

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Shrapnel!

In its fixation with the rules of the genre *Last Action Hero* exposed its fundamental point of misrecognition: the primary error of *Last Action Hero* was its inability to recognise that the rules of the action genre do not exist, rather they ex-sist! It is at this point where the strands of Lacan and the four discourses, genre theory, and action films are intrinsically tangled. The thread that knots genre study with Lacan resides in the split that though the consensus of genre theorists is that genres are easily recognisable, what precisely constitutes this recognition consistently eludes description. In particular, the logic of the action universe resists inscription in the realm of language as evidenced in the failure of lists to organise the rules of genres into what Bordwell calls a “coherent map”<sup>1</sup>. To paraphrase Altman, while we all know the rules when we see them, as there is not a singular essence of these rules, these rules are impossible to articulate. The impossibility of articulating something that is nevertheless recognised highlights the advantage of Lacan’s schema of the four discourses. The four discourses include precisely what escapes language: the object *a*, the object which resists articulation, as it is “the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier.”<sup>2</sup> In short, the object *a* resists articulation as it is literally, “the bone which got stuck in the subject’s throat”<sup>3</sup>. Like Lacan’s concept of the woman, though the rules of the action genre are recognisable, they still resist articulation. In other words, when it comes to the rules of the action genre, to recall Žižek, they encapsulate “the impossible-real kernel resisting symbolisation.”<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding the impossibility of the task, *Last Action Hero*’s title stands as a tribute, albeit flawed, to its attempt to have the final word in the action film rules, definitions and points of recognition.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 147.

<sup>2</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental*, 270.

<sup>3</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy*, 117.

<sup>4</sup> Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 137.

The impossibility of inscribing the rules of the action genre derives in the first place from the legacy of the master. The dominant discourse of action films—the master’s discourse—binds action films with other genres such as, “westerns. Swashbucklers, war films, disaster films, space operas, epics, safari films, jungle films, and so on.”<sup>5</sup> Throughout, the ‘masculine’ genres present us with structurally identical films but with different, yet varying, signifiers. The difficulty in distinguishing such films from the action universe, as lists illustrate, is that they all follow same structure: they celebrate the same master but with a changed backdrop, landscape, icons, or other features, The lack of any new positive content means that such genres elude all attempts to pinpoint precisely their differences. This is particularly the case with the action genre which lacks a consistent point of recognition.

It is this lack of a tangible defining point that causes a return to the past to uncover more of the similarities assumed to be sustained by the action genre with its predecessors. Given that the master’s discourse is dominant within the ‘masculine’ genres, it is easy to see the threads from the ‘sensational melodrama’ or the ‘thriller melodramas’ to the action film. But what emerges from the discussion about action and the sensational melodrama is the key point that the identification of action films rests with words such as ‘speed’, ‘spectacle’, ‘fights’ and ‘suspense’. Thus the danger of an appeal to history for an answer, as Tasker points out, is that it results in a re-emphasis on “action as a spectacular rather than a narrative cinema.”<sup>6</sup> The focus on the spectacle is necessary for the action cinema as, unlike the war film or the western which are identified by their content, one of the problems of the action genre’s identity is that there is no positive content to separate it from the changing face of the ‘sensational melodrama’ other than the descriptives already apparent in its predecessors.

For the action film, nothing suffices to classify it as a separate entity; there is no object or particular affect that offers a basic point of recognition. Richard Matlby claims that are two fundamental ways of classifying genres, the first identifying

---

<sup>5</sup> Steve Neale, ‘Action-Adventure as Hollywood Genre’, in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 74.

<sup>6</sup> Tasker, Introduction, 7.

