

CHAPTER THREE

Explosions!

The emphasis on triumphal power and heroics in the action blockbuster ensures that the suspense of action narratives derives not from the question of *whether* the hero will save the day, but rather, given the numerous obstacles and challenges encountered, of *how* the hero will achieve that end. However, the assumption that action films are just stupid stories revolving around notions of the hero's (and America's) power is misleading – also vital to the action film's narrative is impotence. On examination, this 'contradiction' is particularly evident in the recurring logic of films such as *Die Hard*, *Commando*, *Speed* (1994), and *Lethal Weapon* (1987), which consistently dictates that despite the continual efforts against him, the villain is apparently indestructible, that is until the hero says a one-liner. Correlatively, the hero resists numerous potentially mortal attacks to deliver this devastating wisecrack. In addition, contrary to the supposition that in the action film there is a simplistic division between good and bad, the distinction between characters is often fraught with ambiguities. Whilst it may appear that in the action universe violating the law immediately equates villainy, the hero, however, frequently breaks laws; more confusingly though, if another character, such as a boss or colleague, enforces the law, then they are presented as evil. And if the hero is chasing the villain, buffoons will mistakenly believe that the hero is the villain (and vice versa). In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the buffoons manage to remain oblivious to the pertinent detail that it is the villain shooting bystanders, not the hero. Such examples are a few of the many inconsistencies of the action universe revealing a masculine logic at work. As a result, the conventions of the action film point to a pervading threat to the illusion of power underlying even the most awesome gesture. For all his status and power, the action hero is unable to achieve recognition of his position when he desperately needs it; he is hopeless at maintaining successful relationships with his boss, colleagues, family or girlfriend; and though he is able to rescue the country, world, or universe from all sorts of

impending catastrophes, he possesses an inability to kill the villain without a witty exchange with his nemesis!

The Dualism of Conventions

The apparent inconsistency of the action film's logic betrays itself in the confusion the surrounds one of the more popular theoretical focal points on action films: the hero's body. Discussions on the action hero's body over the years have largely focused around the possible motivations of emphasising the questionable 'maleness' of the hero and the supposed meaning of his body. Opinions in this debate divide over in the perceived ambiguity of the hero's maleness. As Yvonne Tasker summarises,

If, for some, the figure of the bodybuilder signals an assertion of male dominance, an eroticising of the powerful male body, for other critics it seems to signal an hysterical and unstable image of manhood.¹

To some theorists, the boundaries defining the masculine from the feminine are not necessarily clear-cut, and the distinctions between the masculine and the ridiculous are, at times, perceived to be blurred. Thus while, on the one hand, some theorists accept the image of the hero as encompassing masculine strength, other theorists use this same consideration to undermine this power and reduce the hero—and consequently, the action genre—to ridicule. This translation, in which the masculine is altered to the feminine, thereby implying weakness, is best demonstrated in Rebecca Bell-Metereau's reading, predicated upon an investigation of the presentation of the eighties action hero, in which she argues that the action hero's body is close to the feminine ideal:

Shots and publicity stills of these figures often highlight the chest of the hero—smooth, hairless, with bulging pectorals, key lit in such a way that it emphasises a cleavage some women would envy. Back-lighting or high spotlighting of the head adds a reddish, golden shimmer to the hair and features. Standing postures reveal the forward-thrust pelvis, a pose that is typical of female runway models.²

¹ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, genre and the action cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 80.

² Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 240.

In concentrating on the conflict between strength and the absurdity of the hero's body what is often overlooked is attention to this duality of the ridiculous and the potent. Richard Dyer touches on this paradox in his observation of the problematic underlying the presentation of the white man's body:

The exposed white male body is liable to pose the legitimacy of white male power: why should people who look like that — so unimpressive, so like others — have so much power?³

However, the duality inherent in the ridiculous and the potent, that is itself symptomatic of the classical action genre film, is frequently ignored.

Stemming from a tension between the presentation of power and its underpinnings of impotence, this duality is born out of a narrative necessity that depends on the appeal of the hero's celebration of success against enormous odds. The action blockbuster follows the classical Hollywood style, in which the construction of the narrative can be simply summarised as relying principally on simply overcoming obstacles to achieve a goal. As David Bordwell's succinct examination of the classical Hollywood framework notes, the emphasis is on causality. By this he means that the principles of the Hollywood story are based on causality, as well as "consequence, psychological motivations, the drive towards overcoming obstacles and personal goals"⁴. The classical Hollywood narrative therefore

presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the goals.⁵

The Three Act Formula of Action

The "distinct phases"⁶ of this practice results in a three act formula, a circumstance to which Jeffery Brown devotes much of his article on the action genre, observing that

³ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 146.

⁴ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 13.

⁵ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985), 157.

⁶ Bordwell, *Narration* 158.

The genre affiliation of the film is quickly established in act one by making the conventional characters and situation obvious. Once the stage has been set, act two advances the plot and brings all of the conflicts inherent in the story to the fore. Hero vs. partner, hero vs. bad guys, hero vs. the system—all these...are made clear. Act three is the resolution of all the hero's conflicts: all is saved, and the world is a better, safer, place—until the sequel.⁷

Following both Bordwell and Brown, essentially the action film amounts to a set-up that begins with an initial presentation of the faults—or misunderstandings—of the hero, which are subsequently resolved only through incessant violence and bloodshed.



Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2

Die Hard: One of the many clues testifying to John McClane's 'everyman quality' is when he sits next to the limousine that his wife has ordered for him and smokes a cigarette.

To elaborate, the familiar structure of the action film commonly introduces a hero who is "the white American every-man", as Latham Hunter summarises, films like *Die Hard*, *Lethal Weapon* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), elevated 'ordinary' positions so that "even cops and archaeologists could be, it would seem, physically cocked."⁸ The first scenes consistently leave obvious clues of the hero's 'everyman' quality, such as in *Die Hard* where John McClane (Bruce Willis) 'rides

⁷ Jeffery Brown, "Bullets, Buddies, and Bad Guys: the 'action cop' genre," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 21.2 (1993): 9pp. 13 Aug. 2002. Flinders University Library: Expanded Academic ASAP Plus <<http://web3.infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au>>

⁸ Latham Hunter, "The Celluloid Cubicle: Regressive Constructions of Masculinity in 1990s Office Movies," *Journal of American Culture*, 26 (2003): 16pp. 21 Nov. 2005. Flinders University Library: Expanded Academic ASAP Plus <<http://web3.infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/>>

up front' with Argyle (De'voreux White) in the limousine (Figs.3.1–3.2). Riggs in *Lethal Weapon 2* makes a point of disregarding bureaucratic demands and smokes as he leans against the sign telling him not to smoke in the police building. Even the President in action films makes the point of emphasising his 'everymen' quality, as in *Air Force One* (1997) where the President James Marshall (Harrison Ford) repeatedly protests his desire to watch 'the game.' Such hints establish that from the outset he is a "blue-collar, 'everyman' figure" who, as Martin Flanagan argues,

often displays a distrust of authority figures and/or 'maverick' tendencies, the latter trope being best demonstrated by Mel Gibson's attractively psychotic Martin Riggs in the *Lethal Weapon* series (1987–98).⁹

The distrust of which Flanagan speaks often provides the basis for the problems that the first act revolves around. It is quickly established that the hero's problems are to be attributed to a breakdown in his relationship with either his romantic partner (in *Die Hard* John McClane is on the verge of a divorce), work superiors and colleagues or his family. Whether he is a 'family man' (Schwarzenegger in *Commando*, John McClane in *Die Hard*) or a loner (Martin Riggs before he is forced to team with Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) in *Lethal Weapon*), relationships are the underpinnings of his or her heroism. As Tasker notes, "if 'the family' in its most traditional guise was not always at issue in the 1980s action films, then kinship, attachment and loyalty most definitively were."¹⁰ These relationships, however, are always fraught with difficulties and the first act highlights the primary obstacles that the hero has to overcome. As such, it quickly becomes obvious that the hero frequently has some unresolved issues that threaten his well-being (see, for instance, Martin Riggs's suicidal behaviour in *Lethal Weapon*), or alternatively, the hero encounters a problem, which is unexpectedly thrust onto him (for example, in *Commando*, despite his heroics, John Matrix's daughter, Jenny (Alyssa Milano) is kidnapped). In any case, the first act presents an overwhelming problem that no ordinary person can solve, and the hero is "wrenched from normality and inserted

⁹ Martin Flanagan, "'Get ready for Rush Hour': The chronotope in action," *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 108–109.

