

Visual Architecture in the Action Film

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1. The main reason for this essay was the bibliographical research that preceded it. The synergies of academic study and film analysis have determined a space for the action film which, if not residual, is at least marginal and ignored by scholars who have preferred to dedicate their works to Jean Renoir rather than John Frankenheimer, or to Orson Welles rather than Peter Yates. Manny Farber point this out in a different time and context, but the reflection suggests that the panorama hasn't changed much: "The saddest feature of cinema today is to see how long-disdained action film directors gradually disappear while less gifted directors like De Sica and Zinnemann continue to fascinate the critics" (FARBER, 2004:394). In a certain way, the intention is to overcome a kind of academically based classism, one that has relegated this particular film genre to a lower level ever since it became associated with mass entertainment and/or *cinema of attractions*. This tendency, more or less perpetuated, has allowed the intrinsic complexity of innumerable filmic texts located within the coordinates of the action genre, inside the boundaries of what is often hypocritically defined as commercial cinema (and therefore dismissed as object of study to the detriment of the clearly authorial works produced therein), to be excluded from a critical

historiography in which it has no place. It is not the objective of this article to patch up holes, or to call for the extension of the aforementioned synergies into fields of study never or seldom explored. Rather, it is to draw attention to this largely unjustified absence and, most of all, to propose models which, in a modest and not very delimited way, invite us to reflect on the question, and perhaps even to engage in a more thorough analysis that is less burdened by the complexities generic classifications.

2. The relationship and internal cohesion between the those sequences that best synthesize the essence of a film -and, depending on the case, of its director- is, together with or even ahead of the primary determining feature of a style, its basic conglomeration of meanings. I am referring to functionality and immersion, which are treated with emphasis on the connection established between the spectator and what is happening on the screen. I also refer to the spatial selection and geographical configuration that is capable of creating (or not) a specific scene, based on which it will achieve a greater or lesser degree of ubiquity. In short, it is a question of determining the visual architecture that structures the most defining and representative sequences of a specific example and/or action genre, a concept that is closely connected with the editing process and which is illustrated in the subdivision established by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (BORDWELL and THOMPSON, 1993:250) when they speak of the special relationships between a shot A and shot B. Without dismissing the other areas of election and control that comprise the so-called dimensions of editing (graphic, rhythmic and temporal), I will highlight the importance of spatial relationships in the functionality and immersive effectiveness of the sequences analysed.

3. In the interests of greater productivity, and guided merely by a sense of pragmatism, the corpus I will analyse will be that of the set piece, considering this the unit and statement that best synthesises the essences and meanings of the action genre. In terms of the aspects involved, those that interest me most for my purpose here are those referring to: a) the spectator's sensation of immersion in the scene, achieved through the relationships established between shots and spaces, with a special focus on ubiquity; b) the specific characteristics that give the chosen set piece a personality distinct from other examples of the genre, whether or not this results in an authorial signature; c) its spatial construction and geographical coherence in the process of meaning production, as well as the degree of skill with which these spaces are combined and the self-imposed limitations. It goes without saying that, semiotic intentions aside, it is necessary first to expose the clichés and rash preconceptions regarding the genre studied here, which are partly the legacy of a critical literature generally resistant to acknowledge the depth that the genre often displays.

Deconstructing the clichés

In general, action films have been subject to a laxer criticism that has taken little time to analyse the set piece as a basic structure of the grammar of a film. This has something to do with the categorisation of *minor genre* assumed almost unconsciously and automatically (which of course doesn't silence interesting voices in the field, such is Diego Salado's), which results not only in the practical exclusion of this analytical corpus from publications with a cinephile target readership, but also in the propagation of the clichés used to dismiss the question as swiftly as possible.¹ For example, the expression *video clip montage* is often used in reference to many titles and directors, but obviously this can't -or shouldn't be- used without distinction to refer to the flashy, epileptic edition of *Man on Fire* (Tony Scott, 2004) and the thunderous hyper-visibility of *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (Michael Bay, 2009). Nor could it be used to equate the immersive experience offered by Paul Greengrass' jittery, rapid-fire montage in *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004), with that provided by M. Night Shyamalan's unstable sequence shot in *The Last Airbender* (2009).

Each of these techniques each has a distinct configuration and materiality, was devised within a different set of parameters and requires a differentiated study adapted to its own particular characteristics. To this end, in the following sections I posit two contrapositions, with the intention of offering examples of the idiosyncrasies of the action piece and exploring its functionality in view of the aforementioned factors.