Generic categories such as ‘the thriller’ or ‘the weepie’...by the affect or emotional reaction they produce. Other descriptions, particularly of the action movies likely to appeal to a predominantly male audience, such as ‘the Western’ or ‘science fiction,’ concern themselves primarily with content. These methods of classification may be incompatible if the objective is to produce a single coherent system of movie genres, but for everyday purposes they indicate the ways in which categorical systems intersect and overlap, confirming that the distinctions we make do not have to be either precise or mutually exclusive. Genres are flexible, subject to constant process of change and adaptation.<sup>7</sup>

For the action film, this approach is insufficient as there is neither a fixed object nor an affect to ground its recognition. Though the action genre is famously linked with the masculine, the lack of a particular object or emotional response gives the action universe a broad scope of variations, which is why action films are encountered in a range of settings. As Tasker indicates:

Most contemporary or post-classical action films are indeed more or less hybrids, drawing on and combining generic plots, settings and character types from sources including science-fiction, the western, the horror, the epic, war films, crime cinema and thrillers, disaster movies, swordplay and martial arts, even comedy.<sup>8</sup>

Inasmuch as the object (or affect) can determine a genre’s category, it is, however, not the crucial point of recognition. What is important to note is that the types (or sub-classification) of a genre depend on the relation to the affect or object at stake. Hence while, for instance, a war film is still a war film, no matter how you look at it, nevertheless there are subtleties that help distinguish its ‘type’. As Basinger explains:

The war film itself does not exist in a coherent generic form. Different wars inspire different genres. ‘War’ is a setting, and it is also an issue. If you fight it, you have a combat film; if you sit at home and worry about it, you have a family or domestic film; if you sit in board rooms and plan it, you have a historical biography or a political film of some sort. It’s very hard to be in war and not be in combat.<sup>9</sup>

Though war is an object, a film’s relation to the object determines its classification.

Lacan’s theory of discourse emphasises precisely the relation to the object, or the Other; just as in a generic recognition based on relation to object and affect, the sub-classifications of a genre are based on its relationship to the object/Other, and

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 75.

<sup>8</sup> Tasker, Introduction, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 10.

in this particular resides the advantage that discourse has over theories of ‘production cycles’.

One way to account for the differences evident in generic groupings is to describe the movement as a ‘cycle’ or ‘evolution’ of the genre. In this connection Maltby observes that there is a tendency within genre theory to view a genre’s history “as an evolution from growth to maturity to decay, or a development from the experimental to the classical to the elaborated to the self-referential, ‘from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism.’”<sup>10</sup> However, the flaw of viewing genres as production cycles is that these “genre histories...do not so much provide an accurate chronological account as delineate a body of works, a canon of texts, to be compared with each other.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike production cycles which are grounded by restrictions of chronological time, the advantage of discursive ‘cycles’ is that they articulate the ways in which a genre relates to the object or affect in question.

The effect of discourse potentially takes virtually identical conventions and places them into another generic category altogether. By way of example, take the war, or the anti-war film, as compared with the action genre. Though the war and anti-war films resembles the action film in many ways, discourse alters identical conventions and signifiers and thereby positions the war films to be recognised as such. The hysteric’s discourse puts features, otherwise identical to the action film, into the realm of the war genre. At first glance, listing the action film’s features against the war (as well as the anti-war) film highlights the similarities between the genres. As Michael Hammond’s summation shows, war epics such as

The Big Parade (1925), Wings (1927), All Quiet on the Western Front (1930), They Were Expendable (1945), Paths of Glory (1957), The Longest Day (1962), Beach Red (1967), The Big Red One (1980) or even Apocalypse Now (1979) or Platoon (1986)...contain all of the elements expected of an action movie; spectacles of violence, fast editing and/or camera movement, sweeping landscapes, heroics by the characters, dangerous foes and they were also accompanied by big soundtracks...<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Maltby, 85.

<sup>11</sup> Maltby, 85.

<sup>12</sup> Hammond, 153.

But there is always something that separates the action from the war film. For Hammond the difference rests in the music: “While the accompanying soundtrack of action films are loud in your face Dolby Digital or THX aural spectacle, that of the epic war film, whether ‘new Hollywood’, ‘classical Hollywood’ or ‘pre-classical spectacular’, possesses an underlying obligato of melancholy.”<sup>13</sup> The difference between action and the war film can be pinpointed to a hysterical reaction against the master.