¹⁰ Yvonne Tasker, "The Family in Action," *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 263.

into a chain of events over which he has little control.”¹¹ The protagonist is then usually driven to action, motivated “not from simplistic patriotism, but from threat to loved ones.”¹² Thus in *Commando* the hero has to save the daughter, while in *Die Hard*, McClane must not only save his wife, Holly Gennero (Bonnie Bedelia), but also her co-workers. On occasion the hero is forced into a mission out of a lack of choice. For instance, in *Lethal Weapon*, Riggs is commanded to pair with Murtaugh, thereby forming a lasting bi-racial buddy-cop-partnership. At this juncture, in order to emphasise the impossibility of the upcoming battle that takes place in act three, the villain or an inept work colleague will painstakingly explain (or if he is unfortunate, illustrate) the dangers of this mission.

The second act calls attention to the frustration of the obstacles that challenge the hero. These obstacles usually come in the form of petty bureaucrats or the villain’s henchmen. The bureaucrat, for example, will warn the hero not to undergo this mission or, at least, to ‘Do things by the book,’ as Axel Foley’s (Eddie Murphy) superior, Police Chief Hubbard (Stephen Elliott) begs him in *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984). Or the bureaucrat will completely disregard the hero’s demands, as in the case of the L.A. police department in *Die Hard* which ignores McClane’s insights into the ‘situation’, with the consequence that they unwittingly aid the villain’s plans. The henchmen, however, are much more obvious. They may emerge from the darkness to attack the hero in his sleep, as in *Lethal Weapon 2*, when they threaten Murtaugh’s family while he is gagged and bound to his bed, or they may simply shoot the hero as a ‘warning’. At this juncture it emerges that

the only routine known to the action hero is that of random contingency and wild plot deviations; the unpredictable can always be relied upon. Individual texts often play on this unwritten rule of the genre, as in *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992), where Riggs’ peaceful enjoyment of a cigarette is disturbed so often by the exigencies of the plot that it becomes a running joke, or in *Die Hard 2* (1990), where McClane, involved in another terrorist situation, exclaims, ‘How can the same shit happen to the same guy *twice*?’¹³

The final act simply offers the successful resolution of all the problems that arose in the first act through, as Brown puts it, a “flurry of incredible action, [and]

¹¹ Flanagan, 109.

¹² Tasker, “The Family in Action” 263.

¹³ Flanagan, 109.

gratuitous violence”¹⁴. In short, the third act is tantamount to the reward of a spectacle of suspense, blood and explosions.

The Narrative Elements

It is commonly held that in action films the narrative weight given to the hero’s pursuit of a particular goal, results in an “accelerated aesthetic”. Writings on action cinema frequently point out that its speed is one of the genre’s defining features. Bean observes that the “most notable characteristic of the action cinema is its dynamic tempo: rapid editing at once articulates and accelerates the breath-taking pace of the stunning human body.”¹⁵ Similarly, Michael Hammond notes that amongst the “elements expected of an action movie [are] spectacles of violence, fast editing and/or camera movement.”¹⁶ For Tasker,

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

This emphasis on the prominence of speed in the action genre is the basis for Rikke Schubarr’s explanation of the production of “aggression turned into kinetic energy, sadism in the shape of vengeance, explosions, pure speed, the hard body, invulnerability, impenetrability.”¹⁸ Thus, the action hero, for Schubarr, “is harder than steel, invincible and almighty, and with him things begin to change.”¹⁹ This leads to the pronouncement that, ultimately,

¹⁴ Brown (pp. nos. not available).

¹⁵ Jennifer M. Bean, ““Trauma Thrills”: Notes on Early Action Cinema,” *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 17.

¹⁶ Michael Hammond “Saving Private Ryan’s ‘Special Affect,’” *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 153.

¹⁷ Yvonne Tasker, introduction, *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 7.

¹⁸ Rikke Schubarr, “Passion and Acceleration: Generic Change in the Action Film,” *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2001), 192.

¹⁹ Schubarr, 199.

this lack of castration is characteristic of the theme of acceleration and binds together such otherwise diverse films as *Terminator*, *Speed*, *GoldenEye*, and most of Steven Seagal's films. The heroes of these films have no past as broken idols, they have no need to reenact castration, and they are never in any danger.²⁰

One of the problems of this conclusion is that it misses the significance of a vital aspect of the action narrative; namely, the narrative reliance on various deviations that always takes place. In other words, the tendency to be enamoured by the speed of action comes at the cost of bypassing the action narrative's dependence on the opposite to speed, namely delays.

In spite of the available permutations that are consistently explored within the action genre,²¹ the underlying persistence that emerges in the breakdown of the action narrative is the importance of obstacles. The fundamental paradox of action's logic emerges precisely in this contradiction, as Flanagan observations illustrate, "Although the action hero bears the outward signs of strength and self-control, he is characteristically powerless in the face of irrational forces that dictate plot."²² This contradiction is very much in the tradition of the classical Hollywood style where, regardless of the genre, narratives are beset with complications and obstructions as part of a formal system that, as Bordwell remarks, "both *cue* and *constrain* the viewer's construction of a story."²³ In the action film, the hero always encounters both personal problems—namely, problems with his relationships—and public challenges, such as defeating the antagonist's villainous plans, to reach his goal. This practice is what Bordwell identifies as retardation. Narrative retardation has been recognised "since the pioneering explorations of the Russian Formalists...as essential to narrative structure,"²⁴ and is the process in which, "the narrative will end, but its conclusion is held back by complications, subplots, or digressions."²⁵ The action

²⁰ Schubarr, 199.

²¹ E.g. in one film the boss may be the villain, in the next, he is a benevolent father figure; the action hero can either be a suicidal loser or is incarnated in another action film as a loving father; or the hero might be a part of a comic buddy-cop-partnership or a stand-offish loner.

²² Flanagan, 113.

²³ Bordwell, *Narration* 49 (author's emphasis).

²⁴ Bordwell, *Narration* 38.

²⁵ Bordwell, *Narration* 38.

film's plot consistently elaborates, expands such digression; there is always another obstacle to prevent the hero from achieving his goal. As summarised by Flanagan, "plot in the contemporary action film is deployed as a series of narrative hurdles the hero must overcome."²⁶ Retardation, therefore, accounts for the logic of action which, for example, determines that at the critical moment when the hero is trying to save the world, he will encounter the infuriating setback of the idiocy of bystanders.

The bystander, in action films, invariably, albeit often unwittingly, aids the villain and hinders the hero's progress. In *Commando*, when John Matrix follows the villain's minions to find his daughter, he encounters the buffoonery of security guards. Rather than pursuing the man who indiscriminately fires bullets in a crowded shopping mall, the security guards ignore him and instead persist in chasing Matrix (who does not possess a single weapon). Similarly, in *Die Hard* the L.A. police force prolong the narrative in their decision to dismiss McClane's calls for assistance as a child's prank. In overcoming the minor challenges as well as the ostensible goal, the action hero's strength and wits are heightened. Thus the setbacks in action narratives are emphasised to not just entice the audience, but more importantly, to offer proof of the hero's powers which implicitly increase with every obstacle overcome.

The powers of the hero are also emphasised in his pretensions to normalcy. The action hero is consistently cast as an 'everyman'. Everything from humour and body to status and skin colour,²⁷ is designed to present the hero as average but not *just* average. The something extra, the heroic quality means, as Flanagan argues, that we know from the outset that John McClane of *Die Hard* and Jack Traven (Keanu Reeves) of *Speed* are heroes: "we are in no doubt as to their heroic credentials as soon as we are introduced to them."²⁸ The everyman quality of the hero stems also from the mundane, everyday, problems that the hero will typically have overcome; 'private' problems in addition to the obstacles that the villains create. The hero will, for instance, meet challenges from a partner or girlfriend, and occasionally from the family. Moreover, the hero's family life is either hopelessly inadequate or a happy family life that has been jeopardised by an external threat. Internal threats also

²⁶ Flanagan, 114.

²⁷ The "hero's body is superior, but his skin colour—tanned white—also signal him as an everyman," Dyer, 162.

