

CHAPTER TWO

Ballistics!

Modifying the Action Universe

Characterising *Last Action Hero* is its obsessional approach to reproducing the formula of the action genre. For director John McTiernan, his imaginary blueprint of action films was central to the mechanisms of *Last Action Hero*. At the film's release he observed:

I think the action genre is particularly ripe for this kind of movie...Some people think they can make action movies by formula and have repeated the same thing time and again...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.¹

However, the care taken to replicate and to upstage the formula of action genre films resulted in some dramatic alterations not typically associated with the genre. One of the more significant variations was the role of language. The association between action and language was highlighted by the role taken by the parents of Austin O'Brien (the boy who played Danny) in controlling the universe of *Last Action Hero*. In a promotional piece for the film, it was revealed that Austin O'Brien's parents

insisted on keeping their son's lines clean in the Shane Black/David Arnott script. They were adamant that he not swear in the film.... 'We absolutely will not take the Lord's name in vain,' Austin's mother, Valerie O'Brien, said. 'If it came to that, we would walk. They'd have to find someone else. And they were really great about it. They took all the swear words out.'²

In their victory over profanity what Austin O'Brien's parents achieved was far greater than the simple act of censorship, for they exemplified an approach to replicating the formula *with modifications*. These modifications effectively enabled the transformation of the action universe from a gritty, violent, tough-speaking world

¹ As quoted in Maynard Good Stoddard, review of *Last Action Hero*, directed by John McTiernan, *Saturday Evening Post* 265.4 (1993), 36

² As quoted in Stoddard, 36.

into a clean, obsessive one. Danny thus recognises an action world that is not really easily identifiable as such. Are cartoon cats a readily recognisable feature of *action* films? Have heroes ever deigned to partner with prepubescent boys? Do the characters of action films carefully avoid saying ‘shit’?

What the creators of *Last Action Hero* missed in their fixation to ‘correct’ language, was the consideration that altering the language is to alter with the underpinnings of the action genre. Though it is frequently acknowledged that in the action film “the body takes primacy over voice in the genre,”³ and notwithstanding that the genre tends to minimise language in favour of a highly visual spectacle, discourse offers the all-important point of definition. One of the defining characteristics of the action hero is his or her way with words. The ‘old-school’ action hero rarely speaks, as epitomised in characters played by Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Chris Holmlund observes that these action heroes “prefer fighting to talking.”⁴ Similarly, Steve Neale comments that the male action hero is commonly recognised for not only his “emotional reticence, but also a reticence with language,”⁵ and Yvonne Tasker argues that the verbal dimension of the hero “is often played down in a cinematic tradition which is so centrally to do with the spectacle of the body.”⁶ While earlier action films were famous for their use of isolated one-liners, the use of one-liners in action films after *Die Hard* (1988) increased. *Die Hard* created a shift in the hero’s verbal approach, as noted by Martin Flanagan:

Action narratives have become progressively more self-conscious, however, the macho archetype has undergone a subtle deconstruction. In 1988, *Die Hard*’s John McClane represented a movement away from the model of the cruel,

³ Jennifer M. Bean, "'Trauma Thrills': Notes on Early Action Cinema", in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004) 17.

⁴ Chris Holmlund, “Masculinity as Multiple Masquerade: The ‘mature’ Stallone and the Stallone Clone,” *Screening the Male: Exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 224.

⁵ Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema', *Screen* 24.6 (1983), 7.

⁶ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 86.

intractable hero, aligning the character with the wisecracking star persona of Bruce Willis and shifting the emphasis slightly from body to voice.⁷

Action heroes thereafter were transformed, in that they constantly had something clever to say. Nevertheless, the consistency throughout these variations is that the masculinity of the action genre is always defined by hero's lack of timidity with language. In fact, as Tasker notes, the more that one speaks in the action universe, the more the character is marked out "as weak and unthreatening."⁸ So while the action hero is typified by a fearlessness in letting the 'head honchos' know *exactly* what he thinks. However, for *Last Action Hero*, the controlled approach to language is symptomatic of a discourse that exercises a very cautious attempt to unmask the conventions, inconsistencies and ridiculousness of the action genre.

The commonplace assumptions of the action universe begin with the alleged stupidity of both the hero and the narrative itself and, by implication, the audience as well. Thus the action film is frequently characterised as 'dumb' entertainment. In Tasker's words, the action genre is famous for offering "'dumb movies for dumb people', [consequently] the critical characterisation of muscular cinema [is] retrograde entertainment for those who know no better."⁹ Though this belief is primarily grounded in action's relationship to language, the groundwork of action's stupidity also lies in its emphasis on the visual over the verbal, as Bean's comment illustrates:

The action film 'speaks' through visual spectacle, that spectacle, in fact, takes precedence over narrative meaning. The humorous pith verging on bald contempt with which these 'mindless spectacles' are so often received reinforce what we already presume to know: action cinema is bad cinema; its aesthetics (if we can use that word) are rude, its pleasures suspicious.¹⁰

Among what would be regarded by some as the crimes of the action genre, its films supposedly fail to produce anything beyond the simplistic narrative formula and heightened spectacle. It is this consideration which has given rise to the conviction that the action universe consists of unvarying features including, as Michael Hammond outlines, "spectacles of violence, fast editing and/or camera

⁷ Martin Flanagan "'Get ready for Rush Hour'", 112.

⁸ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 87.

⁹ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 107.

¹⁰ Bean, 17.

movement, sweeping landscape, heroics by the characters, dangerous foes...also accompanied by big soundtracks.”¹¹ Supplementing this list is Tico Romao’s inclusion of the car chase.¹² Further additions to this list include Neale’s observation that there is an emphasis on “tongue-in-cheek humour and tongue-in-cheek knowingness [that] are as common in swashbucklers as they are in modern action-adventure films”¹³ and Flanagan’s comment regarding the underlying politics. To Flanagan, the action blockbuster has a “tendency to portray American institutions at the mercy of Middle-Eastern zealots or European nihilists, highlight[ing] the political conservatism that frequently pervades the form.”¹⁴ Though the action genre encompasses a broad scope of forms and offers a variety of thematic backdrops. As Neale points out, action’s hybridity incorporates films ranging “from swashbucklers to science fiction films, from thrillers to western to war films.”¹⁵ However, in spite of the varying generic mutations, the term ‘action-adventure’ is nevertheless routinely employed to

pinpoint a number of obvious characteristics common to these genres and films: a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions, and in addition to the deployment of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and stunts.¹⁶

The action universe is consistently defined by these three elements and identification of the action universe also extends to the aesthetics as Tasker’s observation highlights:

Action presents the story events of adventure in a particular (thrilling) way. We have certain expectations of an action sequence and, by extension, an action film. These expectations include elements such as chase sequences, combat of various kinds, a distinctive (typically fragmented) orchestration of space, an accelerated sense of time (a feeling of speed, of modernity perhaps) and pace (in

¹¹ Michael Hammond, 'Saving Private Ryan's "Special Affect"', in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 153.

