believes in a future possibility of plot-less cinematic constructions that forfeit presenting specific facts in favour of guiding or moulding the emotional responses of the audience (Eisenstein, 1998, p. 49).

## 1.1. Attraction through Eisenstein and Gunning

Eisenstein's notion for a long time was used primarily in connection with Eisenstein's films and theoretical writings. It was Tom Gunning who rejuvenated it, giving it new life in a text titled *The Cinema of Attractions[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde* (Gunning 2006b).

According to Tom Gunning, a cinema of attractions is “dedicated to presenting discontinuous visual attractions, moments of spectacle rather than narrative” (Abel, 2005, p. 124). Tom Gunning explored the concept of a cinema of attractions through the work of classic film-makers and film theoreticians like Sergei Eisenstein, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. While film theory in the 1970s was more or less dominated by structural-semiotic critique and psychoanalysis that sought to uncover how popular movies are ideological apparatuses shaping the unconscious desires of a passive, viewing “subject” (see Bordwell, Carroll, pp. 3-36) “these earlier avant-garde thinkers and practitioners saw revolutionary possibilities (both political and aesthetic) in the novel ways cinema took hold of its spectator” (Gunning, 2006a, p. 31), shaping experiences, creating emotional responses and generating new modes of spectatorship. Coining the term “cinema of attractions” Gunning referred to the first decade of cinema which was characterised by The drive towards display, rather than creation of a fictional world; a tendency towards punctual temporality, rather than extended development; a lack of interest in character “psychology” or the development of motivation; and a direct, often marked, address to the spectator at the expense of the creation of a diegetic coherence, are attributes that define attractions, along with its power of “attraction,” its ability to be attention-grabbing (usually by being exotic, unusual, unexpected, novel). (Gunning, 2006a, p. 37)

Gunning's formulation arose out of discussions with André Gaudreault in the wake of the FIAF Brighton Project on Early Fiction Film in 1978, the main achievement of which was a critical reevaluation of film history. As Frank Kessler notes, the term cinema of attractions has both a historical and formal aspect: it refers to a certain *period* in the history of cinema, ending roughly around 1906, when movies started becoming more and more narration-driven, (although this timeline is contested by some scholars) as well as a *type* of cinematic experience (Kessler, 2006, p. 57).

Whereas in Eisenstein's paradigm, attractions are indelibly bound with associative montage, Gunning uses the term “cinema of attractions” to define a certain *mode* of addressing and affecting the audience. In other words: Eisenstein focuses on montage while Gunning pays attention to the content of particular

shots. If *diegetic* (or narrative) *integration* emphasises storytelling – the narration<sup>1</sup> provides data for the audience and the latter uses its cognitive capacities and expectations in order to facilitate the mental reconstruction of a chronological blow-by-blow account called a “story,” (or *fabula*), complete with deadlines, character motivations, plot goals, plots twists and so on – a cinema of attractions “directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself” (Gunning, 2006a, p. 384). If the former is “inward” and “voyeuristic,” seeking to involve the viewer’s mind in the story-telling process and the psychology of the characters, the latter is “outward” and “exhibitionist,” attempting to appeal directly to the spectator senses and emotions.

## 1.2. Attraction versus Spectacle versus Narration

There are two methodological problems arising from the concept of attraction: a semantic problem regarding difference between *attraction* and *spectacle* and a formal problem regarding the relation between attraction and narrative.

What about spectacle? Geoff King provides a basic definition: “the production of images at which we might wish to stop and stare” (King, 2000, p. 4). The important word here is “might” – obviously, spectacle elements are only potentially appealing, just as gore or horror elements are only potentially successful in inducing fear. King’s terse definition makes the whole concept appear a bit murky by connecting it with viewer reactions which are quite elusive and unpredictable. A more text-based way of looking at spectacle is to refer to what producers and screenwriters call *whammo*: “a burst of physical action, injected to keep things from turning into just a string of conversation” (Bordwell 2006, p. 112). Such a spectacle element may or may not detract from the process of narration (more on that later), but when contrasted with Eisenstein’s definition of attractions as visual stimuli holding emotional and ideological value, a *whammo* has a lesser purpose.

Authors who use terms like spectacle or spectacular (Geoff King, Erich Lichtenfeld or Yvone Tasker) focus on kinetic or visually impactful phenomena like spectacular chase scenes, intricately choreographed fights, tense shootouts, death-defying stunts, mind-boggling CGI and special effects or beautiful dancing and singing sequences. If for Eisenstein a “proper” attraction holds ideologi-

<sup>1</sup> I use the term *narration* as understood by David Bordwell: “a process whereby the film’s *syuzhet* and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator’s construction of the *fabula*,” see. D. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, The University of Wisconsin Press: 1985, p. 53.

cal and psychological efficacy achieved through montage while Gunning examines the same term in the context of a certain *way* or *mode* of interacting with the audience, then it appears spectacle has a slightly narrower meaning and applies to specific instances of kinetic and visual stimuli which may or may not have an additional purpose aside from soliciting the audience's attention and stimulating its nervous and perceptive systems.