²⁸ Flanagan, 109.

extend from the home to the hero's work life; often upon arrival at the headquarters, or an office, the boss is quick to demean the character, who also may be treated with caution by work colleagues. Although neither the boss or colleagues recognise the hero's potential, they constantly focus on the problems that have limited his talent. Of course, another option is that the hero simply has lost everything and is suicidal because there is nothing to lose (*a la* Riggs in *Lethal Weapon*). Though the overcoming of everyday problems serves to magnify the hero's power, the threat of a loss of control that comes from 'within' (rather than a menacing source of power) points to an impotence and the character's inability to control the world. Thus the narrative necessity of both the private and public obstacles in action film results in an ambivalent relationship between power and impotence, which is revealed in the reoccurring conventions (symptoms) of the genre.

Within action films, attention to the seemingly all-powerful one-liner denotes this ever-present tension between power and an underlying threat to the stability of a complete power. The one-liner consists of a devastating pun that coincides with the villain's last words or gesture. The menacing cool of lines, whether Arnold Schwarzenegger's 'I'll be back,' used in the *Terminator* series, *Commando* and, self-reflectively, in *Last Action Hero*; or McClane's 'Happy trails, Hans,' to Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) in *Die Hard* who finally plunges out of a skyscraper; or Jack Traven's comeback to Howard Payne's (Dennis Hopper) 'I'm smarter than you Jack! I'm smarter, I'm smarter!' (his reply after Payne gets decapitated by a hanging light is, 'Yeah, well I'm taller!'); or Murtaugh's 'Nailed you both,' in *Lethal Weapon 2*, to the villains that he has killed with a nail gun, as well as his retort 'It's just been revoked,' in *Lethal Weapon* to Arjen 'Aryan' Rudd's (Joss Ackland) protests of 'Diplomatic Immunity!' just before he is shot by Murtaugh, all signal the hero's triumphal victory against his nemesis. The familiarity of this pattern is evident in the jocular website comment: "When a villain seems dead, he never is. He will always be allowed one, and sometimes two resurrections. The hero will frequently see him coming, even if his back is turned."²⁹ The action film presents the hero as having a doubled-edged power in his physicality and his verbal abilities.

²⁹ Giancarlo Cairella, comp. *The Movie Cliches List*, 22 Jan. 2004 <<http://moviecliches.com>>



Figure 3.3



Figure 3.4

Die Hard: In the final scenes, John McClane's triumphal entrance is emphasised through the background of electrical sparks. As with most final one-liners, there is still another obstacle that the hero has to overcome. In this instance, his wife is being held at bullet-point....



Figure 3.5



Figure 3.6



Figure 3.9



Figure 3.8

McClane seemingly gives up and drops his weapons; but he then laughs at Hans Gruber's threats to kill him and his wife....



Figure 3.11



Figure 3.12

..... the reason why becomes apparent in a cut that moves down McClane's back, revealing a gun taped to his back.



Figure 3.13



Figure 3.14

In a series of rapid shots, McClane whips his weapon out and kills both the henchmen and Gruber.



Figure 3.15



Figure 3.16

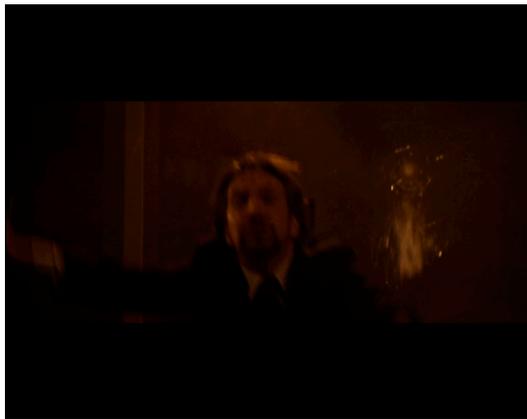


Figure 3.17



Figure 3.18



Figure 3.19



Figure 3.20

Who is shot again, as he is not *quite* dead. A close up punctuates McClane's 'Happy Trails, Hans!'

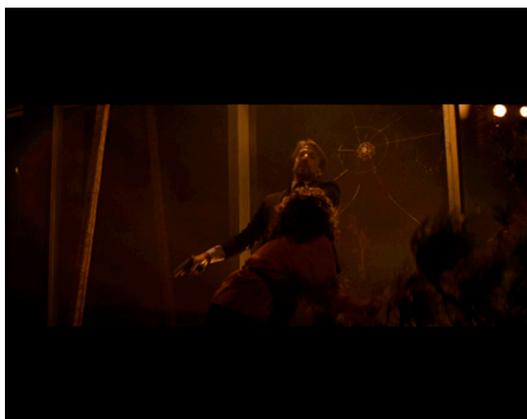


Figure 3.21



Figure 3.22



Figure 3.23



Figure 3.24

The fatality of the hero's 'last word' is amplified through various filmic techniques underscoring this moment of victorious power. One-liner sequences from *Commando*, *Speed*, *Air Force One* and both the *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* series, all incorporate filmic techniques such as: isolating the hero within the frame; low-angles shots; the preceding shots which tend to show not only the power of the villain, but also of the explosion, fire, the height of the cliff, building, scaffolding, or some other menacing force in the background such as a hurricane or volcano; and a slight pause in the soundtrack to cue the one-liner itself, maximising the impact of the wisecrack and, finally, to ensure the significance of this line, followed by surging triumphal music (see for instance, Figs. 3.3–3.24). The point of note here, is that not only is the spectacle vital to the triumphal one-liner, but that this spectacle also highlights the hero's peak of potency.

The Sublime

To some extent this presentation of potency mimics the sublime. The logic of the sublime, according to Alenka Zupancic, produces an admiration and awe arising from a collision of the spectacle and the mundane. The action genre's custom of over-emphasising the spectacle of bombs, explosions and death-defying leaps, coincides with the dimension of the sublime. This is seen, for instance, in the practice frequently employed in action films, in which through combining rapid cuts, slow motion and inserting cuts "made on movement, particularly the movement of the

fireball,” are used “to magnify its impact.”³⁰ These devices reflect what Zupancic calls the sublime’s “inadequacy of the presentation”³¹. The series of rapid shots from multiple angles to capture the excessive spectacle of explosions, fights, and death plunges to capture the action in a single shot, are characteristic of the sublime, wherein the sublime “manifests itself as too large, inaccessible, and impossible to be grasped in one sole gaze”,³² and one can “neither get too close...nor stay too far away”.³³ The pure spectacle of the excessive background effects of explosions, fire, and threatening heights all evoke the sublime “eruption of *jouissance*.”³⁴ This destructive, chaotic form is somehow strangely familiar, and here lies both its fascination and the urge to see it over and again. The presence of this senseless form also explains the overly enthusiastic use of multiple camera angles and repetitive shots of excessive spectacle (Figs. 3.3–3.24).

Another, more obvious, element of the sublime lies in the presentation of the invincibility of the hero’s body. The hero’s body is one that is able to resist firebombs, explosions and gravity, all in order to capture the villain and secure his victory. The hero’s body exemplifies Tasker’s point that the action genre is a celebration of “the refusal of (physical) limitations”³⁵. This ‘limitless’ quality points to yet another key sentiment of the sublime; namely, what Zupancic identifies as a “Sadian body” that functions beyond “infinite suffering”³⁶. The hero’s body does not merely suffer; it goes beyond universal laws and can often perform the impossible, thus operating as a signifier of awesome potency.

The sublime dimension of the action film, however, only manifests itself completely in the final battle of wits between the hero and the villain that only concludes with the ‘killer’ one-liner. To begin with, the sublime arises through the

³⁰ Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000), 94.

³¹ Alenka Zupancic, “The Logic of the Sublime,” *The American Journal of Semiotics*, 9. 2–3 (1992): 64.

³² Zupancic, 66.

³³ Zupancic, 65.

³⁴ Zupancic, 59.

³⁵ Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), 69.

³⁶ Zupancic, 57.

collision between the extreme spectacle of activity with ordinary, stupid, mundane words. As Zupancic points out, the sublime erupts from the “intrusion of one dimension into the other...and it does so at a very specific moment”.³⁷ What is significant to this battle of wits though, is the hero’s manner in his delivery of the one-liner. The hero consistently delivers the one-liner in an odd staccato manner that produces a cold, distant attitude characteristic of understatement. The comic effect of the one-liner entirely depends on the art of understatement to effectively work and this operation relies on, as Slavoj Žižek observes, a “distance where one would not expect it”.³⁸ The hero’s nonchalance to his threatening surroundings and death produces precisely this ‘unexpected distance’, which not only reduces the villain’s power and diminishes the surrounding threat, but also creates an elevation of the hero and a sense of grandeur. This production of elevation and grandeur leads us back again to the framework of the sublime: which is hardly surprising, given that both understatement and the sublime function through an identical mechanism.