¹² Tico Romao, 130.

¹³ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 56.

¹⁴ Flanagan, 109.

¹⁵ Neale, *Genre* 52.

¹⁶ Neale, *Genre* 52.

editing or camerawork for instance), visual and aural spectacle and special effects.¹⁷

Put concisely, the elements expected of an action genre film, as Hammond summarises, are “spectacles of violence, fast editing and/or camera movement.”¹⁸ Conveniently, this combination of elements is perceived to be the indicator of the genre’s stupidity.

Hollywood Style

While the link between action films and their alleged ‘dumbness’ is partly due to the supposed inarticulate grunts of the hero,¹⁹ another source of deprecation can be traced to the economic factors motivating the action blockbuster’s production. Despite Hong Kong cinematic offerings, according to Neale, the term action-adventure is associated with “what was perceived in the 1980s and 1990s to be a new and dominant trend in Hollywood’s output.”²⁰ Similarly, Tasker links action to Hollywood, “Action has emerged as a pre-eminent commercial genre of the New Hollywood cinema”.²¹ This association with the brand of the ‘New Hollywood’ production generates particular assumptions as Flanagan’s statement exemplifies:

John McTiernan’s *Die Hard* (1988) and Jan De Bont’s *Speed* (1994) exemplify Gross’s definition of the post-1977 blockbuster. Both are narratively lean, structurally simplistic adventures, prioritising action over dialogue, characterisation or emotion. They are formulaic, visually exciting, conceptually shallow entertainment machines, and each definitively represents the state of Hollywood’s art at the time of production.²²

¹⁷ Yvonne Tasker, Introduction to *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 7. Furthermore, the label of action-adventure can be distinguished from the presentation and the narrative backdrop, as Tasker (*ibid*, 7) goes on to say, “Adventure bears more explicit *narrative* expectations: we will follow the protagonist or protagonists on a journey or quest into the unknown territories of adventure space. Thus the narrative thrust of adventure provides a stage for action” (emphasis in original).

¹⁸ Hammond, 153.

¹⁹ See Tasker for a summary of the derisive comments regarding “inarticulate” action heroes (*Spectacular Bodies* 107).

²⁰ Neale, *Genre* 52.

²¹ Tasker, introduction, 1.

²² Flanagan, 105.

Embedded in Flanagan's comment is the implication that the economic associations with the 'New Hollywood' product link action films with mindless entertainment. This assumption is reflected in James A. Welsh's comment that action films are "usually big and often brainless and they extraordinarily popular."²³

Though the action genre is often heralded as an exemplification of the New Hollywood style, in recent years the consensus regarding such differences in Hollywood productions is that they are so minimal that they have little impact on Hollywood's famous 'classical' style. To David Bordwell, the proliferations of evidence of a New Hollywood style all amount to nothing:

the idea that popular cinema bounces between narrative and spectacle is the belief that in 'postclassical' Hollywood (that is, since the 1980s or so) coherent storytelling has collapsed. Critics of a postmodernist stripe like this view because it coincides with what they take to be the rise of merchandising, distracted and interruptive viewing habits, and a general breakdown in our understanding of the modern world...Usually what the postmodernist critic takes as a fragment film is just an episodic one, and there is nothing new about episodic narratives.²⁴

Similarly, Kristin Thompson's *Storytelling and the New Hollywood* argues that any evidence of differences within Hollywood films fail to amount to a discernible transformation of a New Hollywood style and, in so doing, refute the claims for "a 'post-classical', 'post-Hollywood', or 'postmodern' approach to mainstream popular American filmmaking."²⁵ Thompson contends "that modern Hollywood narratives are put together in much the same way as they were in the studio era."²⁶ Accordingly, a Hollywood movie, as Richard Maltby puts it, "can be thought of as a manufactured assembly of component parts. These parts may function harmoniously, like a well-

²³ James A. Welsh "Action Films: the Serious, the Ironic, the Postmodern," *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 161.

²⁴ David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 179.

²⁵ Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.

²⁶ Thompson, x.

designed machine, but they are also visible as separate elements.”²⁷ To the Bordwell and Thompson camps, the end result is that the production, narrative structures and stylistics of Hollywood films are essentially identical. Consequently, attention to the narrative structure, spectacle and economic background of action as points of distinction, tends to result in a snubbing of the action.

The focus for Bordwell and Thompson is the consistency of the approach to Hollywood films and, from this basis, Thompson systematically dismisses suggestions as to what constitutes this new approach to narratives. The idea that the high concepts are innovative is met with the refutation that high concept has its foundations in the classical era, “many Hollywood films of all eras have been based on ideas that could be simply summarised.”²⁸ Similarly, concepts like ‘synergy’ are redundant because “the big Hollywood firms have always been driven by market considerations.”²⁹ To Thompson, close examination of filmic techniques reveals a consistency with style, even taking into account the rapid cuts and occasional jump cuts (‘the music video aesthetic’); the abandonment of techniques, such as dissolves, and the limited use of fades; the introduction of darker lighting and tonality which is beyond the “realm of the film noir.” Nevertheless, these techniques have failed to proffer evidence of a new style: they “have not broken down the principle that style’s most fundamental function is to promote narrative clarity.”³⁰ This is a point that discussions of pre-divorcement Hollywood action forms implicitly emphasise,³¹ and is reiterated in Bean’s observation that there is a tendency to concentrate on the

sensational movement, aggressive energy, and unsettling form – in short, a trauma that thrills – over character psychology and meaningful content, was (and is) inextricably hinged to complex narrative techniques through which they found their most sustained expression.³²

²⁷ Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 60.

²⁸ Thompson, 3.

²⁹ Thompson, 3.

³⁰ Thompson, 18–19.

³¹ E.g. see Ben Singer “Child of Commerce! Bastard of Art: early film melodrama,” *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 52–70.

³² Bean, 18.

What then is the difference? According to Thompson, “the differences are essentially superficial and nonsystemic.”³³ However, this focus on the lack of differences within the Hollywood style implicitly draws attention away from differences within generic structures.