Interestingly, both King and Tasker refuse to see spectacle elements as inherently opposed to narration. This brings us to the question of the relationship between attraction and narrative. Eisenstein envisioned a time where cinema could be liberated from the logic of narration and provide in its stead a series of impactful shocks sculpting and guiding the emotions of the audience. In addition, Gunning, even though he insists the mode of attraction was somewhat absorbed by the more narratively-driven post-1907 cinema, still believes in a fundamental difference between the attractive and narrative modes of address<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps, the difference between the attractive and narrative modes lies also in how they affect the viewer. Describing narration as a kind of mental play regulating the flow of information the viewer receives, cognitivists emphasise thinking rather than emotional responses, and it seems the latter are, in fact, more important for the attractive mode of address. Early on, the analysis of emotions in cinema fell in the purview of psychoanalysis and its framework of desires and drives, but the last two decades saw the emergence of theories of filmic emotions and somatic effects based on contemporary psychological research like Carl Plantinga's *Moving Viewers* (2009), Greg M. Smith's *Film Structure and Emotion* (2003), Per Persson's *Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery* (2003), Ed S. Tan's *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative: Film as an Emotion Machine* (1995), Laura Marx's *The Skin of the Film* (2000), Patricia Pisters *Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (2012) or Thomas Elsaesser's *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2009). The cognitive current, with its emphasis on the flow of information from film to spectator, was naturally more fixated on narration as the conduit for data transfer. By the same token, psychoanalysis as a discursive activity whose goal is to uncover hidden meaning beneath explicit content has always probed the narrative in search of its unconscious. It hasn't been until recently that film theory has taken a much broader interest in the purely bodily or somatic aspects of the movie-watching experience.

<sup>2</sup> Another semantic confusion arises from Tom Gunning using on numerous occasions in his article the term "diegetic mode of address". Considering the scope of the adjective "diegetic" as denoting elements which simply belong to the narrative world, it appears Gunning is actually talking about a "narrative" mode – a way of telling a story – and opposing it to the above-described mode of attraction.

When Eisenstein and Gunning use words like “shock”, “pressure on the psyche”, “blows to the consciousness”, “visual curiosity”, or “direct stimulation of shock or surprise” it seems a cinema of attractions either aims at soliciting emotional responses that are scarcely under the audience’s control or relies on different cognitive schemata than the ones required for “narrative absorption” – as Gunning states: “Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its [cinema of attractions’] energy moves outward to an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative” (Gunning, 2006, p. 384). Nonetheless, isn’t the energy always flowing outward, from screen to audience? And furthermore, aren’t emotions an intrinsic part of any cinematic experience? Even the most classic narration-based films depend on the viewer’s capacity to become invested in the story, and almost all films, as David Bordwell stresses time and time again, create certain expectations which, according to neuroscientists, as well as cognitive film theorists, are indelibly bound with emotional responses. Noël Carroll, on the other hand, wrote extensively on the emotional facets of horrors and comedies (Carroll, 1999, pp. 145-160). Perhaps then, it is not the direction but the nature of the emotional energy that is at stake. The classic model assumes that emotions felt by the viewers are a result of a vicariously mediated identification with the characters, whereas more recent concepts stipulate emotions stem from stimuli received directly from the screen.

There are theoreticians who prefer to see the attractive and narrative modes as more closely knit. Like G. King, Yvone Tasker focuses expressly on the concept of spectacle (spectacular imagery of bodies, spectacular action scenes etc.), and according to her, many scholars overemphasising the importance of narrative have too hastily dismissed spectacle sequences as a mere distraction. Coupled with a strong commitment to decoding the ideological stakes of particular narratives and giving analytical preference to dialogue, intellectual montage and deliberate framing, this approach led to neglecting the non-textual effects of movie-watching: emotional reactions, visual pleasure, visceral experiences etc. Tasker claims spectators have “contradictory desires,” wanting both to follow the narrative to its conclusion as well as to ponder the details and take in the spectacular visuals put in front of their eyes (Tasker, 1993, p. 6). This would mean cinema, even if predominantly attraction-driven and laced with spectacle, is capable of meeting both the affective and storytelling needs of the audience.

For Geoff King, the contours of spectacular narratives overlap with frontier mythology. The frontier narrative pits characters (often ordinary people) against extraordinary forces and crushing odds, forcing them to overcome obstacles

through incredible feats of physical exertion. The movie itself may operate and be promoted as a kind of “surrogate” frontier that invades the life of the spectator with a promise of delivering a larger-than-life experience (King, 2000, p. 5). Furthermore, in spite of being derisively treated by critics, spectacle, seemingly opposed to traditionally structured narrative and dialogue, may not only provide sensuous experiences but also carry meaning – in Yvone Tasker’s view, spectacular representations of chiselled, glistening, mangled, transformed, injured or tortured bodies mediate matters of gender, culture and politics (see Tasker, 1993, pp. 153-167).

It is my belief that the general discussion regarding the “narrativity” of spectacle is not productive. Spectacle may have a narrative component and still be a spectacle as far as it tries to deliver kinetic and visual stimuli of a potentially attractive character.