While jokes, according to Freud, serve either to “obtain a yield of pleasure or to place the yield of pleasure that has been obtained in the services of aggression,”³⁹ the humorous attitude lies beyond the realm of jokes.⁴⁰ The one-liner exemplifies

³⁷ Zupancic, 52.

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 171.

³⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Humour,” *Art and Literature*, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 429.

⁴⁰ According to Freud, the mechanism of jokes relies on the same principles as dreams, that is, secondary revision, displacement and condensation. To illustrate condensation, take the example of Mel Gibson’s response to Danny Glover’s grumbling about the pranks that he is forced to endure upon the discovery that his daughter appears in a commercial for condoms (his colleagues decorate the plant on his desk with condoms and present it to him as a “rubber tree”). While Mel Gibson assumes the stance of a concerned listener, he then comments that Glover’s complaints have gone, “Out one ear, and into the rubber.” Freud notes that jokes possess “the characteristic of being a notion that has occurred to us ‘involuntarily’,” Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 6 (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 224. This ‘involuntary’ nature of the joke points to the fact that the joke “is the contribution made to the comic from the realm of the unconscious,” *ibid*, 270.

pure humour,⁴¹ primarily though the minimalist reaction to the climactic life and death battle but also in that it shares the sublime characteristic of a sense of, as Freud states, “grandeur and elevation.”⁴² Moreover,

The grandeur in [humour] clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure.⁴³

Here, as Zupancic notes, reside the similarities between the sublime and humour. As she points out, in addition to this “grandeur,” the fundamental qualities of both the sublime and humour is an incorporation of a “new distance, a kind of unconcernedness in face of something that concerns him dramatically,”⁴⁴ and they are grounded in an approach where “a pleasure that takes the place of suffering”.⁴⁵ The traits of both humour and the sublime—a magnificent superiority, the presence of a certain distance and an unconcernedness reaction to threatening surroundings—all happen to coincide with the traits of the superego.

The juxtaposition of humour with the moral agency of the unconscious (the malevolent force of the superego) is grounded in what Zupancic defines as the conversion of “the feeling of anguish and of some considerable discomfort into a certain gain of pleasure”.⁴⁶ Humour, in other words, is the superego’s Freudian slip and, as Jacques Lacan remarks, it is the “betrayal in the comic of the very function of the ‘superego’.”⁴⁷ This betrayal consists in humour’s paternal dimension. According to Freud, the humorist “acquires his superiority by assuming the role of the grown up and identifying himself to some extent with his father, and reducing the other people

⁴¹ The subtle distinction between humour and jokes can be described, according to Freud, as the difference in pleasure: “humorous pleasure never reaches the intensity of the pleasure in the comic or in jokes, that it never finds vent in hearty laughter,” Freud, ‘Humour’, 432.

⁴² Freud, ‘Humour’, 428.

⁴³ Freud, ‘Humour’, 428.

⁴⁴ Zupancic, 55.

⁴⁵ Zupancic, 54.

⁴⁶ Zupancic, 55–56.

⁴⁷ Jacques Lacan, “Kant with Sade,” trans. James B. Swenson, Jr. *October*, 51 (1989): 58.

to being children”.⁴⁸ The understated humour of the action hero thus relies on the process of withdrawing the

psychical accent from his ego and having transposed it on to his superego. To the superego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial; and, with this new distribution of energy, it may become an easy matter for the superego to suppress the ego’s possibilities of reacting.⁴⁹

The functioning of the sublime and of humour according to the rationale of the superego, means that both are not the all-powerful gestures as initially perceived. In the humorous attitude, the superego, according to Freud, “is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion.”⁵⁰ The impenetrable mask that is the cause of the humorous effect also signals the defensive aspect of the one-liner. Thus the one-liner draws attention to the underlying impotence residing in the gestures of triumph.

The Forced Choice

The inherent impotence of action narratives initially emerges in the opening impossible choice that justifies the violence that pervades throughout the narrative. This ‘choice’ shares the merits of the Lacanian forced choice, in which the subject is condemned to uphold the semblance of choice although it really is not one. The forced choice, to elaborate, is the course of action in which the subject is condemned to choose between being (the subject) or meaning (the Other). In other words, it is the choice in which the subject renounces pure enjoyment to become part of the symbolic network. For the divided subject, this process of ‘alienation and separation’ ultimately ends “with a desire of its own.”⁵¹ But in both cases the choice demands that we lose something, as Lacan proposes,

If we chose being, the subject disappears...it falls into non-meaning. If we choose meaning, the meaning survives only deprived of that part of non-

⁴⁸ Freud, “Humour” 430.

⁴⁹ Freud, “Humour” 430.

⁵⁰ Freud, “Humour” 432.

⁵¹ Paul Verhaeghe, *Does the Woman Exist? From Freud’s Hysteric to Lacan’s Feminine*, trans. Marc du Ry (New York: Other Press, 1999), 50.

meaning that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realisation of the subject, the unconscious.⁵²

The forced choice translates in to a choice that threatens to jeopardise everything. Lacan illustrates this by the choice between your money or your life: “If I chose the money, I lose both. If I chose life, I have life without money, namely, a life deprived of something.”⁵³ The forced choice is the ultimate in impotence, because the alternatives are not between good and bad, but between worse and even worse! This dilemma is frequently incorporated within the first scenes of action films, as in Matrix’s choice in *Commando* highlights. After an opening bliss montage of John and Jenny Matrix eating ice cream, swimming, fishing, fighting and indulging in other wholesome activities, she is kidnapped. John Matrix is then offered the choice to either kill the president of Val Verda in order to regain his daughter, or to rebel and be killed; but in both acts, he risks losing his life (or, at least, a life in prison, presumably without his daughter). Typically, he disregards the orders of his nemesis, and in doing so, risks jeopardising his daughter’s life as well as his own. This scenario is re-enacted precisely in *The Nick of Time* (1995), where Gene Watson (Johnny Depp) is trapped by a choice of equally unappealing outcomes: he must either obey the commands of the villains and kill the governor, or risk his and his daughter’s life.

According to Zupanic, the sublimity of the forced choice arises from the circumstance that it aims at “a ‘symbolic death’—even if the price we pay for it turns out to be our empirical life.”⁵⁴ What is significant about Matrix’s choice in *Commando* is that he has to risk everything, including his life, in order to regain his power. The action hero consistently must risk losing everything (not least in sequels) in his efforts to continually confront the problems and obstacles that must be overcome to attain to, and to sustain, the heroic status. The forced choice of *Commando*, in which John Matrix stands to lose everything, illustrates precisely the threat of loss that dominates action. The narrative reliance on this choice points to

⁵² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis Four Fundamentals*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 211.

⁵³ Lacan, *Four Fundamentals* 212.

⁵⁴ Zupanic, 56.

what Žižek describes as the ‘phallic experience’, a state marked by a duality of power and loss:

It is this very ‘contradiction’ that constitutes the ‘phallic experience’...This act is ‘phallic’ in so far as it marks the point of coincidence between omnipotence (‘everything depends on me’: the subject posits all reality as his work) and total impotence (‘but for all that I can do nothing’: the subject can formally assume only what is given to him).⁵⁵

The Symbolic Network

The forced choice explicitly emphasises how much the hero stands to lose. Hence it appears that the problem for the action hero is that, as powerfully as he may be constructed to be, the male’s possession—having the phallus—is a burden as he always has something to lose. Therefore, as Miller argues, “he is condemned to prudence. The Lacanian man is fundamentally fearful...men are not without semblants but they are in order to protect their little having.”⁵⁶ Because of this omnipresent threat of castration, the phallic experience is, naturally, masculine; and Lacan illustrates this contradictory experience in his diagrams of sexual difference.

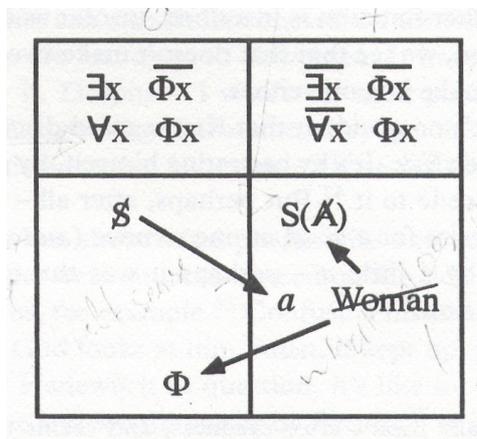


Figure 3.25

Lacan’s schema of sexual difference.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 223.