Genre and Conventions

In as much as the propositions of a new Hollywood cinematic style are consigned to outright rejection, acknowledgement of the differences within films of the same generic designation are more readily accepted as inherent to the Hollywood production structure. For Maltby, the Hollywood product is

an aggregation of familiar parts, and its individuality results from its particular combination of standardised elements. As a mode of production, aggregation relies on the interchangeability of these elements, and the connoisseur’s pleasures in an aesthetic of aggregation involve a strong sense of intertextuality: of a movie’s inheritance from, and resemblance to, other similarly styled aesthetic objects.³⁴

These familiar parts include elements such as the film’s stars, the plot and setting or simply the conventions of the genre.³⁵ These variations are based on the principles of regulated differences, which aim to deliver to audiences the requirement that “movies be ‘just like...but completely different from’ each other.”³⁶ In short, the constant changes within a generic grouping are attributed to the practice of regulated difference. Thus the conventions of a genre not only provide a point of recognition, they also “accommodate change: the variations on plot, characterisation, or setting in each imitation inflect the audience’s generic expectations by introducing new elements or transgressing old ones.”³⁷ These changes within a generic structure vary the ways in which a film will exploit the conventions of the genre. As Rick Altman

³³ Thompson, 4.

³⁴ Maltby, 60.

³⁵ Maltby, 82.

³⁶ Maltby, 82.

³⁷ Maltby, 82.

argues, “not all genre films relate to their genre in the same way or to the same extent.”³⁸

The fluid relationship between films belonging to a certain genre and its generic conventions is immediately clear when comparing the narrative of *Last Action Hero*—which through parody attempts to unmask the conventions—against the ‘classic’ action film. Beyond parody, however, the distinctions in the ways that the action genre exploits the conventions are not clearly articulated. The differences underlying action films are usually distinguished by the divide between action hero and action heroine films, as in Marc O’Day’s comment regarding the new ‘developments’ of the action film:

One of the most striking developments in recent popular cinema has been the wave of action-adventure films featuring attractive women stars as hugely capable heroines ‘kicking ass’ in a range of fantasy orientated screen worlds. These movies trade in the fare of contemporary ‘high concept’ cinema – elevated ‘B’ movie genre materials, episodic plots, breathtaking visual spectacle of the post-*Matrix* combat stunts, amazing digital effects and computer generated imagery variety and tie-in friendly musical soundtracks – but what marks them out in the field are the beautiful, sexy and tough heroines who command their narrative, invariably driving vehicles, shooting guns, wielding weapons or fighting in hand-to-hand combat better than their (frequently male) adversaries.³⁹

From this one might conclude that the conventions of an action film give the genre the illusion of stability as long as they retain the consistency of spectacle, speed and stupidity. Further, according to this premise, such conventions are only subverted through parody or by replacing the male hero with an ‘action babe’. What is left unexplored, however, is the transgression of conventions that dominate the latest ‘development’ of the genre.

Lacan’s Four Discourses

The assumption that action genre films are just ‘mindless entertainment’ means that the genre is not associated with twists to the conventions that go beyond slapstick

³⁸ Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 33.

³⁹ Marc O’Day “Beauty in Motion: Gender, spectacle and action babe cinema,” *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 201.

parody or ironic self-reflection. If we look at the relation of action films to the conventions of action, it is clear that the action genre encompasses three major structural approaches to the unwritten laws, codes and conventions of the genre. The first approach is the celebration of power. It is logically prior, in that the conventions are later parodied or transgressed, and because the action film is largely recognisable due to a particular discourse that heralds given ideals of nation, the masculine and the triumph of overcoming a goal. The second approach ridicules this power through parodying the conventions. The third approach, the post-action, is where the surprise lies. The post-action plays on the action's supposed simplicity to deliver the unexpected twists. In other words, the post-action relies on the assumption of stupidity so as to transgress the conventions in order to question the genre and to cheat the notions of traditional ideas of power.

Examination of the discourse of the action film against the post-action film reveals several points of dissimilarities. For this reason this thesis uses Jacques Lacan's schema of the four discourses as a way of identifying the varying relationships action films sustain with their designated genre. Lacan's four discourses offer a mapping of the available subjective positions (the hysteric, master, university, or analyst) within the symbolic network;⁴⁰ in this case, the four ways in which a film of a recognisable generic category associates with its supposed genre, or how signifiers, conventions, can produce different effects. The advantage of the four discourses then, is that this schema is able to address what Linda Williams identifies as the "dynamics of structuration"⁴¹ and offers an articulation of the differences that invariably occurs within generic structures.

Lacan's schema approaches the disparities of relationships by focusing on the structure—namely the formal relationship of the discourse, which generates differences—rather than concentrating on the difference of content (such as conventions), as the structures exist before the speech act. In this instance, we can

⁴⁰ In psychosis the master signifier is foreclosed and the symbolic social link thus does not exist. Therefore there is no formal discursive structure for the psychotic, hence its exclusion.

⁴¹ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 128.

approach discourse, “as a signifying articulation”⁴² of the ‘unconscious’ logic of the action genre. Alternatively, the ‘words’—conventions—are not overly significant here, rather it is the relationship to the words, because for Lacan “the subject is not the agent but rather the effect of speech.”⁴³ In much the same way, Gérard Wajcman claims that the four discourses offer a point of examination, by concentrating on the

specific formalisation of the basic components of speech and its effects... Before the actual speech act occurs certain stable relations determine its effect, depending on the place from which it is performed. According to Lacan, it is the discourse that gives the speech act its status⁴⁴

Thus Paul Verhaeghe’s statement that the four discourses “have to be understood in the first place as a *formal* system, independent of any spoken word as such. A discourse exists before any concrete word is spoken and, to go further, a discourse determines the concrete speech act,”⁴⁵ suggests in the case of *Last Action Hero* that, rather than Austin O’Brien’s parents’ insistence, ultimately it was the creators’ desire to create an action world based on knowledge that pre-determined the film’s jolting content (no swear words, cartoon cats and jarring cop-partnerships). In short, through an analysis of the dominant discourse of the individual films of the genre, Lacan offers a basis to explore the differences and variations available in the action genre.

The operation of the four discourses is dependent on which feature—the master signifier, knowledge, the subject, surplus *jouissance*⁴⁶—is emphasised. In turn, this results in four alternate organisation of the remaining terms, though throughout the basic structure remains consistent. Lacan presents this structure as the basic framework of the four discourses:

⁴² Gérard Wajcman, “The Hysteric’s Discourse” *The Symptom*, 4 (2003), 9 May 2003 <<http://www.lacan.com/hystericdisc.htm> >

⁴³ Collete Soler, “Hysteria and Obsession,” *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Marie Jaanus (Albany: State University Press, 1996), 257.

⁴⁴ Wajcman, (pp. nos. not available).

⁴⁵ Paul Verhaeghe, *Does the Woman Exist? From Freud’s Hysteric to Lacan’s Feminine*, trans. Marc du Ry (New York: Other Press, 1999), 100.

⁴⁶ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972 – 1973, Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 17.