Though the obvious point of distinction rests in its content, what is more important here is the war film’s approach to its content. That is to say, the source of the war’s melancholy derives from the emphasis on the pointlessness of war. As a protest against violent action, the contemporary American war film is largely hysterical in its persistent resistance and by its attention on the unanswered questions produced by that war. The hysteric’s discourse is dominated by, as Mark Bracher puts it, “the search of meaninglessness for a meaning.”<sup>14</sup> A film such as *Apocalypse Now* illustrates the logic of the hysterical structure, as exemplified by Francis Ford Coppola’s statement that

I feel any artist making a film about war by necessity will make an ‘anti-war’ film and all war films are usually that. My film is more of an ‘anti-lie’ film, in that the fact that a culture can lie about what’s really going on in warfare, that people are being brutalized, tortured, maimed and killed, and somehow present this as moral horrifies me, and perpetuates the possibility of war.<sup>15</sup>

Coppola’s need to expose the lies of war equates to the hysterical need to challenge the master yet, at the same time, find some meaning to an essentially meaningless event. Instances of discourse of protest for a reaction from the master (America) sprinkled throughout the narrative include Captain Willard’s (Martin Sheen) ‘Oh man, the shit piled up so fast in Vietnam you needed wings to stay above it.’

The hysterical fantasy invests as master the one who knows. Accordingly, in exposing the lies of America (the master), the narrative of *Apocalypse Now* literally follows Captain Willard’s quest for answers. From the outset, Willard imbues

---

<sup>13</sup> Hammond, 153.

<sup>14</sup> Bracher, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Ford Coppola as quoted in promotional booklet with *Apocalypse Now: Redux* DVD release, May 2001

Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando) with a mystique: ‘I couldn’t believe they wanted this man dead...I’d heard his voice on the tape, and it really put the hook in me, but I couldn’t connect up that voice with this man.’ Likewise, when he discovers that Kurtz renounced his impressive career to do Airborne Training, he asks himself, ‘Why the fuck would he do that?’ Willard endows Kurtz with a special knowledge: for Willard, Kurtz is the answer. Though the low angle mid-close ups of Kurtz were motivated to minimise the impact of Brando’s weight (he could not fit into a Green Beret colonel uniform), it nevertheless created a god-like effect, which was heightened by shots of the masses around him, the fawning photo-journalist (Dennis Hopper), and the framing of his final stand with a silhouette of smoke. Though the hysteric sets up the master, the hysteric is the one who, as Verhaeghe points out, “also unmask[s] him.”<sup>16</sup> The unmasking of the powerful figure is mirrored in *Apocalypse Now*’s casting of icons like Dennis Hopper and Marlon Brando. In presenting the impossibility of the heroic, *Apocalypse Now* literally sets up the heroes of Hollywood to be destroyed, stripped of their mystique, and celebrates their non-conformity. Neither Brando or Hopper are cast favourably and both play figures which are exposed to being ridiculous. Fittingly, for the hysterical discourse of *Apocalypse Now*, the final scenes revolve precisely around the destruction of a master. The senseless violence of Kurtz’s slaughter is traced to the Willard’s realisation of his being reduced to an object. This displacement of the master’s fall to Kurtz (from America) also explains the initial caution against the production of *Rambo: First Blood*.

Though the *Rambo* film series are iconic action-adventure films, the process of making them was initially plagued with challenges from studio dictates, as the comments of Michael Kozoll’s, screenwriter of *Rambo: First Blood*, reveal:

the last war Kozoll wanted to glorify was Vietnam, which had horrified him... Kozoll’s 1980 script, though substantially tamped down from Rabe’s, still veered too close to the truth for any studio’s comfort. ‘You have to understand,’ Kozoll said, ‘that this movie was done in an atmosphere where Warner Bros. said to us, “Absolutely nobody wants to see a movie about the Vietnam War!”’<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Verhaeghe, 111.