⁵⁶ Jacques-Alain Miller “Of Semblants in the relation between Sexes,” *Psychoanalytic Notebooks of the London Circle*, Autumn (1999): 17.

⁵⁷ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 78.

In his seminar, *Encore*, Lacan encapsulates the male and female operations of inscription into the symbolic network as a series of formulas, which are designed to show the impossibility of the sexual relationship (Fig. 3.25). In this connection it is important to note that according to this mapping of sexual difference, all pretences of a complete masculinity are illusory. This inscription is not necessarily biological but, according to Lacan, all speaking beings situate themselves, “on one side or the other,”⁵⁸ and this, according to Joan Copjec, depends on the “enunciative position one assumes.”⁵⁹ The upper left-hand side of the formula⁶⁰ encapsulates the masculine experience as follows:

$$\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$$

$$\forall x \Phi x$$

These symbols equate, on the one hand, that “there is at least one x that is not submitted to the phallic function” ($\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$), and on the other, that “all x s are (every x is) submitted to the phallic function” ($\forall x \Phi x$).⁶¹ Hence, according to this formulation, while all men are castrated to function within the symbolic network, this is conditional on the belief that one man remains whole, complete and is not divided.⁶² The position of the one who escapes castration is occupied by the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father ($\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$), and is what Verhaeghe identifies as “the necessary exception to the rule.”⁶³ As François Regnault states, the Father functions “to support the symbol, i.e. to prop up the symbolic order. Man is constituted by that order.”⁶⁴ This means that through the cost of renouncing enjoyment the symbolic grants men their status as men, but as men who are lacking something. Thus the

⁵⁸ 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), 79–80.

⁵⁹ Joan Copjec, *Read my Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 214.

⁶⁰ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality* 78.

⁶¹ Copjec, 214.

⁶² This ‘man’, unlike all other men, escapes symbolic castration and does not encounter the forced choice to give up something to enter the symbolic network because he is, simply, the symbolic.

⁶³ Verhaeghe, 201.

⁶⁴ François Regnault, “The-Name-of-the-Father,” *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Marie Jaanus (Albany: State University Press, 1995), 66.

Name-of-the-Father acts as both a symbolic guarantee (of his identity), and also is the grounding point of the divided subject's desire (the enjoyment that he has lost or surrendered on his entry into the symbolic) and regulates enjoyment. Thus it is significant that underneath these formulas are the symbols, Φ ; as it is the phallic (Φ) which Lacan claims "props him up as a signifier"⁶⁵. In other words, it is the phallic rule that allows the divided subject to have his own desire. Therefore, the function of the Name-of-the-Father, "is the establishment of the Law in the Symbolic."⁶⁶ This position of Law, however, is impossible for a man (who so desires) to assume; any attempts to do so amount to an imposture because it is "only an Imaginary construct of the subject"⁶⁷. This imposture of masculinity ensures that "no man can boast that he embodies this thing—masculinity—any more than any concept can be said to embody being."⁶⁸

The lower formula, $\forall x \Phi x$, is the signifier of all other men, denoting that all men are submitted to the phallic function. Accordingly,

upon the subject's encounter with the forced choice, they chose their castration and must renounce *jouissance* to enter the symbolic: to Lacan, 'castration means that *jouissance* has to be refused in order for it to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire'.⁶⁹

But, the presence of the $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$ (the Name-of-the-Father), insists that the only way for men to enter into the symbolic network comes with the proviso that man's inscription

is limited due to the existence of an x by which the function Φx is negated: $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$. That is what is known as the father function—whereby we find, via negation, the proposition $\overline{\Phi x}$, which grounds the operativity (*exercice*) of what makes up for the sexual relationship with castration, insofar as that relationship is in no way inscribable. The whole here is thus based on the exception posited as the end-point, that is, on that which altogether negates Φx .⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality* 80.

⁶⁶ Verhaeghe, 202.

⁶⁷ Verhaeghe, 107.

⁶⁸ Copjec, 234.

⁶⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002), 311.

⁷⁰ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality* 79–80 (author's emphasis).

What this complex explanation amounts to is that the presence of the Name-of-the-Father both enables symbolic entry and also *limits* it: for the man to attain enjoyment (*jouissance*), paradoxically, it initially has to be refused. Simply stated, to use Copjec's explanation, "the inclusion of *all* men within the domain of phallic rule is conditioned by the fact that *at least one* escapes it."⁷¹ As the guarantee of Law, the inherent exception, this 'man escaped' is, to Lacan, "also incarnated in S_1 "⁷²—the master signifier.

The master signifier, as the fundamental guarantee, is central in the operation of the discourse of the master. The master's discourse uses the master signifier to present a whole, undivided and powerful point of regulation. Thus the parallel between the classical action film and the discourse of the master can initially be clearly discerned in their equal prominence of the master signifier. In the classical action film, the significance of the Name-of-the-Father translates to an enshrining of fathers, within which lies the difference between the two equally melodramatic worlds of action films and the "woman's film". While, in their respective genres, the troubles of both the action hero and the hysterical heroine are placed at the centre of the universe, only *her* troubles matter, whereas *he* is more concerned with saving the universe. In contrast to the internal plights of the heroine, the action hero's problems are externalised to saving the Father's Law, that is, although the ostentatious reason for the action hero's action may be to save his family, his motivation is always supplemented by an external problem jeopardising the greater universe (whether the local area, country or the world). However, this is not to say that the family is of little significance in the action film, because the importance of the family in the action universe lies in that the family is a condensation of upholding the Father's Law.

The role of the family in the action universe has been noted as one of the point of yet another inconsistency of action's logic: for some, though the family is important it is resisted by the hero. As Tasker summarises,

At issue in action and adventure's staging of familial and other bonds of loyalty is an insistent and intense opposition between the perils and pleasures of freedom (physical exhilarations; potential isolation) on the one hand and

⁷¹ Copjec, 216 (author's emphasis).

⁷² Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality* 80.

responsibility (limits placed on physical activity; the intensity of romantic love or comradeship) on the other.⁷³

In this sense, the action film casts the hero to occupy the impossible position of the (metaphorical) grounding exception. He is the embodiment of a complete man, which might explain why heroes may simultaneously be loners as well as fathers, or else look up to a father figure. These father figures are not necessarily literal fathers, but the hero is always

framed by other allegiances, alternative families and, crucially, the community of work. And if ‘the family’ in its most traditional guise was not always at issue in the 1980s action films, then kinship, attachment and loyalty most definitively were.⁷⁴

The one consistency of action films however, is that fathers always play a crucial role. So, whilst the action hero may or may not occupy the position of fatherhood, fathers still prominently appear in the clichés such as of the kindly, but tough, boss. However, more importantly the action film triumphs the American Founding Fathers. Thus the importance of families in action can be pinpointed to a need to emphasis the upholding of the Father’s Law.⁷⁵

For Americans, the importance and elevation of Father is what holds the community ‘together’, and this is particularly evident in the American reverence of the Constitution. To Renata Salecl, because of “the lack of a unified national substance”⁷⁶ the point of contact for Americans is

the word of the Founding Fathers. The Constitution works in America as a unifying principle that has the same logic as the nation in European democracies. And the way to express love of country and respect for the Founding Fathers is not national identification or nationalism, but patriotism—devotion to the father.⁷⁷

⁷³ Tasker, “The Family in Action” 254.

⁷⁴ Tasker, “The Family in Action” 263.

⁷⁵ At the same time there is in action films a necessary opposition to the Father as Law: namely, the obscene father, the villain.

⁷⁶ Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 1998), 135.

⁷⁷ Salecl, 135–136.

Naturally, this respect for the word of the Founding Fathers—the master signifier of America—translates across to the action film.⁷⁸ The parallel accounts for Susan Jeffords’s reading of action heroes, which argues that the action hero is a stand in for the U.S. President, who in turn, is an embodiment of America; that is, the action hero and the U.S. President both stand for what is currently believed to constitute the “American identity”⁷⁹.