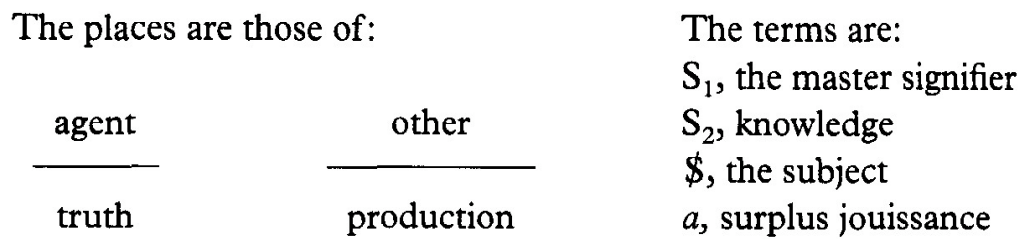


Figure 2.1

Lacan's basic schema of the four discourses.⁴⁷

The simplest way to look at this arrangement is to begin with the position of agent, since the agent is the source of the explicit activity, as it is from here that one speaks; however, it is a puppet-like illusionary position, hence its underpinnings of truth. On the right side of the basic schema there is the other, who is forced by the subject's message to receive and adopt a particular position. The other responds to the agent. However, without knowing the 'truth' (as the truth cannot be known), the Other can never hope to produce concisely what the sender wants. The production is always something that is incompatible with the sender's desire.⁴⁸

The position of agent is parallel to the Freudian concept of the ego, where the ego is an imaginary construction that establishes an identity for the subject,⁴⁹ but this identity is founded on the misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of the illusion of unity and wholeness. In Lacan's words, "the *méconnaissances* that constitute the ego, the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself."⁵⁰ The disjunction between the agent

⁴⁷ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 17.

⁴⁸ Much more comprehensive accounts of the four discourses can be found in Verhaeghe, Slavoj Žižek, "Four Discourse, Four Subjects," *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 74 – 113, and Mark Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses," *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, eds. Mark Bracher, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., Ronald J. Corthell, Françoise Massardier-Kenney (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 151 – 162.

⁴⁹ The ego is a construction, which achieves its formation from the identification with the specular image in the mirror stage. This is the moment when the subject recognises itself, "That's me!" but the ego can only perceive itself as an object, to quote Lacan, "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object." (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1977), 86.)

⁵⁰ Lacan, *Écrits* 6.

and truth often remains hidden but, as Lacan illustrates, humour can highlight this split:

[T]he truth of the subject, even when he is in the position of master, does not reside in himself, but, as analysis shows, in an object that is, of its nature, concealed, to bring this object out into the light of day is really and truly the essence of comedy.⁵¹

Parody, in particular, is inherently positioned to be able to expose this split, hence its subversiveness. The humour of parody, according to Freud, derives from the process of *unmasking*, thus parody achieves the “degradation of something exalted in another way: by destroying the unity that exists between people’s characters so we know them and their speeches and their actions.”⁵² What is implicit in this ‘unmasking’ of the action genre is that there is something to disguise: What is it that lies beneath the mask?

One of central points of the subversion of *Last Action Hero* lies precisely in the presentation of Schwarzenegger as a willing puppet. This is especially obvious in the scenes in which Schwarzenegger’s character, Jack Slater, naïvely obeys the rules of the action genre, denying that he is an actor and refusing to believe that he is not a police officer, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Slater’s existence depends on following the rules of the action movie, though he is everything that an action hero is not supposed to be. Even the encounter with the ‘real’ Schwarzenegger retains his puppet-like nature, as he is a man who spinelessly follows the dictates of his wife. The illusion of all-powerful hero is further parodied when, upon Slater’s first encounter with ‘real’ physical pain, he whimpers. Such scenes highlight the illusory nature of the action hero: rather than fitting the image of an independent, powerful man, the action hero is actually controlled by a master (his wife and/or the rules of the action genre).

This truth that underlies the agent is the point where the agent has no control. For all the supposed autonomy of the ego, the ego (or the agent) lacks any real power over what is spoken, as it is driven by an unconscious truth. In the act of speaking,

⁵¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis Four Fundamentals*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 5.

⁵² Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 6. (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 262.

the agent can never be completely certain of exactly the words uttered, and the truth occasionally may slip through the gap.⁵³ Though this truth, as Verhaeghe argues, “functions as the motor and as the starting-point of each discourse,”⁵⁴ it is impossible to neatly identify. As Lacan’s remarks in his seminar *Television*, “I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there’s no way to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail.”⁵⁵

To return to the overall schema of the four discourses, while the positions of agent, truth, other and produce are stable within the elementary structure, the terms which are superimposed over these positions rotate to produce a different operation of discourse (Fig. 2.2). Each discourse, “takes its name from the term which occurs in the position of agent.”⁵⁶ The resulting differences of each discourse represent a fundamental relationship, or social bond, with the other: which Lacan calls “his four-legged diagrams.”⁵⁷ This relation to the Other is conveyed through the agent’s position of power: whether power is analysed (the discourse of the analyst), challenged (the hysteric’s discourse), relied upon as a guarantee (the discourse of the university), or embodied (the master’s discourse). The fifth potential relation to power (the Father) is by definition excluded as it pertains the discourse of the psychotic. Psychosis relies precisely on the foreclosure of the Father’s word; hence Lacan’s pun that the choice is “from Dad to worse.”⁵⁸

⁵³ The ‘Freudian Slip’ exemplifies this drama.

⁵⁴ Verhaeghe, 101.

⁵⁵ Jacques Lacan, “Television,” *October*, 40 (1987): 7.

⁵⁶ Wajcman, (pp. nos. not available).

⁵⁷ Lacan, “Impromptu at Vincennes,” *October*, 40 (1987): 122.

⁵⁸ Lacan, “Television”: 50.