## 2. Spectacle in Mainstream Action Cinema

The skydiving scene in Kathryn Bigelow’s cult-classic *Point Break* (1991) stood out because Patrick Swayze performed a few jumps himself (and this footage made it to the final movie)<sup>3</sup>, but in the newest *Mission Impossible* instalment (*Fallout*, 2018), Tom Cruise not only performed a stunning 106 halo jumps in Abu Dhabi in a specially designed helmet (so the actor’s face could be seen on film), but also piloted a helicopter and dangled precariously off its skids<sup>4</sup>. At first glance, “spectacularness” is on another level now and the formal, stylistic and technical arsenal of the moviemaker (CGI, stunt work, special effects etc.) has grown to the point that contemporary directors appear to feel the urge to utilise a plethora of methods, leading to eclectic fiction films such as *Deadpool* (2016), blending humour, postmodern allusionism and puzzle film non-linearity, or even highly spectacular biopics: in *I, Tonya* (2017), *Speed Kills* (2018) or *American Made* (2018) characters break the fourth wall, filters give some shots a VHS graininess, there are documentary-like interview scenes, non-linear storytelling, slow-motion montage sequences with non-diegetic music, CGI, fast-cut, Guy Ritchie-like editing as well as jerky snap-zooms and obscured framing resembling hidden hand-held cameras or smartphones. These formal and stylistic solutions exemplify the kind of eclecticism and technical intensity that has slipped into every nook and cranny of modern cinema, and since attractions are

<sup>3</sup> *Behind the Scenes of Point Break* at: <https://skydiveperris.com/b/point-break-skydive-behind-the-scenes/> (accessed 10 March 2019).

<sup>4</sup> J. Guerrasio, *106 Skydives with a Broken Ankle* at <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-tom-cruise-pulled-off-the-halo-jump-in-mission-impossible-fallout-2018-7?IR=T#the-quick-decision-that-saved-the-halo-sequence-6> (accessed 10 March 2019).

supposed to prompt emotional responses in the audience then at no other time in cinema history has there been such a vast toolkit available for movie creators to make them.

According to David Bordwell, the fact that contemporary cinema is more spectacular than before does not in any way undermine the bedrock of narration (Bordwell, 2006, pp. 4-6). Elizabeth Cowie, on the other hand, claims cinema has undergone certain changes since the demise of the studio system, the main result being the disappearance of a “consistent group of norms” (Cowie, 1998, p. 188). In her view, narrative pleasure is not always the dominant factor while David Bordwell’s definition of classic Hollywood cinema is simply too flexible and universal to even allow the possibility of talking about a post-classical cinema, or, more precisely, a cinema that leans less towards narrative pleasure and more towards non-narrative pleasures.

For me, spectacle has the potential of being meaningful (Tasker, King) or becoming an emotion-modifying attraction (Eisenstein). Similarly, it has the potential to either serve the purposes of goal-oriented and motivation-driven narration or to undermine it. There is a story which is *potentially* pleasurable (and potentially comprehensible) for some viewers and a spectacle that is *potentially* pleasurable as well (again, Tasker claims movies can fulfil both the storytelling and spectacle needs of audiences), both may either go hand-in-hand or stand at odds with each other. Most spectacle sequences are motivated by narrative – the outcome of a fight or chase determines, for instance, which character survives and proceeds towards fulfilling key plot goals. In a movie like *Baby Driver* (2017), there are multiple musicalesque tracking shots of wheelman Baby walking down the street or making a sandwich to the tune of his favourite songs – such sequences may reinforce our impression music is a crucial part of his life. They may have also been compressed into shorter segments and still convey the same narrative information. However, by being prolonged and elaborate they potentially go beyond narrative pleasure and supply other pleasures to the audience. By the same token, this potentiality does not necessarily have to do with pleasure. It may relate to any number of potential somatic or cognitive responses induced during the course of a given movie. There are some spectacular worlds, for instance, which are both visually stunning and disgusting or frightening (i.e. the “real world” of the *Matrix*).

My thesis is that not only has the nature of spectacle in big-budget mainstream action movies changed, but also its relation to narrative, with the latter’s complexity being sacrificed in favour of intensifying the former.



By providing case studies of series like *Die Hard*, *Predator*, *Mad Max*, *John Wick* or the *Fast and Furious*, mainstream action cinema, I would like to pinpoint both quantitative and qualitative changes spectacle has undergone in them. The basic quantitative aspect relates to the number and duration of spectacular action sequences, identified according to the tentative definitions provided by G. King or Y. Tasker: scenes of physical and kinetic exertion, like fights, shootouts, executions, car chases or explosions. I take the liberty of omitting scenes which are of a merely descriptive character such as characters moving from point A to B or shots surveying the locales (either way, their inclusion would hardly change the results) and providing rounded-off numbers. However, I will additionally analyse the quality of these sequences, their relation to narrative, as well as the spectacle-related aspect of space, finally, I will provide a chapter on the formal, technical and VFX changes spectacle has undergone.

## 2.1. Die Hard

The *Die Hard* series did for action cinema what *Mad Max* did for the dystopian genre. The years following the release of Bruce Willis' first major motion picture saw the emergence of many successful movies of varying budgets which recreated the trope of a lone hero taking on bad guys in a specific place – there were “die hards” on planes (like *Air Force One*, 1997), on ships (like *Under Siege*, 1992) and seemingly countless Van Damme/Michael Dudikoff/Steven Seagal movies which piggybacked on the successful formula drawn by director John McTiernan and producer Joel Silver. Nonetheless, *Die Hard*, like action cinema in general, has undergone significant changes as the years went on.