Jeffords also argues that not only does the action narrative’s worship of America ensure the positive outcome for the action hero but also, due to the hero’s shared qualities with the U.S. President, the hero’s power is derived from an alignment with the current politics in force. For Jeffords, like the President, action heroes exemplify what Americans can identify with as being American, and are “characters who stand for individualism, liberty, militarism, and a mythic heroism.”⁸⁰ Using the Reagan presidency to illustrate the resemblances between the action hero and the presidency, Jeffords proposes that the “action-adventure Hollywood films...portrayed many of the same narratives of heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength and ‘good old Americanness’ that made the Reagan Revolution possible.”⁸¹ The corresponding qualities between action heroes and the President lie largely in Reagan’s invincibility. Like the action hero, Reagan was applauded for his seemingly indestructible body; during his eight years as President, he survived operations and an assassination attempt. To Jeffords, Reagan’s survival of an assassination attempt was “able to show that incidents that could have defeated a lesser man—or, more to the point, a lesser body—were unable to overcome him.”⁸² Furthermore, akin to the conduct of an action hero, Reagan uttered one-liners when he faced dire events, such as quipping upon entering an operating theatre, “I hope

⁷⁸ In opposition to the Hollywood classical action movies, the *James Bond* films rarely focus on saving children, nor do fathers feature heavily. This is, perhaps, due to England’s “unified national substance”, a point which a common feature appears “likeable to ourselves and thereby obtain our symbolic identity” (Salecl, 135). Whereas, for Americans, as a cultural ‘melting pot’, this unifying source is necessarily different.

⁷⁹ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinities in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 24.

⁸⁰ Jeffords, 16.

⁸¹ Jeffords, 15.

⁸² Jeffords, 29.

that you are all Republicans.”⁸³ In any case, this interpretation, in which the hero acts as a condensed notion of America,⁸⁴ highlights the dominance of the master’s discourse precisely in that the signifier of America imbues the action hero with meaning.

Given that the Founding Fathers may function as the investment of power for the action hero, the specific causes of the spectacle of violence that pervades the action film can then be identified through two key points of attack. First, the justification for violence in action movies not infrequently devolves upon the moment when the family, or more specifically, children, are placed in danger by the villain’s plans. For Sarah Harwood, the family in the action film “serves as moral touchstone.”⁸⁵ Similarly, Tasker notes that while “some 1980s movies emphasised the melodramatic (loved ones in peril), whilst the sentimentality of others clearly drew on an image of the patriarchal family as a moral anchor.”⁸⁶ In the action film, these ‘morals’ transform the value of violence. Though violence against the family is the worst act, as Karen Schneider observes, violence that protects the family is encouraged:

In family-centred action-thrillers... violence has a positive function; it may rend the fabric of hegemonic American society, but it also reweaves it. It is therefore, not violence *per se* that most people object to; it is the breaking of the Father’s law, in this case the dismemberment of the family unit that embodies and reproduces that law.⁸⁷

The immediate purpose of violence against the family is to explicitly illustrate the immorality of the villain, and then subsequently to justify the meted out punishment. The psychoanalytic reasoning behind this conversion of violence is that the villain’s attack jeopardises the Name-of-the-Father. The major threat to the

⁸³ As quoted in Jeffords, 6.

⁸⁴ I.e. while the action hero himself is not the master signifier; the master signifier does, however, invest the action hero with the power connoted by America.

⁸⁵ Sarah Harwood, *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema*, (London: MacMillan Press, 1997), 2.

⁸⁶ Tasker, “The Family in Action” 263.

⁸⁷ Karen Schneider, “With Violence if Necessary,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. 27.1 (1999): 2pp. 11 Nov. 2002 Flinders University Library: Expanded Academic ASAP Plus <<http://web3.infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/>>

Father's Law is when it is unable to be passed on, as Verhaeghe's reiteration of the tale of a father bird and his young highlights. The significance of the legacy of the Name-of-the-Father in this story emerges through the father's choice:

During a storm, a nest of young birds was at the risk from flooding. Papa bird brought his little ones to safety, one by one. While flying above the teeming flood with the first of his young carefully held in his claws, he asked: 'Look at the amount of trouble I am going through in order to save you; will you do the same for me when I am old and weak' — 'Of course I will,' the first replied. At which the father promptly dumped him in the water, with the words 'One should not save a liar.' The same went for number two. When asking the question of the third and last one, he received the following answer: 'My beloved father, I cannot promise you that; but I do promise that I will save my little ones.' Needless to say, the papa bird saved this little one.⁸⁸

Verhaeghe claims that the father figure "is saved because he does not have to be saved. The signifier which establishes the function has been passed on to the next generation."⁸⁹ For the action film, there is nothing more violent than an encroachment that jeopardises the legacy of the Father, and the villain's attack serves to illuminate the fragility of the Name-of-the-Father. As a result of this attack, the villain's violence stresses the impotence that underpins the Law.

The second moment that cues violence surfaces when the imposture of the master is highlighted. Despite appearances, neither America nor its 'representative', the hero, are all-powerful, impenetrable fortresses. The illusion of stability engendered by the Father threatens to collapse when the villain draws attention to its inherent impotence. The logic of this persistent link between the threat to the Father (America) and spectacular action materialises in Verhaeghe's account of the consequences of the grounding force of the Father:

The law of the Name-of-the-Father grounds all other laws...The Name-of-the-Father grounds the symbolic order $S_1 \diamond S_2$, thereby creating the possibility of the discourses, those structures which enable our different social bonds to exist. Hence, the trespassing of this system implies a threat to the very existence of the social order, and all the more so if the trespassing concerns the founding law itself.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Verhaeghe, 170.

⁸⁹ Verhaeghe, 170.

⁹⁰ Verhaeghe, 201.



Figure 3.26



Figure 3.27

Die Hard: When Hans Gruber and his team take over the Natokomi building, John McClane investigates from underneath a table.



Figure 3.28



Figure 3.29

A series of 'point-of-view' shots show the negotiations in process...



Figure 3.30



Figure 3.31

... to which McClane is just a helpless witness.



Figure 3.32



Figure 3.33

Rapid shots then heighten the impact of Mr. Takagi's murder....



Figure 3.34



Figure 3.35

... which slows to a close-up of McClane's look of horror.

This threat, equating with impotence, is the impetus for activity as the actions of the action hero consistently illustrate. For example, in *Commando*, John Matrix in the end deals with the threat of loss through a murderous rampage. For Matrix, violence is an escape from the crippling dimension of the forced choice: he was not able to save his daughter, and he now has something to lose. Similar examples can be found in *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard* and *Speed*, in which once it is established that the hero has lost something (Riggs no longer has the will to live, an emasculated McClane risks losing his wife to divorce and the actions of a madman, and Jack Traven's buddy-cop-partner, Harry Temple (Jeff Daniels) is killed by his arch-enemy), the hero breaks out in aggressive action. A classic example of hopeless preceding violence is McClane's reaction after he helplessly witnesses the killing of Mr. Takagi (James Shigeta), the C.E.O. of the Natokomi Corporation (Figs. 3.26–3.35). Within the space of his two scenes, McClane transforms from staggering

helplessly around answering his own questions ('Why the fuck didn't you stop him, John? 'Cause then you'd be dead too, asshole. Think Goddamn it! Think!'), to fighting an all-out death match brawl with one of the innumerable blonde henchmen (Figs. 3.36–3.43). From this, one may conclude that the masculine activity which marks the classical action can always be located to the moment of impotence.



Figure 3.36



Figure 3.37

Die Hard: This sequence is the first time we see McClane after the murder of Mr. Takagi. The camera tracks along side him as he protests to himself ('Think John, Think!')



Figure 3.38



Figure 3.39

Immediately after his monologue, he spies one of the henchmen and attacks him....



Figure 3.40



Figure 3.41



Figure 3.42



Figure 3.43

... and after a frenzied fight, McClane kills him.

Just as the conventions of the action resemble symptoms of power, conversely they also resemble conventions of impotence. This ambivalent affiliation between power and impotence that resides in the classical action's discursive structure (the discourse of the master), also is evident in the action hero's relationships with the Other. As one of the central defining points of the male hero's strength, the presence of weaker men is necessary for the illustration of his power. Similarly, the discourse of the master is characterised by its paradoxical relation to the Other. For while the movement from S_1 to S_2 imitates the master/slave relation, it is the Other that supports the master's position: without the slave—the Other—the master ceases to exist. As Verhaeghe states, "it is the slave who confirms, through his knowledge, the position of the master. Indeed, this upper part illustrates the fact that the master desires to be the Other, an incarnation of the knowledge desired by some other."⁹¹

⁹¹ Verhaeghe, 108.