Contrapositions 1

The relationship between geographical space and visual architecture is extremely intimate in the film *The International* (Tom Tykwer, 2008), especially in its climax scene, a shoot-out in the Guggenheim Museum in New York.² Tykwer himself highlighted the importance of the architecture in the conception of his work: "this movie also looks at the role of architecture in our lives and how much it influences emotions. Expensive modern architecture has changed the skylines of so

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many big cities. It's fascinating architecture: it seems driven by a desire to exude clarity with its lines, yet at the same time it difficulties hard to read" (WIGLEY, 2009: 47). It would be quite reasonable to attribute this idea to the aforementioned sequence in the famous New York museum, which is a highly complex exercise in planning, visual structuring and editing which results in a set piece that is shrewd in its execution, and violent and dirty in its mood. The passage starts with a demarcation, in a single crane-shot, of the space and boundaries within which the action will take place, upon the entrance of the main character, Lou Salinger (Clive Owen). He is accompanied by other agents who, together with Salinger, are searching for a possible key-witness to uncover a plot involving corruption on a global scale. Salinger enters the lobby and keeps walking while raising his gaze to examine the interior of the building, a movement that is followed by the camera and that establishes the context with visual economy.

A few shots later, and before the shoot-out starts, we witness an example of a skilful use of space and of the possibilities of the setting. In the scene, Salinger and one of his companions are hiding behind one of the walls spying at their target, who is sitting on a bench next to the consultant from the international bank that they are investigating. When the latter leaves, the potential witness, played by Bryan F. O'Byrne, stands up, redirects his gaze as he walks and stops to stare thoughtfully at the enormous hanging crystals in the centre of the building. It is a shot that adopts his point of view and allows us to see Salinger's and his companion's reflections, and in the reverse shots we can see that they realise they have been discovered. This set of shots

maximises the perspective of each character and establishes a sense of ubiquity for the spectator that is maintained throughout this sequence: the audience may be disturbed by the fast pace and the sordid nature of the events, but it will always be from *inside* the images of the scene, immersed in a geographical logic that will prevent them from losing track of what is happening. The same occurs once the spectators are plunged into the heat of the action, where the keys of visual perspective prove to be vital. At one moment, we see a confrontation in the setting described above, but with the positions reversed: Salinger remains hidden in the background behind a corner of the wall, while now in the place he was spying before is one of the mercenaries who have burst into the museum, shooting at him. In the

exchange of gunfire and of camera shots, the field of vision of each character remains clear, information possessed by both the spectator and the characters themselves. However, this changes in the next shot: a high angle shot shows Salinger crouching down in his trench-corner and also reveals the lower floor of the Guggenheim, where we can see the advancing positions of the other two armed men. In this moment, the spectator is privileged with information that is unknown to the impromptu hero of the movie, a strategy that is repeated almost immediately, when Salinger catches sight of the (presumably) dead hand of the witness holding a gun and decides to move forward to reach it. But first, he turns around to offer a calming gesture to one of a museum visitor in a state of panic. The spectator's privilege of information over the character is repeated when we see, in the background, a figure crossing from one side to another to hide in a different corner without Salinger noticing. Immediately thereafter, we see our hero leaving his shelter and running for the gun, dodging the enemy fire on his way. But just as he is about to take the gun, a fleeting close-up shows us the hand holding it react and dodge Salinger's movement. In this way, Tykwer reveals that the character O'Byrne is not dead as we thought, and now he comes back into the action, this time to become an ally.

In the sequences described, the director always indicates an explicit desire to clarify the location of his characters on the screen, but also, and equally importantly, the location of the spectator who, depending on the needs of the action in each case, may be given more information than the characters have. Both patterns will be repeated throughout the sequence in order to establish

a dimension of ubiquity that is present both in a coherent, almost geometrical visual structuring and in the frames and the skilful use of every space and element of the setting.