<sup>17</sup> Micheal Kozoll as quoted in Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1999), 394–395.

Kozoll's remarks illustrate how the content—the Vietnam War—was negatively associated with interrogation. Similarly, Thomas Doherty remarks, “As a high-concept motion picture material...Vietnam was a hard sell. For nearly a decade, Hollywood ignored it.”<sup>18</sup> The producers' repugnance of *Rambo* was occasioned by the fact that it was initially pitched as a Vietnam film. Presumably, the producers anticipated that a victorious tribute to America would be more successful than a film which would highlight the “uncertainly, incompetence, impotence” of America.<sup>19</sup>

The change of approach to Vietnam turned on the consideration that rather than presenting a quest for answers, the focus shifted to the retrieval of veterans. In liberating the American POW, extraction films, including *The Delta Force*, *Iron Eagle 1* and *2*, *The Rescue*, *Uncommon Valor*, *Let's Get Harry*, and *Navy SEALs*,<sup>20</sup> all celebrated the overcoming of obstacles and America's power. The popularity of this movement, for Doherty was based on a need to present *the* reality:

As if in penance for the excesses and duplicities of the past, the Vietnam combat film embraced a stony cynicism and brutal realism—or at least it appeared to. In the fanciful action-adventures of Chuck Norris (*Missing in Action*, 1984; *Missing in Action 2—The Beginning*, 1985; and *Braddock: Missing in Action III*, 1988) and Sylvester Stallone (*Rambo: First Blood Part 2*, 1985), the rollicking matinee spirit lives, but reflection and seriousness dominate the genre, and not just the works of big-gun auteurs. The Hollywood film depicting combat in Vietnam presents itself as no blood-and-guts Hollywood fantasy, but the genuine item, one step removed from actually being in the bush.<sup>21</sup>

The movement away from the hysterical challenge, which emphasises the confusion and questions generated by war, relied on the presentation of the progression of a whole, complete hero. Rather than dwell obsessively on the exposure of the master as Willard's complaint, ‘Oh man, the shit piled up so fast in Vietnam you needed wings to stay about it’ exemplifies, the triumph of the action film was that it presented us the illusion of the infallibility of the master. Thus in the action universe those whom epitomised ‘Americanness’ are guaranteed safety (or at least, nobility) and in doing so, this world conformed to the desire to believe in the completeness of

---

<sup>18</sup> Doherty, 282.

<sup>19</sup> Doherty, 294.

<sup>20</sup> Doherty, 294.

<sup>21</sup> Doherty, 287.

the master. In short, the transformation from anti-war to ‘the reality’ lies in the turn from the backdrop of anxiety produced by the interrogation of the master to the guarantee of the security of the Father’s Law.

The distinguishing point of both the anti-war film and the post-action arrives in the degree of their turns from the master. From the hysterical turn from quest to saving, then follows the turn to perversion. It is through analysis that action’s points of recognition are highlighted. In showing power in fluidity, fantasy, and in the outwitting of the audience, the effect is twofold. The attention to fireballs, shoot-outs and the spectacle of bodies in the post-action is often drawn out and exaggerated. This attention implicitly emphasises action points of recognition and also broadens the scope of landscape. However, the primary point of recognition still eludes identification!

The impossibility of John McTiernan’s assurances of “having fun” with the action genre’s ‘formula’ lies in its persistence to observe the ‘rules’ of the genre, of which there are none! The only things defining the action genre are speed, spectacle, suspense and fights, which are found across genres, and which determined that *Last Action Hero*’s constraint of imaginary dictates would be doomed to failure. In other words, ensnaring the film’s logic within the university discourse, with the result, as Jonathon Romney’s review argues, that the problem of *Last Action Hero* is that it “gets bogged down in pedantic niggling about conventions. The boy Danny is a real pain in this respect, a genre diehard who wants everything to conform to a fictional template.”<sup>22</sup> This duty to the rules is particularly apparent in the scene when Jack Slater first encounters pain. The supposed joke here is that as an action hero he has never experienced the agony of wounds; however, rather than playing on the comedy of Schwarzenegger wincing and crying like a baby, *Last Action Hero* reverts to the standard presentation of the hero as strong and invincible; in other words, although this scene aimed to play with the rules, it was trapped by them.