The first *Die Hard* (1988) features 46.1 minutes of Spectacular Action Sequences (henceforth referred to as SAs) comprising 35% screen time (Spectacular Screen Time henceforth referred to as SST). 17 SAs for an average length of spectacular action sequence (henceforth referred to as SAL) of 2.7 minutes, the longest SA being an action scene of 9 minutes and 9 seconds, showing several decisive events near the film's end. *Die Hard 2* (1990) features 39.1 minutes of SAs comprising 31.5% SST divided into 16 SAs for an SAL of 2.5 minutes, the longest SA being the final showdown on a plane taking off that lasts 10 minutes and 50 seconds. *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995) features 59.1 minutes of SAs comprising 46% SST divided into 16 SAs for an SAL of 3.6 minutes, the longest sequence being a bank robbery scene that starts at the 51-minute mark of the movie and lasts 7 and a half minutes. This scene shows characters seemingly effortlessly extracting gold from federal banks, facing no resistance at all, with a non-diegetic *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* by Percy Gilmore playing



throughout. If one were to exclude this scene, this would bring the final tally of SAs to 52.1 minutes, decreasing the SST to 34% and the SAL to 3.5 minutes. Nonetheless, even if the above-mentioned bank heist scene lacks tension, it is a spectacle in the strict sense: a form of kinetic exertion that potentially makes the audience “stop and stare” as King puts it. *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007) features 41.2 minutes of SAs comprising 31.9% SST divided into 14 individual SAs for an SAL of 2.9 minutes, the longest SA being a powerplant action scene lasting 9 minutes and 49 seconds and an 8-minute sequence where John McClane faces off against a F-35 jet fighter plane near the end of the movie. Finally, *Good Day to Die Hard* (2013), which takes place in Russia (actually filmed in Hungary) features 43.2 minutes of SAs comprising 47% SST, divided into just 7 SAs for an SAL of 6.2 minute, the longest SA being a final showdown in Chernobyl that lasts 16 minutes and 5 seconds. The last movie exemplifies the tendency to condense SAs and is not incidentally the one that stands out from the rest of the series.

	No. of SAs	SAL	Longest SA	SST
<i>Die Hard 1</i> (1988)	17	2.7 min.	9 min. 9 s.	35%
<i>Die Hard 2</i> (1990)	16	2.5 min.	10 min. 50 s.	31.5%
<i>Die Hard 3</i> (1995)	16	3.5 min.	7 min. 30 s.	46%
<i>Die Hard 4</i> (2007)	14	2.9 min.	9 min. 49 s.	31.9%
<i>Die Hard 5</i> (2013)	7	6.2 min.	16 min. 5s.	47%

All five *Die Hard* movies play out within a time-span of roughly twelve hours and have Bruce Willis starring as John McClane. In terms of spectacle, it could be said that the first three movies are more *spatially focused* – the stories with their spectacle sequences happen in specific locations (Nakatomi Plaza, NY Airport, the streets of NY). The fourth and fifth instalments take their characters to various locations (New York, Washington DC, Maryland, West Virginia, Moscow, Chernobyl etc.).

The relation between spectacle and narrative (or, more precisely, the narrative significance of SAs) has changed as well. The first movie in the franchise is often lauded as one of the best structured three-act scripts in Hollywood history, and in 2017 it was added into the United States National Film Registry. Most spectacle sequences spawn additional consequences: as the terrorists take over Nakatomi Plaza, McClane runs out to the staircase barefoot because he was

practising an anxiety-relieving trick he'd learned from someone on the plane, he kills a terrorist whose feet turn out to be too small and whose brother is also one of the terrorists (two narrative consequences of one spectacular action). Almost every spectacle sequence in the film is a part of a web of cause-and-effect relationships interlinking several narrative players who are competing with or supporting one another: McClane Sgt. Al Powell, the FBI, the terrorists/robbers, Gruber, a brother seeking vengeance, the LA Police. The second movie, though less complex in this regard, still manages to provide plot twists within spectacle sequences and ties together several competing parties. In the third, the villain is not revealed until the 47-minute mark. Spectacle scenes involve John McClane and Zeus solving riddles set around New York by Simon Gruber, there is a prolonged bank heist scene, several chases, fights and a customary elevator spectacle scene (these appear in all but the fifth movie in the franchise) also containing a small plot twist (bad guys masquerading as cops). The fourth is not a major detraction from the previous three, the main difference being the spatial diversification of SAs, as well as an increase in the implausibility of certain spectacular set pieces (i.e. John McClane defeating a jet fighter plane with a truck).