I will now turn to an opposite example. The ending of *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) contains in turn up to four different endings established in different dream layers underlying the dream induced during a flight taken by the main characters (in theory, the real layer). In what would be equivalent to the third layer in this set of Russian dolls, the characters, played by Leonardo DiCaprio et al., seek to infiltrate a snowy mountain fortress guarded by a small army, with the aim of breaking into its vault. Outdoors, the expedition is divided into various groups and Eames, the character played by Tom Hardy, must do whatever he can to distract their enemies and keep them away from the fortress. As a result, various lines within the same dream layer intersect, and Nolan needs only a few shots to introduce a chase scene on skis reminiscent of the one in *The Spy Who Loved Me* (Lewis Gilbert, 1977). However, if we look closely to the shots that precede it, a succession of shots only a few seconds long is enough to provoke disorientation and a loss of ubiquity: in a lateral close-up, we see Eames talking to Cobb (DiCaprio) by intercom; in the background, in a frontal shot between the trees, a vehicle arrive with enemies who spot Eames; after further intercutting with other plotlines in progress, we see these enemies shoot at Eames; the next shot shows us the marksman

on top of the vehicle, shooting off-camera to the right, i.e., towards the same position that Tom Hardy occupied in previous shots, breaking the sense of the visual axis established between the two characters; we go back to Eames, who moves quickly to find shelter from the gunfire and rises to leave the shot on the right; the marksman makes signs to other soldiers to go after the fugitive; and we see Eames jumping over a hill from the left on skis, the jump that initiates the chase. The problem that drags down this sequence lies both in a lack of consistent match cuts -all the actions, even though they occur at different and/or opposite points, move from left to right- and in the chaotic distribution



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of the few characters that appear, which fails to describe with visual logic the exchange of gunfire or the moment when Tom Hardy's character decides to escape on skis; his appearance in the last shot on the left side of the screen is as surprising as it is hasty, as he flees down a hill that we didn't even know existed because it hadn't been shown to us before. In this sense, this scene is far from Nolan's best sequences as an action film director, such as the bank robbery in the opening scene of *The Dark Knight* (2008) skilfully organized into three phases, also visual, or the fight in the rotating hallway in *Inception*, in which audience engagement is ensured through a single shot that gives room for the



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real source of fascination: the suspension of the laws of physics as the main conditioning factor of the hand-to-hand combat between the two opponents.

Contrapositions 2

Indeed, the immersive experience offered to the spectator in the rotating hallway scene is not far from that offered by the most interesting moments in *The Last Airbender*. In this film, based on Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko's American *anime* produced and broadcasted by Nickelodeon, director M. Night Shyamalan opted for a highly uncommon method of depicting the action: the camera as a fluid and almost uninterrupted companion, with minimal editing mediation. Consider, for example, one of the first fight scenes in the film: the main characters Aang (Noah Ringer), Sokka (Jackson Rathbone) and Katara (Nicola Peltz) find themselves surrounded by masters of the Fire Nation. The confrontation has a clearly defined geographical centre, occupied by the three aforementioned characters, around which is arranged a ring of enemies. When the fighting starts, the camera begins a light rotation over this gravitational centre, offering different angles on the action. It is strategically placed behind one of the masters of the Fire Nation, and it is then that a stone hits the soldier's head from behind. At this

moment, the action expands beyond the defined centre and ring and opens the range to take in the people of the Earth Nation who, up until then, had been passive spectators, too afraid to interfere. The shot thus leaves the centre and moves to follow the attacks exchanged between the masters and the villagers, following the elements that they control and leading to new points of attention. For example: the soldier taken by surprise from behind turns around to counterattack; enraged, he throws a blaze of fire at the villager, and the camera follows it until it hits a wall that rises suddenly out of the ground; when the camera breaks through the cloud of smoke caused by the impact of fire and wall, we see the villager who has raised this wall, thereby initiating a new direction for the action. What follows is a succession of comings and goings between two concentric areas of action, attacks being showed without losing the continuity of the sequence shot and ultimately leading back to the starting point.³

On the opposite extreme we find action filmed with self-conscious hyper-visibility of the image, a painstaking maximisation in editing that offers the gaze a different kind of immersion, directly connected to the visual frenzy and, occasionally, to the simulation of a first-hand experience. In *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004) and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), the last two films