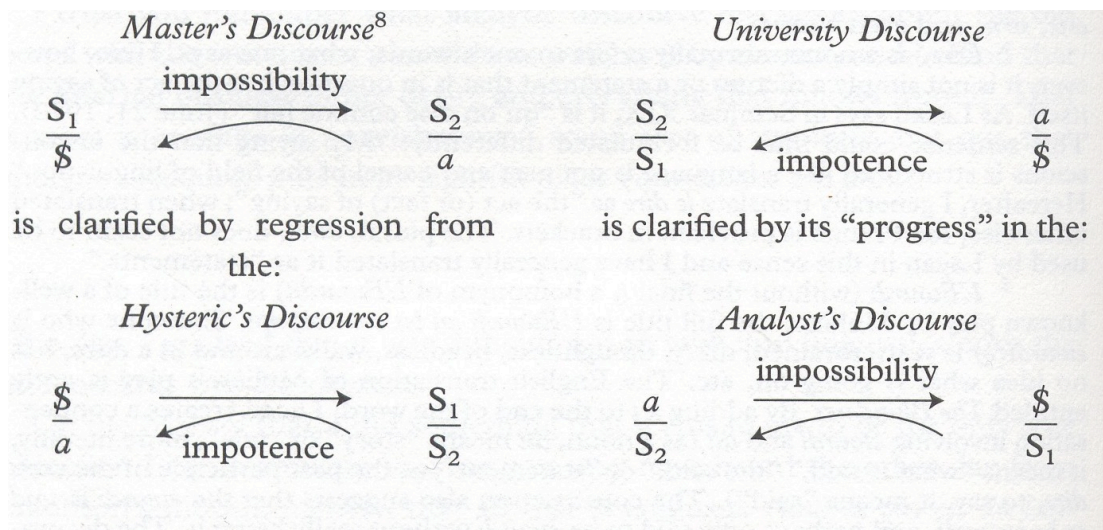


Figure 2.2

The four discourses.⁵⁹

One of the interesting things about the four discourses is that in spite of any certainties (such as the image of power or the hysterical challenge), because of the necessary incorporation of truth and the Other's forced acceptance of its position, these relations are fraught with ambiguities. This is particularly evident in the master's discourse incarnation of power. The discourse of the master is characterised by the master signifier operating as the focal point. This dominance of power within the master's discourse closely resembles the structural framework often detected in action films, primarily in that the master signifier plays an ever-present role. The master signifier, according to Mark Bracher, is the signifier that the agent invokes to guarantee, anchor, explain, or justify "claims or demands contained in a message."⁶⁰ Instances of the master signifiers include, "words like 'God', 'Satan', 'sin', 'heaven', and 'hell' in religious discourse and terms such as 'American', 'freedom', 'democracy', and 'communism' in political discourse."⁶¹ For Jacques-Alain Miller, the traditional master signifier at work in western culture is the soul.⁶² For the 'classic' action film, frequently the designated master signifier is 'America'.

⁵⁹ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 16.

⁶⁰ Bracher, 112.

⁶¹ Bracher, 112.

⁶² Jacques-Alain Miller, "The Desire of Lacan and his Complex Relation to Freud," trans. Jorge Jauregui, *Lacanian ink*, 14 (Spring1999):16.

Similarly, in the *James Bond* series, 'England' functions as the master signifier, as for example in a scene in *Goldeneye* (1995), where before attacking a Russian fortress, Bond whispers to his partner, Alec, 'For England!' The master signifier has a structuralising effect that invests meaning for other signifiers (S₂), and can, Bracher claims, "constitute a powerful positive or negative value."⁶³ Hence, in action films, a villain is primarily a villain because he or she operates outside the master signifier. The villain is the psychotic madman, for whom the master has been foreclosed.⁶⁴ He or she has found a "private solution" to prevent "disappearing into the great Other."⁶⁵ Alternatively, given that the master signifier is the signifier, as Verhaeghe puts it, "denoting basic difference—sexual differentiation—it grounds difference in itself, and thereby too the whole system of signifiers,"⁶⁶ the source of conflict between good and bad also derives from the dubious designation of a villain because he or she has a different master (is the Other). As General Franklin Kirby's (James Olson) insightful listing of John Matrix's (Arnold Schwarzenegger) potential enemies in *Commando* (1985) reveals, "They could be the Syrians, the South Americans, the Russians, or a terrorist group". That is to say, the totalitarian nature of the master signifier is especially obvious within action films when, for instance, a character is *not* American.

In a narrative where the relationship to America determines whether a character is good or bad, a product of the Soviet Union has little hope when they face their American opposition. This is illustrated by the plight of Sergeant Yuskin (Voyo Goric) in *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2* (1985). Though he is, as Susan Jeffords points out, "the only man with muscles bigger than Rambo's,"⁶⁷ his Soviet citizenship determines his downfall before he has raised a fist. Although Yuskin outperforms John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) physically, somewhat inconsistently this circumstance actually serves to reinforce Yuskin's weakness, because he lacks

⁶³ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinities in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 40–41.

⁶³ Bracher, 111.

⁶⁴ Žižek, "Four Discourse, Four Subjects" 109.

⁶⁵ Verhaeghe, 104.

⁶⁶ Verhaeghe, 156.

⁶⁷ Jeffords, 39.

independence of mind and therefore, can be outwitted by Rambo! As Jeffords observes:

Given that so much of Reagan's characterisation of the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire' is grounded on communism's ostensible disregard for human individuality, it is imperative that Rambo be more than a fighting machine. In order to be the embodiment of Reagan democratic ideals, he must be both muscular *and* independent of mind.⁶⁸

What is noticeable in this example is the structuralising effect of the master signifier (in this instance, America). Though Rambo, on the American side, shares the same qualities of Yuskin, such as physical strength and determination, this quality is somehow reformed to make Yuskin's characteristics represent evil.

Accordingly, the authoritarian nature of the master signifier creates the illusion of being the 'whole' signifier. One of the greatest tricks of the master's discourse is that it presents itself as 'the way that things should be', and thus it is believed that the master is the one that possesses an infallible understanding of the code; namely, the secret or the key to comprehending the operations of a particular subject, country, topic or philosophy. The schema of the discourse of the master, however, illustrates the agent of the discourse of the master as simultaneously desiring the Other, knowledge (S_2), but also relying on the Other to support its positioning: it is the Other who makes the master. The Other, through the knowledge that this subject is a master, confirms the master's existence. The moment when the agent, S_1 , demonstrates knowledge coincides with the moment when the structure of the master gives way. It is this that reveals the split of the divided, desiring subject (S); what lies beneath is an ordinary subject, rather than an entity who possesses a 'wholeness' as it is mistakenly believed to be. Ultimately, the illusory nature of the master hinges on the circumstance that the agent which embodies the position of S_1 is, like all other subjects, castrated. In clinging onto the illusion of the 'wholeness' of the master signifier, the agent is able to disavow this castration. To Verhaeghe, the master signifier acts as a "plug in the fundamental lack by means of which the master believes himself to be one."⁶⁹ The only way for one to maintain the master's discourse is to maintain the 'purity' of the master signifier, which means that one has

⁶⁸ Jeffords, 40–41 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁹ Verhaeghe, 108.

to escape the possibility of its corruption by other signifiers; as Verhaeghe states, “to avoid signifiers saves one from being divided by them.”⁷⁰ This is why, according to Žižek,

the classical Master must legitimise his rule with a reference to some non-social, external authority (God, nature, some mythical past event...)—as soon as the performative mechanism which gives him his charismatic authority is demasked, the Master loses his power.⁷¹

In short, the moment the master speaks coincides with the moment when the agent’s authority is jeopardised. As Verhaeghe clarifies, the best master is thus a dead master, as this master is “one who has entered eternal silence.”⁷²

In the action film, through the hero’s minimalist approach to language the narrative frequently mimics the discourse of the master. In fact, the more a character in the action film speaks, the more likely the character is a woman or a comic fool (Figs. 2.3–2.6). The comic fool’s excessive grasp of language, which is reflected in his lack of exploits, casts him or her as the harmless idiot who serves to highlight the powers of the hero. Tasker observes, “the hysterical ramblings of a character like Leo (Joe Pesci), a witness in need of protection in *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989), mark him out as weak and unthreatening.”⁷³



Figure 2.3



Figure 2.4

Lethal Weapon 2: The static medium long shot of Leo Getz’s (Joe Pesci) first appearance, lends itself to comedy. The contrast between the solidness and stillness of Murtaugh emphasises Leo Getz’s

⁷⁰ Verhaeghe, 109.