It is the fifth instalment that is really different. As is the case with *Fury Road* and the latest *Fast and Furious*, *Good Day to Die Hard* is an example of spectacle becoming more condensed. There are two SAs which run for more than 15 minutes, one commencing at the 16-minute mark and the other being the final showdown in Chernobyl. As for the narrative aspect, it is no surprise the movie was criticised for its unsubstantial and implausible plot<sup>5</sup>: with an SST of 47% for a movie that is just 97 minutes long (the first *Die Hard* runs for 132 minutes with 35% SST), *Good Day to Die Hard* has little time to spare either on character development or creating a dense web of relationships between the protagonists and antagonists – the story quickly moves the characters from one spectacular set piece to another, and while in previous entries the spectacle sequences took a toll on the protagonist, here he breezes through over-the-top hazards with a demeanour so stoic it verges on indifference. What is more, the two main villains are not in any way developed, either within or outside the seven SAs – a big narrative downgrade in comparison to the previous four movies – and some of their actions lack any logical justification, the most absurd of which was Irina's decision to kill herself by slamming a helicopter into a building occupied by John and

<sup>5</sup> See reviews by R. Roeper at: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/a-good-day-to-die-hard-2013> (25.02.2019); N. Allen at: <https://www.denofgeek.com/us/movies/a-good-day-to-die-hard/60664/a-good-day-to-die-hard-review> (accessed 22 February 2019); D. Stevens at: [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2013/02/a\\_good\\_day\\_to\\_die\\_hard\\_reviewed.html?via=gdpr-consent](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2013/02/a_good_day_to_die_hard_reviewed.html?via=gdpr-consent) (22.02.2019); R. Collin at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/9868781/Bruce-Willis-in-A-Good-Day-to-Die-Hard-review.html> (accessed 25 February 2019).

Jack. Finally, John Moore's direction included several formal decisions which I will discuss in the last chapter of this essay.

The general condensation and diversification of spectacle elements appears to make mainstream action cinema less focused on character development or creating complex sets of connections between all the elements of the story. A good example here is *Skyscraper* (2018), starring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson as ex-FBI agent Will Sawyer, billed as a quasi-remake of the first *Die Hard*. The movie features a good, "family man" cop (a stark opposite to the divorced, trying-to-get-his-life-back-together McClane) who has to save his loved ones from a burning building overrun by terrorists. If the police and FBI outside Nakatomi Plaza were an important source of narrative complexity, making McClane's task even more difficult, *Skyscraper* treats similar forces as decorative elements that have little influence on the events unfolding in a fictional high-tech building in Hong Kong. Sawyer is pretty much the only vocal and developed character in the movie (alas, he has hardly anyone to talk to), where the sense of urgency is gone since no civilians (aside from Sawyer's family) are put under threat, and spectacle sequences appear repetitive in nature and are focused on Sawyer's singular task of scaling the building and saving his family members. Finally, there is no prominent villain, no sarcastic banter or protagonist-antagonist "bonding" so vital for any *Die Hard* formula<sup>6</sup>.

## 2.2. Fast and Furious

In what was then considered one of the most spectacular movies of the 1990s, *Con Air* (1997), a 67' Corvete Sting Ray C2 is literally hoisted off the ground on a wire attached to a Fairchild C-123 transport plane and slammed into an old airport control tower only to crash conveniently next to three federal agents. Fast forward to 2015 and the car-on-a-plane motif is taken to a whole new level of "spectacularness" in *Fast and Furious 7* where the main protagonists literally drive out of a plane in expensive cars which deploy parachutes and land gracefully in a nearby forest. The stunt required dropping four real cars (albeit without the real actors inside) from the plane. Ten cameras were used, including a helicopter and three skydivers with helmet cams, filming the action from multiple angles<sup>7</sup>. The entire action sequence starts off at about the 41-minute mark and

<sup>6</sup> S. Mendelson, *Skyscraper is a Die Hard Rip-off that Forgets the Die Hard Formula* at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2018/07/13/dwayne-johnson-skyscraper-is-a-die-hard-tribute-that-forgets-why-die-hard-was-great/#96482cd63a7f> (accessed 5 March 2019).

<sup>7</sup> J. Guerrasio, *How 'Furious 7' dropped real cars from planes in its most ridiculous stunt yet* at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/furious-7-how-they-dropped-cars-from-a-plane-2015-4?IR=T> (accessed 12 March 2019).

lasts a whopping 19 minutes and 10 seconds. First the air drop in the Caucasus Mountains (the shooting actually took place in Colorado), then a guns blazing chase after an armoured bus carrying the “God’s Eye” (a special computer program Mr. Nobody asks Dom to retrieve), Connor gets in a skirmish with a bad guy on the bus, narrowly escaping death as it slides off a cliff (a stunt scene allegedly shot without the use of CGI<sup>8</sup>), before finally, Dom and a hacker named Ramsey (new addition to the *Fast and Furious* crew) escape an ambush by hurtling a supercharged car down a cliff. The SST in this movie is approximately 66 minutes, about 48% of the film’s runtime. The numbers for *Fate of the Furious* (2017) are 61 minutes and 44% SST while the very first *Fast and Furious* (2001) a modest 38 and a half minutes amounting to roughly 36% SST.

It is not just the number of spectacular action sequences that increased. The first instalment of the franchise features 19 SAS, a SAL of 2 minutes, the longest SA running approx. 8 minutes and 7 seconds (the last truck heist attempt of Dominic Toretto’s crew). The seventh instalment has 15 SAs, an SAL of 4.5 minutes, the longest sequence being a final showdown lasting 25 minutes and 40 seconds. The latest instalment has only 7 major SAs, an SAL of 8.7 minutes, and two long SAs running roughly 15 minutes and 31 minutes respectively and happening at the end of the movie.