in Robert Ludlum's trilogy, director Robert Greengrass⁴ explores this visual planning in some of the set pieces that best represent the cinematic saga. The chase scenes in Moscow and New York at the end of these films, for example, are paradigmatic both of Greengrass' rapid-fire montage and aesthetics of hyper-visible realism sustained by various strategies. One of these, without doubt, is of the jittery camera or *shaky cam*, which is used even more lavishly inside the car driven by Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) than in the shots that visually situate the progress of the chase. In these moments the shaking camera responds and contributes to Bourne's lack of control, adopting positions and rapid movements that could be those of a hysterical passenger or of Bourne himself, supplanting his gaze in the brief glances he shoots at the rear-view mirror. The other aspect that supports the submersion is the conception of both chases as experiences that are not only essentially unpleasant, but also clearly violent, in which the audience must experience the impact as if they were inside the vehicle or direct victims of a hit and run. This is how the producer Frank Marshall explains it in one of the documentaries about the production of *The Bourne Supremacy*: "Dan Bradley had the idea of putting the audience inside the car with Bourne, so they could experience the chase from the inside."⁵ And Bradley himself adds: "...the idea is every camera's moving. It's all loose or hand-held." In this sense, the camera is in constant motion and is shaken forcefully when inside the car, next to the character in the moments of the chase. Outside the car, the camera becomes a *crash cam*, i.e., a camera that occupies the position of the headlight that is smashed in a crash or that is placed at the point of impact, adopting the consequent synergy of movement behind it. In effect, the aim is to render the scene with a physical harshness beyond the usual, imposing the direct impact of the collision on the audience through planning and editing strategies.

Epilogue: The real video clip aesthetic

In such a generic and succinct study, it is difficult to cover such a broad field to reach any specific conclusions. The only reasonable conclusion, perhaps, would be to recognize the heterogeneity of the systems of representation in the action film, and the impossibility of standardising visual procedures and strategies when involving the spectator. This is why it is unfeasible to describe the genre using a single analytical criterion, or to proclaim the video-clip aesthetic to be the ultimate outcome of any maximisation of cinematographic montage. In other words, to use an ill-conceived generalisation that often ignores the fact that this aesthetic doesn't exist, and, if it did, is far too vague to be meaningful. The possibilities of the video clip are as wide as

the audiovisual spectrum itself, with all its consequent and almost infinite combinations. Therefore, of the terms discussed here the closest one to a certain degree of truth can be found in a film that is fully conscious of this inexhaustible multiplicity. *Crank* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2006) is the impossible paradigm for this kind of work, a rare example that challenges all the habitual narrative constructions (by approximation, the role model would be the well-known saga of video games *Grand Theft Auto*, where the action is constructed on the way, without even a synopsis to guide the narrative) to carry out an unpredictable and stimulating exploration of audiovisual possibilities. A scene that synthesizes this consciousness shows Chev

Chelios (Jason Statham) running frantically after finding out that if his adrenaline level drops, the poison that has been injected into his blood will kill him. While on the run, Chelios calls a doctor friend on his mobile phone to ask him for a solution: at one moment we see him running down some hallways, but we can also see the doctor on the other end of the line, whose projection fleetingly appears on the walls that flank Chelios. The levels of representation of both sides of the line are overlapped and superimposed in a single place that could be that of a visual alternative of the future: of the real video clip aesthetic, i.e., of multiplicity as the true common ground for in-depth exploration. ■

THE ONLY REASONABLE CONCLUSION, PERHAPS, WOULD BE TO RECOGNIZE THE HETEROGENEITY OF THE SYSTEMS OF REPRESENTATION IN THE ACTION FILM, AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF STANDARDISING VISUAL PROCEDURES AND STRATEGIES WHEN INVOLVING THE SPECTATOR

Notes

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- 1 Another topic for exploration would be where the frontiers between analysis and criticism begin and end, the boundaries between two fields that are discussed in the section *(Dis)agreements* in this issue, with regard to debate over the state of criticism in Spain. In any case, criticism usually treats the set piece superficially, in mere praise or description, while analysis rarely enters into these kinds of discussion.
- 2 The scene required a couple of weeks and a high level of destruction, making it impossible to shoot it in the original location -only a few shots of the characters entering the building were filmed there. Instead, the location was reconstructed in sixteen weeks out of an old locomotive warehouse in Babelsberg, near Berlin, with similar dimensions.
- 3 The particular way in which Shyamalan decided to shoot the fight scenes extends to other sequences in the film; for example, the scene where Prince Zukko (Dev Patel) practices his fire-handling skills. From afar, the camera films the bodies in combat from waist up, and moves between some very narrow frames, never losing Prince Zukko as its visual centre. Later, a

change of shot leaves the rest of the action to take place in the background, at a distance.

- 4 It should be noted that, although Greengrass was the film's director, he delegated the shooting of the action scenes to the second unit, headed by Dan Bradley, who, for example, was the main person responsible for the New York car chase scene that closes *The Bourne Ultimatum*, which I analyse in this article.
- 5 The declarations made by Marshall and Bradley can be found in the documentary *Crash Cam: Running at Full Speed on the Streets of Moscow*, in the DVD edition of *The Bourne Supremacy*.

The International (Tom Tykwer, 2008)



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