⁷¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 145– 146.

⁷² Verhaeghe, 109.

⁷³ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 87.

diminutiveness, excessive movement and chatter, and as such, his weakness. This point is finally highlighted in the close up of Murtaugh's response to Getz's inane chatter (figure 2.6).



Figure 2.5



Figure 2.6

The logic that determines 'weakness' also applies to women in action films. Hence, as Stephanie Mencimer remarks,

the key to any good action film is an inverse relationship between the amount of special effects and the amount of dialogue. Talk too much and the heroine loses her mystique and starts to remind men of their ex-wives.⁷⁴

Unlike the action hero who is portrayed as self-sacrificing in his concern for others as he tries to save the universe (he has to save his family, the entire free world, his country or his buddy), in the action film the verbosity of the hysteric's discourse can be pinpointed to a concern with the demands of self. In the mapping of the hysteric's discourse, the barred S dominates the agent, because, as Vicente Palomera notes, the commonplace complaint of the hysteric is that of "their *lack of identity*, a lack that Lacan wrote with a symbol, $\$$, which means that the subject is separated from her being, and thus from identity."⁷⁵ Jeanine Basinger's study of the woman's film thus reads as a textbook on filmic hysteria. Basinger argues, for instance, that the central point of the woman's film is the notion that the female protagonist acts as "the centre

⁷⁴ Stephanie Mencimer, "Violent Femmes," *Washington Monthly* 33.9 (2001): 4pp. 11 Nov. 2002, Flinders University Library: Expanded Academic ASAP Plus <<http://web3.infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/>>

⁷⁵ Vicente Palomera, "The Ethics of Hysteria and Psychoanalysis," *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Marie Jaanus (Albany: State University Press, 1996), 388 (emphasis in original).

of the universe,”⁷⁶ in that only “her troubles matter.”⁷⁷ *Her* division is placed in foreground, as highlighted in Basinger’s example of Bette Davis in *Beyond the Forest* (1949), where she protests, ‘I thought I was different!’ and obsesses over her name and identity, and repeatedly exclaims, ‘I am Rosa Moline!’ This desire for an identity originates from the primary loss, for the moment one speaks, one loses the primary object. As Verhaeghe explains, this loss is expressed by the way of,

a demand, directed to the other. In terms of discourse, one has to turn the other into a master-signifier in order to get an answer. In this way the hysterical subject always makes a master out of the other, an S_1 who has to produce an answer: $\$ \diamond S_1$.⁷⁸

In the demand for the assumed master—the Other—to provide the answer that holds the solution to the complaint’s symptom, resistance or protest,⁷⁹ the hysteric simultaneously challenges and creates the master. The master’s answer, or rather, the knowledge that the master possesses, however, never satisfies the hysteric’s demands or symptom. In effect, the master “is impotent in his knowledge of what will cure her.”⁸⁰ One of the interesting things about this discourse is that analysts have discovered that in “intending to talk about hysteria, we found that hysteria makes us talk.”⁸¹ It is hysteria which produced the foundations of psychoanalysis. For Lacan the importance of the discourse of the hysteric lies in that “with it the discourse of the psychoanalyst takes shape.”⁸²

Therein, within the discursive schema, the quarter turn from the hysteric’s discourse results in the structure of the analyst’s discourse. The discourse of the analyst is an inversion of the master’s discourse. Rather than repressing the piece which resists symbolisation (as in the master’s discourse), or hysterically reacting to

⁷⁶ Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930–1960* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 13.

⁷⁷ Basinger, *A Woman’s View*, 17.

⁷⁸ Verhaeghe, 109.

⁷⁹ Normally it is to seek out from the master the answer to the protest, as Verhaeghe (110) expresses it, “Tell me who I am, tell me what I want”.

⁸⁰ Palomera, 390.

⁸¹ Wajcman, (pp. nos not available).

⁸² Lacan, “Impromptu at Vincennes”: 116.

possibility of being reduced to an object,⁸³ in the position of agent resides the ambiguous object *a*. The analyst places what is excluded from symbolisation, in the position of agent, the position of power. This ‘leftover’ from symbolisation is, to use Bracher’s description,

that part of the subject’s being that is simultaneously left out of and produced by the identity established for the subject in the $S_1 - S_2$ articulation. As such, the object *a* holds the key to understanding both the nature of *jouissance* and “what the incidence of the signifier in the destiny of the speaking being is all about.”⁸⁴

In foregrounding the excluded, excessive object, Lacan argues that “only analytic discourse gives ex-sistence to the unconscious.”⁸⁵ In other words, the truth that underlies the analyst’s position is the perverse power of knowing exactly what they are to the Other. For this reason, the analyst’s position mirrors the inverse fantasy of the pervert. The link lies in that both the analyst and the pervert possess a knowledge. As Žižek claims, “what he is for the Other: a knowledge supports his position as the object of Other’s...*jouissance*. For that reason, the matheme of the discourse of perversion is the same as that of the analyst’s discourse.”⁸⁶ Therefore the suffering of the pervert, according to Miller, rests in the possibility of being “able to reveal the truth of enjoyment to the non-pervert...[as] he has knowledge of sexual enjoyment that he cannot communicate.”⁸⁷ When one is confronted with the presence of excessive enjoyment, or the unarticulated little piece of the Real (which is later subjected to analysis by the analyst), it has the potential to change everything: after the encounter nothing is ‘quite the same as before’. Following the meeting with the Real, there is a need to place this object into signification in order to be able to articulate this encounter. The outcome of this discourse is the production of a new master signifier, which usurps the previous, externally imposed, master. This new master signifier attaches a new meaning to all of the other signifiers.⁸⁸ The crucial

⁸³ Žižek, “Four Discourse, Four Subjects” 79.

⁸⁴ Bracher, 114.

⁸⁵ Lacan, “Television”: 18.

⁸⁶ Žižek, “Four Discourse, Four Subjects” 79 – 80.

⁸⁷ Jacques-Alain Miller, “On Perversion,” *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Marie Jaanus (Albany: State University Press, 1996), 306.

⁸⁸ Miller, “On Perversion” 309.

difference in this master discourse is that “its master signifiers are produced by the subject rather than imposed upon the subject from the outside.”⁸⁹ Consequently, the discourse of the analyst offers the only possible exile from the tyranny of language.⁹⁰ This discourse is the discourse in which a production of a new generation of thought can take place.