In keenly anticipating the rules of the genre *Last Action Hero* was caught in a fantasy. In this very gesture we encounter an exemplification of the university discourse in its concern with the ‘secret’ of formula. To return to John Mc Tiernan’s comment,

---

<sup>22</sup> Romney, 34.



Audiences have caught on to the formula, so to make things interesting again we're having fun with that. We used the audience's knowledge of the genre as the basis of our jokes.<sup>23</sup>

Inasmuch as the film is claimed to understand the formula—and notwithstanding that McTiernan had past success with *Die Hard*, *Predator* and *The Hunt For Red October*—nevertheless this 'formula' remained a mystery to its makers, thereby negating any possibility that the film had of relating to the defining object (or affect) of the genre. Considering the university discourse is driven by a demand that, as Loretta Monaco claims, has “the Object embody the idealised signifiers of the institution—the family, the church, the state—and all its values, the fantasy of the University Discourse is that this will induce a conformity and obliterate the possibility of a discordant discourse,”<sup>24</sup> the result was that *Last Action Hero* was forced to presume the identifying object of the action genre. Hence it was caught in the trap of presenting conventions that did not resemble those encountered in the action universe. In its presumption of knowledge *Last Action Hero* could not add anything new to the genre. Consequently, it was nothing more than a clumsy exercise in reinforcing imaginary rules. Indeed, the real mistake of *Last Action Hero* was its attempt to solidify the rules of the genre. As one reviewer observed, “by mixing destruction with deconstruction, Arnold shoots himself in the foot.”<sup>25</sup>

In its attempt to illustrate and solidify the conventions of the action genre, *Last Action Hero* exemplified the logic of the university in its simultaneous claim to produce the point of recognition of the action universe by parodying the rules of the genre, and by its obsessive regression to the order of the master (the perceived formula of action). Alternatively, the four discourses delineate the other ways that action films may relate to the vague landmarks of generic rules. The dominance of the master's discourse within the action genre offers a neat point of identification; but while the masculine logic offers an easy point of recognition of the action genre, the identity of action universe does not stop here. Although the master's discourse assumes the rules of the universe, the distinct approaches to the action universe

---

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Stoddard, 36.

<sup>24</sup> Monaco, Loretta, 'Comments', available at < <http://www.lacan.com/hsacer.htm>>.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, 49.

emerge in their relation to such 'rules'. The university discourse attempts to freeze the rules of the genre, and the post-action uses the analyst's discourse to pervert and cheat the expectations associated with the rules of a genre, while the hysterical break is where we do not encounter the action genre as such.

The post-action, however, expands on the action's logic and feeds the monstrous appetite of the pit of action's points of recognition. The post-action's foundation of the analyst's discourse, which cheats and perverts our expectations causes "us to revise our expectations, not redefine."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, to the extent that the post-action foregrounding of fantasy frequently places the post-action into the realm of the sci-fi,<sup>27</sup> and because it exploits the expectations created by the action framework, and moreover, because it does not slavishly follow a formula or the rules of the action rules, the end result is that it adds to our expectations of the action genre.

As much as masculine logic may provide an easy point of recognition for the action genre, the genre is not wholly bound by this structure. If anything, the inclusion of other discourses produces new expectations and brings new heroes to the fore. Moreover, it is apparent that the aim of post-action is to revise meanings by producing a new master. These considerations reveal the basic disingenuousness of *Last Action Hero's* title. In spite of its attempt to solidify the rules and boundaries of the action genre, the post-action proved the impossibility of *Last Action Hero's* pronouncement. The trap of post-action produces a new master, ensuring that there will always be a new master, or worse, a new action hero

---

<sup>26</sup> Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 148.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. films such as *Face/Off* and *The Matrix*.