	No. of SAs	SAL	Longest SA	SST
<i>Fast and Furious</i> (2001)	19	2 min.	8 min. 7 s.	36%
<i>Furious 7</i> (2015)	15	4.5 min.	25 min. 40 s.	48%
<i>Fate of the Furious</i> (2017)	7	8.7 min.	31 min. 40 s.	44%

In the case of the *Fast and Furious*, pointing out the differences in their approach to spectacle is a fairly straightforward task. The spectacle aspect underwent a strong *condensation*: SAs become sparser but longer. They are also often *network* in nature: the final 31-minute SA from *Fate of the Furious* cross-cuts between Dom, Dom’s crew and Deckard (Jason Statham) as all of them try to achieve their goals, fighting, shooting and racing against a small army of mechanised Russian soldiers, a nuclear submarine and a high-tech plane. Similarly, in *Furious 7*, the final showdown has multiple characters involved in a wild, multi-tiered skirmish: a mercenary named Jakande piloting a stealth helicopter and aerial drone which is destroyed by a minigun-brandishing Hobbs (The Rock),

<sup>8</sup> J. Guerrasio, *One of the most insane stunts in 'Furious 7' almost didn't happen* at: <https://www.businessinsider.in/One-of-the-most-insane-stunts-in-Furious-7-almost-didnt-happen/articleshow/46818645.cms> (accessed 12 March 2019).

Ramsay trying to hack the God's eye device, Brian getting into a fight with Kiet (played by martial arts star Tony Jaa), Dom going blow-for-blow with Deckard on top of a parking lot collapsing due to fire taken from Jakande's helicopter. The scene ends with Dom driving off the collapsing parking lot and tossing at the helicopter a bag of grenades subsequently shot up by Hobbs. Spectacles happening in different locations *simultaneously* and depicted through cross-cutting are also a staple of superhero movies.

While the SST in the *Fast and Furious* franchise has noticeably increased, the spatial characteristics have also changed. The "furious crew" may no longer operate in Los Angeles: it seems it is now imperative the action of any new *Fast and Furious* movie takes place in multiple locations all over the world: from Cuba to Russia, from Los Angeles to Abu Dhabi, America, Brazil, Mexico etc., although, obviously, since the spectacle sequences are shot in, for instance, the state of Georgia in order to lower filming costs, these locations are "faked", often times through clever usage of CGI (more on that in the last chapter of this essay).

The general narrative differences between the first *Fast and Furious* and its newest instalments could also be rendered as *local vs global*: the first movie focused on Los Angeles car culture, the seventh and eight are based on international espionage themes with *mcguffins* in the form of weapons of mass destruction. The spectacle sequences in the first movie are all about gradually building the characters and the focal points of a Donnie Brascoseque undercover cop plot – truck robberies, an undercover FBI agent posing as a street racer, a street racer dealing with family issues and disgruntled former associates, an undercover FBI agent gaining the trust of the street racer while putting his disgruntled former associates behind bars, more male bonding by racing, a desert drag race that puts the street racers friend in jeopardy and eventually leads to the revelation of the FBI agent's true identity. At the beginning, the seventh movie in the franchise pays homage to some spectacle scenes from the first (such as the desert drag racing sequence) and uses them to provide information about the state and motivations of key characters (Letty, Deckard Shaw). By the time the air drop commences, the spectacles turn into missions, as it were, having protagonists and antagonists perform different tasks and fight one another (Michelle Rodriguez vs Ronda Rousey, Paul Walker vs Tony Jaa, Jason Statham vs Vin Diesel etc.). The eighth movie's seven SAs, aside from being confrontations between the good guys and bad guys, contain one significant narrative element: Dom going rogue or switching sides whilst performing specific tasks. Interestingly, the very first SA in the movie (lasting 4 minutes and 29 seconds), a street race in Havana between Dom and a loan

shark, is entirely disconnected from the main plotline and serves only to reinforce the fact Dom likes racing and being honourable.

As is the case with *Die Hard*, gradually the *Fast and Furious* series became less occupied with formally creating a dense web of cause-and-effect relationships. The strategy of creating causes for future effects (so-called “dangling causes”) and establishing deadlines<sup>9</sup> was quite prominent in the first entry in the series. The spectacle sequences, generally terse but frequent, served to either key a story complication or resolve a previous one, for instance, the destruction of Connor’s car which he’d promised to give to Dom served to establish two lines of causality – gaining Dom’s trust and investigating Johnny Tran – which are subsequently developed in other spectacle sequences, like Connor sneaking into Tran’s garage, getting caught by Dom’s brother and acquiring a new car (the motif of owing Dom a “10-second car” remains an important theme right up until the end of the movie). In the latest instalments, most spectacle sequences take the form of elaborate, long antagonist-protagonist clashes while the dangling causes are usually introduced prior to them, therefore making the overall plot look like a string of missions, as it were.

### 2.3. Mad Max

George Miller and Byron Kennedy’s *Mad Max* series is credited with blazing a path not just for dystopian post-apocalyptic movies but for post-apocalypticism in general, embraced by so-called *maxploitation* films, countless dystopian-themed big budget pictures and video games. The *Mad Max* films are also prominent for their reliance on carnage, gas-guzzling machines slamming into one another at top speeds and death-defying stunts, all merged to form the unique atmosphere of madness and destitution permeating the wastelands.