For action films, it is commonly assumed that the Other—the one who makes the master—is either a foreigner or the megalomaniacal psychotic. That is, the Other is frequently defined in terms of a negative relation to America. As Flanagan notes, the action film has a “tendency to portray American institutions at the mercy of Middle-Eastern zealots or European nihilists.”⁹² This immediate association, however, does not account for the persistence presence of the ‘bureaucratic villain’, an American who rigorously follows the law that it conflicts with the hero’s goal. Thus instead of the belief in the neat opposition between good and bad—with the hero equating good and the sadistic madman occupying the position of bad—the storyline of the classical action film is not contingent on the presence of the obvious villain, but rather, the narrative reliance in the action film consistently presents the Other in the form of an ordinary man.

In the classical action film, in contrast to the action hero who is the embodiment of the American ideals of individuality and adventure, the ordinary man exemplifies blandness. Accordingly, this character often appears in the form of the bureaucrat, and his various incarnations include the roles of either the security guard, office worker, inept colleague, boss, nerd and (in later films) the techno-geek. The ordinary man acts as an essential counterpoint who illuminates the masculinity of hero; in fact, the power of the hero hinges on the idiocy of the ordinary man. At the simplest level this is evidenced by the familiar role of the ordinary man in making the hero (and the audience) aware of the enormity of the problems the hero is likely to encounter. The hero’s potency is realised not simply just through his battles against sublime forces, but is highlighted through the action hero’s overcoming what the ordinary man believes to be impossible.

Like all other characters in the classical action universe, the ordinary man is defined in relation to the master signifier of America. While the villains are evil because they operate against the master, or simply because they function without a master,⁹³ and the hero is defined as an embodiment of the qualities of an ideal American, the ordinary man’s relationship to the master is somewhat problematic. Though the ordinary man often is portrayed as law-abiding by virtue of his

⁹² Flanagan, 109.

⁹³ In which the function of the master is foreclosed, forcing the villain to exist as a psychotic.

humourless attitude, still he is characterised by some vaguely un-American qualities. Unlike the hero who faces ridiculous challenges, the ordinary man is without 'real' problems: we learn nothing of his relationships, his boss values his work and he does not have to save the world. As a consequence, whatever his guise, the ordinary man, is treated with suspicion and thus perceived as feeble. However, more importantly, by virtue of his willingness to conform the ordinary man is presented as lacking the ability of independent thought and, to that extent, thereby betrays the 'democratic ideals' of America. The crimes of the ordinary man, to paraphrase Jeffords, are that he is not muscular and that he does not possess an autonomous mind.⁹⁴

The importance to the narrative discourse of the ordinary man's resistance to individuality results in one of the worse accusations in the genre, that is, to be called a 'suit'. This occurs in *Mercury Rising* (1998) when Art Jefferies (Bruce Willis) scathingly sneers at the idea of having someone tell him what to do: "You are not going to let those suits tell *me* what to do?" This tension between the hero and his opposition is realised in the presentation of their bodies. For the action hero, his body functions as part of the cinematic spectacle and, accordingly, is exposed to highlight his exceptional physique; as Tasker argues, "muscles serve as just one component of the excessive visual display that characterises the action cinema."⁹⁵ The legitimacy of this exhibition of brawn, however, rests on highlighting the excessive physicality of the hero's challenges. Hence Paul McDonald's observation that the hero's body is one that is "continually shown to be a body in action."⁹⁶ In similar vein, the location search for *Rambo III* required finding a setting with a sweltering climate in order to justify the heightened exposure of Stallone's torso.⁹⁷ For Tasker, it was "this explosive and excessive cinematic context," of heat and physical action "that provides a setting for, even *allows*, the display of the white male body."⁹⁸ The notion of the hero's body functioning as part of the genre's attraction is evident in the narrative rigmarole that *Die Hard* offers to explain Bruce Willis's transformation

⁹⁴ Jeffords, 40–41.

⁹⁵ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 78.

⁹⁶ Paul McDonald, "Stars Bodies and Performance," *Stars* by Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute publishing, 1992), 182.

⁹⁷ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 76.

⁹⁸ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 76.

from fully-clothed to shoeless and shirtless; a state then exploited through long lingering shots of his rippling muscles. In contrast to the bareness of the hero, ordinary men are frequently costumed in restrictive grey suits and uniforms. This opposition is magnified through the difference in the way that they are filmed; while the hero is framed in isolated close-ups, ordinary people are framed in groupings through tightly framed shots as if to emphasise their functioning as a mass. In *Die Hard*, for example, McClane is largely filmed in close-ups, but the inept police officers are huddled together in tight medium-long shots. The ordinary man operates as part of a bureaucratic machine, and is therefore representative of institutions, not of America.

On the one hand, the complexity of the ordinary man's relationship to the master stems from an ambivalent attitude towards bureaucracy while, on the other, members of institutions like the FBI or the CIA, though meant to uphold the law, by means of their pedantic, nit-picky approach are perceived to betray it. The action film makes the point of the inclusion of the distinction between "loyal service to 'country' (good) and 'government' (bad)." ⁹⁹ Thus the bureaucrat in the action universe is a man who has "lost touch with the people they are to serve, largely through the failure of bureaucrats themselves to attend to individual needs." ¹⁰⁰ Thus the foolishness of the ordinary man often emerges through the narrative dictate that a 'superior' someone, or an institution such as the FBI or CIA, will invoke all of their authority to hinder the hero from doing his duty. These bodies are presented as the irrational rational; they are the spoilsports of the action genre. The obvious mistake that the ordinary men make is that they always, to recall the Police Chief's warning in *Beverly Hills Cop*, 'Do things by the book.' In *Die Hard*, Sergeant Al Powell (Reginald VelJohnson) begs Deputy Chief Dwayne T. Robinson (Paul Gleason), 'Can't you see? Can't you read between the lines?' In other words, ordinary men embody the worst of the university discourse. In *Die Hard* it takes an inordinate time for McClane's cry for help to be recognised by the LAPD as genuine. When the officials finally realise their mistake, McClane is then informed that he has no

⁹⁹ Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 292.

¹⁰⁰ Jeffords, 19.

authority to act. The only one to recognise the hero is his 'partner', Al Powell, who is just as impotent in getting recognition for himself or for Bruce. Bureaucrats, unlike McClane, always misread the situation and mistakenly presume that they know the best way to deal with what they believe to be a terrorist scenario by following the rules. As Powell says, 'They got the universal terrorist playbook and they're running it step by step.' This by-the-book approach that the authorities adopt is inept and always costs lives. The effect of such idiocy implicitly draws attention to the hero's vaunted qualities.

The opposition of the ordinary man from the hero primarily results from the need to define the power of the hero. As Bordwell points out, "a character is made up of a consistent bundle of a few salient traits, which usually depend on the character's narrative function."¹⁰¹ The ordinary man's prime narrative function is not only to highlight the heroics, but also to hinder the hero's mission. Whether or not intentional, the ordinary man always hinders the hero by creating pointless obstructions; the ordinary man usually takes the avenue of either inadvertently aiding the villain or creating bureaucratic obstacles. If, in the action film, a FBI agent is called in, the hero encounters the frustration of the ceaseless production of inefficient time-wasting; for instance, they may spend an inordinate amount of time obsessing over whose jurisdiction the crime 'belongs' to, and which institution has the proper authority. Obstacles also result from the institution's failure to immediately comprehend the working of the hero's mind and the knowledge that the hero's way is the only right way. In *Die Hard*, ordinary men, in this instance the FBI, ignore McClane's knowledge and mistakenly aid the villain's plans by following the FBI's procedure when confronted with terrorist activities. By-the-book they turn off the power to the building, which then enables the villain to do what he planned and to steal money from the immobilized vaults. The ordinary man sometimes plays the role of faceless henchmen to the villain, and from time to time, the action film rejects the standard psychotic villain and displaces his characteristics onto the ordinary man. Here, the dangerous impact of the ordinary man rests in that he exemplifies pure bureaucracy and follows the Law precisely. His evil constitutes in blindly following the Law which consequently ignores other subjects ($S_2 \rightarrow \frac{a}{s}$). The ordinary man's

¹⁰¹ Bordwell, *Classical Hollywood Cinema* 14.

narrative purpose is not limited to merely tacitly demonstrating the hero's physical strength; in his obedience to a master he illustrates the righteousness of the hero's actions.