The final discursive link is the discourse of the university, which can be summarised as the discourse of knowledge; a knowledge that can be illustrated through the example of guns in action films. While the hero masterfully exploits weapons to his advantage, and the villain deviously acquires stockpiles, the inept use of guns in action films points to hysteria. This inability is exaggerated to highlight their hysterical unease of ‘everyday reality’ as demonstrated, for instance, in *Commando*, when an unwitting accomplice, Cindy (Rae Dawn Chong), is forced to defend herself with a machine gun. The scene repeats itself in *True Lies* (1994), when Helen Tasker (Jamie Lee Curtis), the dull and fearful wife of Harry Tasker (Arnold Schwarzenegger), also ceaselessly and carelessly misfires bullets. It is only when she accidentally drops the gun that she hits her targets (Figs. 2.7–2.18). The ‘comedy’ of these scenes relies on the perception of the opposition of the hero’s solidness against the feminine inability to function in the ‘real world’. In contrast, the comic element of *Last Action Hero* derives from the overplayed joke of repeated scenarios in which Jack Slater possesses too many guns: as when an assortment of weaponry falls out of his car’s glove box; or when the villain, Ripper (Tom Noonan), who holds Jack’s son at gunpoint, demands that he ‘Loose the cannon,’ and though Jack complies, the villain scoffs ‘Just one gun Jack? You have got to be kidding,’ to which Jack then proceeds to remove knives from his sleeves, guns hidden by his jacket, under his belt, and one from his leg holster. To point out the obvious, the humour of this joke stems from the mocking of the typical action hero’s reliance on guns, and not only rewards the audience for their knowledge, but also serves to highlight the gleeful knowledge of the makers of the film. This emphasis on knowledge points to the similarities of the narrative of *Last Action Hero* to the university discourse.

⁸⁹ Bracher, 123–124.

⁹⁰ Bracher, 123.



Figure 2.7



Figure 2.8

True Lies: When Helen and Harry Tasker have to defend themselves against terrorists, Harry leaves Helen with a machine gun. While Harry is calm, the camera moves into a close up to emphasise Helen's fearful reaction.



Figure 2.9



Figure 2.10

So when Helen sees a terrorist sneaking up behind Harry...



Figure 2.11

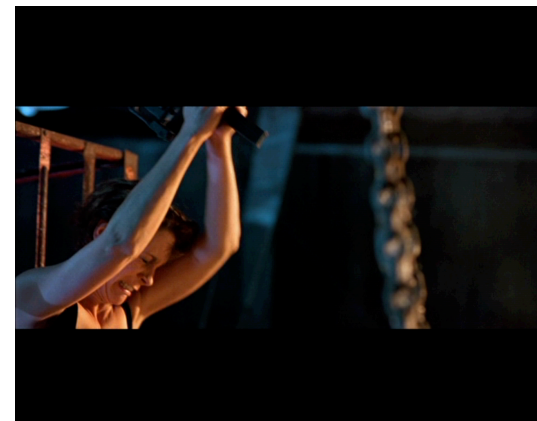


Figure 2.12

..... she blindly defends him....



Figure 2.13
... and misses,



Figure 2.14



Figure 2.15
.... and drops the gun.

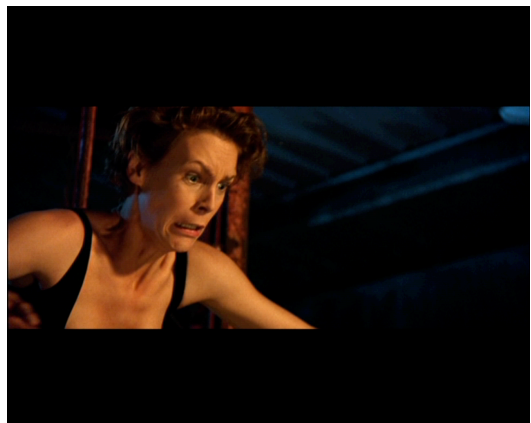


Figure 2.16



Figure 2.17



Figure 2.18

It is only when the gun is out of her hands that she is successful in hitting her target.

In the discourse of the university, knowledge presents itself as an objective, “neutral” agent.⁹¹ The tyrannical force of knowledge reduces the other to an object

⁹¹ Žižek, “Four Discourse, Four Subjects” 78.

(a). One instance of this relationship emerges in parenthood where, for parents, the object-cause of desire (*a*) is their baby, an ‘as-yet-unassimilated remainder of the real’ upon which they impose their ready-made knowledge in order to produce a speaking, alienated subject (*\$*), who can function within a symbolic network.⁹² The subject encounters their subjection to the regime of knowledge throughout their life, and this is particularly evident in the fields of education and bureaucracy. According to Bracher:

Bureaucracy is perhaps the purest form of the discourse of the University; it is nothing but knowledge—that is, pure impersonal system: The System, and nothing else. No provision is made for individual subjects and their desires and idiosyncrasies. Individuals are to act, think, and desire only in ways that function to enact, reproduce, or extend The system.⁹³

In the pursuit of obliterating discursive discontent reveals the shared quality of the hysteric’s and of the university’s discourse in their relation to power. For Lacan the “scientific discourse and the hysteric’s discourse have *almost* the same structure,”⁹⁴ because both discourses are marked by a desire for some power, which is never quite fulfilled. Underscoring the university’s ‘cold’, ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ knowledge, is power. The master signifier operates surreptitiously and provides a necessary guarantee. As Verhaeghe points out, the hidden truth of the university discourse is that “it can only function if one can guarantee it with a master-signifier. Every field of knowledge functions by the grace of such a guarantee.”⁹⁵ For *Last Action Hero*, despite the illusion of rebellion against the classic action film, such films are essential for the jokes to function.⁹⁶ This guarantee proves to be the demonstration of both the makers’ knowledge (of action films) and an ambiguous relationship to the master. Hence what the ‘knowing’ jokes, as well as the exposure of the hero as a puppet and the ban against coarse language all illustrate, is the potential of small details to operate as symptoms pointing to the dominant discourse at work within the

⁹² The positioning of a baby as ‘*a*’ already observed in both Žižek, “Four Discourse, Four Subjects” and Bracher, “On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan’s Theory of the Four Discourses”.

⁹³ Bracher, 115.

⁹⁴ Lacan, ‘Television’, 23 (emphasis in original).

⁹⁵ Verhaeghe, 116–117.

⁹⁶ Whether or not these jokes actually worked....

narrative. Accordingly, this thesis is grounded in the notion that the possibility of unveiling the inner logic of action genre films is to be sought through examination of the conventions of the action genre film, rather than by means of a speculative construction of the meanings or of the apparent symbolism that may reside in the text.