In *Mad Max* (1979) we have approx. 49.5 minutes of SAs comprising 53% SST. The number of SAs is 15 for an SAL of 3.5 minutes, the longest SA being the first and final scenes lasting for roughly 10 minutes and 12 minutes respectively. *Mad Max 2: Road Warrior* (1981) features 54 minutes of SAs comprising 56% SST divided into 14 major SAs for an SAL of 3.9 minutes, the longest SA being the final car chase scene lasting 17 minutes and 4 seconds. *Mad Max 3: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) features 49 minutes of SAs comprising 46% SST divided into 15 SAs for an SAL of 3.5 minutes, the longest sequence being the final chase scene lasting 12 minutes and 20 seconds. Finally, the latest instalment, *Fury Road* (2016), features 65 minutes of SAs comprising 54% SST divided into

<sup>9</sup> D. Bordwell, *Anatomy of the Action Picture*, in: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/anatomy.php> (accessed 16 March 2019).

just 8 SAs for an SAL of 8.1 minutes, the longest sequence being a 16 minute, 55 second chase scene.

	No. of SAs	SAL	Longest SA	SST
<i>Mad Max</i> (1979)	15	3.5 min.	12 min. 25 s.	53%
<i>Road Warrior</i> (1981)	14	3.9 min.	17 min. 4 s.	56%
<i>Beyond Thunderdome</i> (1985)	15	3.5 min.	12 min. 20 s.	46%
<i>Fury Road</i>	8	8.1 min.	16 min. 55 s.	54%

As is the case with the *Fast and Furious* franchise, the latest instalment of the *Mad Max* series, released more than 30 years after the third movie, is an example of spectacle becoming more intense and condensed. The first movies devoted a larger portion of their spectacle sequences to develop the psychological make up of the characters: Max Rockatansky suffers emotional breakdowns and terrible nightmares in the wake of the death of his friend Goose, whose tempestuous but kind-hearted personality is visualised in at least three spectacle sequences; Toecutter's gang rapes and pillages while he threatens, torments and manipulates his men; finally, Max's psychological transformation into Mad Max is rendered expressly in the movie's final SAs. The second movie uses its SAs to outline core narrative elements. Fuel scarcity, an abandoned truck vital for hauling gas tankers and a pair of main villains are all introduced in the very first chase sequence. There are also at least two specific SAs devoted to emphasising the insanity and despondent homoeroticism of scavengers led by Humungus as well as an SA in which Max's Pursuit Special car is destroyed, leading to a change of heart and Max helping the wastelanders (the movie itself is a post-apocalyptic rendition of the western *Shane* from 1953). The third movie was the first to receive Hollywood backing and used its budget mostly to build a spectacular post-apocalyptic world divided into a few major set pieces, all of which were aesthetically different from one another, including a giant structure that housed hundreds of pigs as the source of Bartertown's energy (see Buckmaster, 2017, pp. 160-185). *Fury Road* does a lot of world-building (though differently than the third movie, more on that in the last chapter of this essay), but also goes back to its automotive roots, with all 8 SAs being stages of a single pursuit involving dozens of war machines. There is relatively little information about the characters provided during their course (these gaps are filled in by tie-in comic books and a sandbox video game), although the peculiar symbolism and slang terms thrown around by the characters convey general impressions about the world they inhabit. *Fury Road* exemplifies both the *condensation* and *intensification* of spectacle. The latest movie is



an even bigger onslaught on the senses than the previous ones: more cars, more explosions, more stunts, more vivid visuals, VFX etc. The narrative is simpler and driven by one dangling cause established at the very beginning.

## 2.4. Predator

The successful action movie *Predator* (1986), directed by John McTiernan and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, was followed by three direct sequels. Its titular highly skilled alien became so potent a figure it landed additional roles in comic books, novels and cross-over movies (the so-called Alien vs Predator series). I will focus on the four main movies of the franchise, which were released in 1987, 1990, 2010 and 2018.

The first *Predator* features 48 minutes of SAs comprising 45% SST. 19 SAs for an SAL of 2.5 minutes, the longest running 14 minutes and being a final showdown between Dutch and the predator. *Predator 2* (1990) features 55 minutes of SAs comprising 51% SST. 13 SAs for an SAL of 4.2 minutes, the longest segment being a showdown between the predator, Harrigan and the FBI crew running for 16 minutes and 50 seconds. *Predators* (2010) features 38.5 minutes of SAs comprising 38.5% SST. 22 SAs for a SAL of 1.7 minutes, the longest being an 8 minute, 32 second segment when the main heroes flee from one of the predators. The latest *Predator* (2018) features 51 minutes of SAs comprising 48% SST, divided into 22 SAs, the longest one running for 8 minutes and 55 seconds and occurring in the first act of the film.

	No. of SAs	SAL	Longest SA	SST
<i>Predator</i> (1986)	19	2.5 min.	14 min.	45%
<i>Predator 2</i> (1990)	13	4.2 min.	16 min. 50 s.	51%
<i>Predators</i> (2010)	22	1.7 min.	8 min. 32 s.	38,5 %
<i>Predator</i> (2018)	22	2.3 min.	8 min. 55 s.	48%

Statistically speaking, it is the second movie, surprisingly, which shows the biggest tendency towards spectacle condensation, while the last two are quantitatively closer to the original. Though it is not easy to specify the exact reasons<sup>10</sup>, the fourth movie, nonetheless, is the one that stands out the most.

We can use the distinction between *local* and *global* narratives to describe the changes this particular series has undergone. The first three movies, and especially the very first, are focused on particular locations (a jungle, future Los

<sup>10</sup> The script was supposedly written in just three weeks, see Jim & John Thomas, *Writers Commentary track*, *Predator 2* DVD: 20th Century Fox, 2005.

Angeles, a jungle on an unidentified planet inhabited by predators) whereas the latest one is more spatially diverse.

There is an unnerving, constant close proximity of danger that characterises the spectacle sequences in the first movie, a quality that also underpinned the close quarters action in *Die Hard*. There are at least 8 short SAs which show the predator's thermal vision from a first-person perspective, emphasising the theme of a hunter stalking its prey (thus, the tables are turned, the specialised commando squad led by Dutch is no longer hunting but being hunted). It takes the film almost 54 minutes before the alien's appearance is revealed. The second movie transports the gist of the first movie to an urban setting. SAs are less numerous, mainly because of the lack of short sequences gradually providing data on the alien (the creature is already known to the audience). The third movie in the franchise is set in a jungle, just like the first, but adds additional sci-fi elements: the action takes place on an unidentified alien planet (CGI used for world-building) and there are other alien species present.

The fourth movie, released in 2018, is by far the most noticeable detraction from the formula devised in the original. Firstly, it is more eclectic narratively and spectacle-wise: there is a "global" plot at work here (the predators want to conquer earth and one rogue predator decided to warn the humans) mobilising scientists, army snipers, dishonourably discharged PTSD-ridden soldiers, a super-intelligent autistic child and government agents. The action takes place in jungles, forests, schools, suburban stadiums, houses, motel rooms, military bases and secret government laboratories. The spectacle sequences, though generally varied, are mostly confrontations between humans and predators, some of them laced with humorous elements (there is virtually no comedic relief in the previous instalments), as the characters briskly move from one set piece to another, hence pretty much dispensing with the spatially focused tension of the previous films.

### 3. Summary

An analysis of mainstream blockbuster franchises reveals spectacle has undergone changes in the last few years. There are several observable tendencies:

1. *Condensation* – spectacle sequences tend to be longer.
2. *Formal variety* – spectacle sequences are more likely to be filmed from multiple perspectives, using a vast array of cameras. Furthermore, since they are often long-lasting sequences, they are turned into separate set pieces of sorts. The dominant style has grown beyond the *intensified continuity* matrix and has been affected by an accumulation of technical and formal novelties.

3. *Simultaneity* – this is especially the case in big-budget ensemble action films like *Fast and Furious* or the Marvel movies which have a “network” feel to them. Various spectacles (fights, shootouts, chases etc.) take place simultaneously in various locations.

4. *Technical Prowess* – generally, visual effects, especially digital ones, are more ubiquitous, though their nature is often complex and may serve a host of purposes, the one which the author of this article finds of particular note is the application of CGI and modern technological novelties in order to emphasise speed, movement and deliver visual attractions.

About *Big Sleep* (1946) director Howard Hawks famously said “the plot didn’t matter at all. All we were trying to do was make every scene entertain. I can’t follow the story. I saw some of it on TV the other night and I’d listen to some of the things (Bogart) would talk about it and it had me thoroughly confused” (Duncan, Muller, (ed.), 2018, p. 23). This intriguing statement about a movie lauded for its narration may be more apt for modern productions.

Although narration and storytelling are definitely still present in mainstream Hollywood fare, spectacle has undergone such diversification, condensation and “networking” that this leads to a potentially smaller focus on the psychology of screen characters and narrative complexity and a bigger emphasis on eliciting certain emotional, somatic and perceptive responses from the viewer.

Furthermore, what also seems to be lacking in modern mainstream action cinema is “ordinary people”, the kind of unlikely protagonists described by Geoff King, like Stanley Goodspeed in *The Rock* (1996), characters who don’t have a military-grade skillset but are forced to rise to the occasion, their emotional conflicts ever-present as they giddily fumble through spectacle scenes (King, 2000, pp. 104-106). Nowadays, the furious crew, comprising former street racers, police officers and hackers, takes on the most outlandish tasks without batting an eyelid, showing little fear, remorse or confusion as they fight evil not unlike their Marvel counterparts. Perhaps it is not that older action cinema was more plausible, but that it often tried to create a dense cause-and-effect web linking protagonists and antagonists in order to make the events seem more credible to the audience<sup>11</sup> – this theory, however, would require a more detailed analysis of a broad range of spectacle-filled films from across a few decades.

<sup>11</sup> Such “realism” and “verisimilitude” qualities being according to Bordwell vital for motivation-driven narrative cinema, see: D. Bordwell, J. Steiger, K. Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Routledge: 1985.

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## Abstract

The following article traces the historical development of the notion of spectacle. It first provides an outline of theoretical research on the subject, pointing out various interpretations and approaches. Secondly, comparative-quantitative analysis is used to compare several film series (*Die Hard*, *Fast and Furious*, *Mad Max*, *Predator*) in order to find what changes spectacle has undergone in mainstream action-adventure cinema, and to what extent these permutations have impacted the relationship between narration and spectacle. Finally, key takeaways are summarised and additional questions for future research posed.

**Key words:** attraction, spectacle, mainstream action cinema