The Analysis of Conventions

An approach based on examination of the conventions of the action genre film, properly begins with Lacan's premise that the symptom, and later the *sinthome*, is not about revealing the unconscious, because, as Lacan puts it, "to explain art by the unconscious seems very suspicious to me. To explain art by the symptom seems more serious to me."⁹⁷ In this connection, the key advantage of using the symptom and *sinthome* as a means of explanation, is that it avoids resorting to the practice of uncovering the 'hidden meaning' that the action film supposedly possesses. An analytical investigation, as Žižek argues, bypasses "the properly fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly hidden behind the form: the 'secret' to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form...but, on the contrary, *the 'secret' of this form itself.*"⁹⁸ Joan Copjec's study on *film noir* offers an exemplification of this approach, which through an analysis of the relation between the filmic and narrative techniques and their cause exposes the inner logic of a 'genre'. Copjec, for example, attributes *noir*'s recognisable qualities— such as deep-focus photography and the chiaroscuro 'expressionist' lighting—as features pointing to the life source of *noir*, which is "a world in which nothing can lie hidden, everything must come to light. This is really the dark truth of *film noir*."⁹⁹ In other words, the question of this thesis is while the action genre's conventions can offer an articulation of the underlying logic that enables an action film to be recognised as such, but what, exactly, do the conventions point to?

The following chapter will focus on the major structural type of action films: namely, the classical action. The classic action genre film is dominated by the

⁹⁷ As quoted in "Itinerary." *Lacan.com*. 20 Apr. 2004. <<http://www.lacan.com/intinerary.htm>>

⁹⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 11 (emphasis in original).

⁹⁹ Joan Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in *Film Noir*," *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), 192.

master's discourse and is familiar in its excessive focus on power, specifically, masculine power. However, instead of merely summarising the conventions of the classical action film, the immediate concern is the problem of why such conventions are reused and replayed. While the conventions of an action film in and of itself are not signals constituting the genre's identity, these conventions point to the genre's kernel (its defining point). In this chapter then, the seemingly inconsequential has formed the basis for an investigation into the action universe.

The borders of the action universe, however, are not limited to one universal view. If *Last Action Hero* exemplifies the university discourse (and the hysterical discourse is reserved for the foolish), then through this thesis's analysis of the discourses of action genre films, it appears that, apart from parody, there are two significant structural approaches to action. That is to say that there are two main ways of using the conventions of action, which is evident from the assumptions of action films. Not only is the action genre supposedly a celebration of dull-witted spectacle, but it is generally thought to be dominated by an excessively masculine approach. Hence one encounters comments like Lizzie Francke's, "Far from being 'macho claptrap'...the action film calls into question the very nature of masculinity,"¹⁰⁰ and Tasker's argument that:

Despite the strength of scholarly interest in action heroines (whether contemporary or historical), it remains commonplace to critically designate action as a male or masculine genre...Given an assumption that action is a masculine arena, it is not perhaps surprising that the genre has been a key site for the development of ideas with men, masculinity and the cinema. Much discussion centres on ways of making sense of the seemingly contradictory location of the star-hero as both narrative agent and object of spectacle.¹⁰¹

But as Tasker's observations indicate, the rise of the action heroine and films like *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *Charlie's Angels* (2000) and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), not least due to the femininity of the heroines, immediately challenge this notion. Additionally, films like *Broken Arrow* (1996), *Snake Eyes* (1998) and *Swordfish* (2001) may on the surface resemble the action film, in that fights dominate, that there are spectacle of explosions, that the male body is emphasised,

¹⁰⁰ Lizzie Francke, "Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema," *New Statesman & Society*, 7.284 (1994): 38.

¹⁰¹ Tasker, introduction, 9.

and that the misunderstood hero tries to save the day, nevertheless are dissimilar from the classical action film due to the predominance of the unexpected melancholic endings (rather than the celebratory ending that offers a neat resolution), the unfamiliar presentations of the hero's body and the unconventional plot twists. Films such as these constitute the second structural 'school' of action, known here as the 'post-action' film.

The much more ambiguous structure of the post-action is the focal point in Chapter Four. The post-action logically succeeds the classical action in that such films are defined in their attempts to pervert one of the defining characteristics of action: masculine power. Unlike *Last Action Hero*, which simply replays the supposed conventions of the genre, these 'post-action' films are not only well aware of the importance of what Lacan called, "the locus of the signifying convention,"¹⁰² but they also use this knowledge to rob the symbolic network of 'classical' action films of their old meanings. In the 'post-action' film, conventions are perverted and twisted until do they not retain the same hold as their previous connotations. Essentially, the post-action film attempts to cheat the symbolic network previously created by 'classical' action films.

Due to the division of the two structural approaches to the action genre it is necessary to incorporate a slight variation to the relationship with the use of Lacan in both chapters. In Chapters Three and Four of this thesis, the key word 'with' will be used in distinct ways, after Lacan's usage. Here it may be helpful to note that Miller, in his "A Discussion of Lacan's *Kant with Sade*" devotes his opening paragraphs to Lacan's use of the word 'with,' pointing out that in "Kant with Sade" 'with' goes beyond the basic assumption of companionship. Though 'with' may possess the suggestion of a "double",¹⁰³ in Chapter Three, 'with' will denote a lop-sided pairing of Lacan against action films. In concentrating on the conventions of the action genre, Lacan, in Chapter Three, serves as an instrument in the exploration of *why* certain conventions are repeatedly used. Thus, crucial aspects of the action film,

¹⁰² Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002), 164.

¹⁰³ Jacques-Alain Miller, 'A Discussion of Lacan's *Kant with Sade*,' *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Marie Jaanus (Albany: State University Press, 1996), 213.

such as the one-liner, are used as a basis to explore the action's logic. Using Lacan with action films, in this sense exposes the mechanisms of the master discourse at work in order to penetrate the foundations which conventions obscure. This is an asymmetrical relationship in that it is based on the assumption that while Lacan might reveal the action film, the action film cannot reveal Lacan. Similarly, according to Miller's understanding of Lacan, though Lacan reads Kant through Sade, this reading cannot go in the other direction: "Lacan's thesis is that something is begun by Kant and continued by Sade."¹⁰⁴ For Lacan, de Sade was the one who could present the truth of Kant, meaning that by using de Sade Lacan was able to perceive the presence of the sadistic superego's voice in Kant's work.¹⁰⁵ Chapter Four, however, focuses on the action films that can be described as 'Action films with Lacan', in the sense that the 'post-action' film is structurally identical to the discourse of the analyst (or pervert). 'With' Lacan, in this instance, offers a key into understanding the how such films manage to cheat the symbolic network of action. Simply stated, for the body of this thesis 'with Lacan' transforms an investigation of why conventions reoccur into an analysis of how these conventions are perverted.

¹⁰⁴ Miller, "A Discussion" 216.

¹⁰⁵ Miller, "A Discussion" 212.