In as much as the ordinary man's folly may be relied on as an essential counter-point to define the hero, the other crucial distinguishing point of heroism arises through the hero's drive towards his goal. One of the fundamental details of the classical action's structure is to distinguish the hero from the ordinary man or the villain, and this is revealed in the hero's insistence to do what he believes to be the right thing to do—the action hero 'does *has* to do'. In the action universe, this phrase consistently offers a convenient justification to go beyond the law, particularly as his mission at this point is transformed from a duty into a personal one. The relentless pursuit stemming from a personal vendetta to do what is 'right' is best illustrated in *Lethal Weapon 2* after Martin Riggs has been warned to stay away from the South African diplomat because of his diplomatic immunity. Riggs nevertheless renounces his symbolic status and deliberately disregards the law to relentlessly pursue the diplomat directly responsible for death of both his wife and his girlfriend, ominously warning Roger Murtaugh over the phone, 'I'm not a cop tonight.'

Throughout action narratives renouncement of the law exemplifies the incompatible relationship between legalities and the hero's goal; a clash that serves to highlight the strength of the hero's desire, thus giving weight to his appearance of power. Lacan, in his seminar *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, identifies the crucial element of a hero as being that he "does not give ground relative to his desire."¹⁰² In this sense, Martin Riggs particularly epitomises the hero. Riggs, Jeffords points out, indulges in the "most appalling behaviour,"¹⁰³ all in the name of some mysterious greater good. Furthermore, part of the appeal of his character lies in that "he believes that breaking laws in the process of achieving a larger good, whether stopping drug dealers, protecting the presidency, rescuing POWs, or maintaining a contra supply route, is not only permissible but necessary."¹⁰⁴ In his disregard for the law (as opposed to the Law, that is the ideals of America) so as to satisfy his desire, Riggs

¹⁰² Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, tr. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 321.

¹⁰³ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 57.

¹⁰⁴ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 58.

meets the psychoanalytic definition of a hero. Desire, according to Lacan, “is the essence of man”¹⁰⁵ and without it, he is reduced to the level of what Lacan identifies as the “ordinary man”¹⁰⁶.

It is through Lacan that the narrative significance of the ordinary man’s crimes becomes clear. While the hero sticks with his desire and refuses to accept boring rationalist explanations, the ordinary man is seduced by the superegoic voice. Whenever the hero accuses the ordinary man of betrayal, his response is usually something like George Dillon’s (Carl Weathers) from *Predator* (1987), ‘I woke up.’ The merits of the hero rest precisely in that he never wakes up and does not betray his desire; again alluding to his inner strength that distinguishes him and elevates him above the ordinary man.¹⁰⁷ The pathetic character of the ordinary man is underscored by the fact that he constantly acts as a reminder of the consequences of the hero’s actions, such as the realities like the department’s budget, the town’s economy, and diplomatic relations. The ordinary man may present seemingly valid reasons for giving up his desire and in doing so he provides an example of Lacan’s point that the ordinary man “has often given ground relative to his desire for a good motive or even the best of motives.”¹⁰⁸ Though it is clear that the ordinary man has made the wrong decision, this tension of choice is always emphasised. The hero’s strength lies in the fact that he, unlike the ordinary man, resists the superego. This is why, the hero, as immoral as he be, is later rewarded (the happy ending). To Copjec, “the subject does not *surrender* its desire in order to gain the rewards society offers as incentives; instead, the subject *maintains* its desire rather than succumb to these “pathological motives for giving it up.”¹⁰⁹

The positivity of the hero is also highlighted by the ordinary man’s principal offence of holding onto the ideal of doing his duty for the good of others. The danger here, as Miller argues, is that, “He who pretends to incarnate the moral law is the true

¹⁰⁵ Lacan, *Four Fundamentals*, 275.

¹⁰⁶ Lacan, *Ethics*, 319.

¹⁰⁷ Betrayal can appear in either form of the subject’s betrayal of himself, or, the subject simply, “tolerates the fact that someone with whom he has more or less vowed to do something betrays his hope and doesn’t do it for him what their pact entailed,” Lacan, *Ethics*, 321.

¹⁰⁸ Lacan, *Ethics*, 319.

¹⁰⁹ Copjec, 94 (author’s emphasis).

sadist.”¹¹⁰ The risks of this excessive morality are epitomised by Harry Dalton’s (Pierce Bronsan) superior’s, Paul Dreyfus (Charles Hamilton), actions in *Dante’s Peak* (1997), who takes the notion of doing what is ‘best for others’ to such lengths—in this instance by being aware of the community’s fears of financial ruin and the potential damage the threatening volcano will have on the town’s image as “America’s second most liveable town”—that the consequence is the destruction of himself and others when the volcano eventually consumes the entire town. The idea of doing what is best for others, inevitably leads to “all kinds of...catastrophes.”¹¹¹ It is only in the very end when lava engulfs the township (and eventually himself) that the boss belatedly realises his mistake. The ordinary man of classical action provides an illustration of the price of morality. This rôle has him performing functions such as articulating the potential dangers of the hero’s mission, blocking the success of the hero. The ordinary man’s existence depends on his lack of desire.

The relationship to desire acts as device to highlight the qualities of all characters. The forced choice is multi-purposed in that not only does it draw attention to the dimension of impotence, it also implies that the hero is a hero because he is able to escape the crippling aspect of the forced choice and maintain his desire. In contrast, what restrains the ordinary man from performing heroic acts is his lack of desire. In charting this tension between the choice of desire (ethics) and what is good for others (moral law), the antagonism between the hero and his superegoic opposition (the ordinary man) resembles the basic matrix of a Greimasian square.¹¹² The Greimasian (semiotic) square consists of four positions that are located according to binary oppositions, and the “the resultant opposition of the presence and absence of a definite trait.”¹¹³ While the hero retains desire, conversely, he is also immoral; the ordinary man is moral, but lacks ethics (desire). Accordingly, the two characters types are defined in relation to each other, so when in the conclusion the

¹¹⁰ Miller, ‘On Perversion’, 319.

¹¹¹ Lacan, *Ethics*, 319.

¹¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), 67.

¹¹³ Algirdas Julien Greimas, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, trs. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins, foreword by Fredric Jameson, introduction by Paul J. Perron (London: Frances Pinter, 1987), 308.

hero is rewarded with a happy ending, the ordinary man will have the exact opposite. If the ordinary man deliberately and directly endangers the hero's life he will die or, in the case of the dumb security guards of *Commando*, since they are merely hapless un-knowing idiots, they are just beaten up by Schwarzenegger.

The Villain

Enlarging this square also reveals the inclusion of two other noteworthy narrative functions, that of scoundrel and saint. The position of scoundrel, as epitomised by the psychotic villain, occupies the void of both morals and ethics. In contrast to ordinary man, whose crime is his complete lack of desire, the villain *desires too much*. In the villain, we encounter the complete collapse of the Father's regulated enjoyment. The excessive desire of the scoundrel often acts as the trigger for the events of the action film: the action begins when the hero becomes aware of the villain's prodigious pursuit of evils, whether money, weaponry, or dictatorship. The villain operates as a warning for the hero to not enjoy too much, in that his lust goes beyond the realm of desire and into the territory of pure enjoyment. It is in the villain that the vortex of excessive enjoyment is evident. This is why in the action film, pure evil is not simply limited to megalomaniacs, terrorists, drug barons and gangsters, but also natural events, such as volcanos and earthquakes; as in the case of the volcano in *Dante's Peak*, or *Volcano* (1997) when the *jouissance* of the Real literally threatens to engulf entire communities. Accordingly, the psychotic villain need not necessarily be human. The terrifying encounter with the Real can be displaced onto 'natural' events such as hurricanes, volcanos, earthquakes, or a camouflage, machine-like creature, Thing, as seen in *Predator*.¹¹⁴ In opposition to the controlled approach of the ordinary man, the villain is often identified through a series of gestures that consist in enjoying too much. Bennett (Vernon Wells) from *Commando*, for instance, goes beyond the call of soldiering and takes obvious pleasure in killing: in Schwarzenegger's words, Bennett 'enjoyed killing *too much*.' In the diplomat Arjen 'Aryan' Rudd from *Lethal Weapon 2*, we encounter a lust of too much power, while in *Die Hard*, the villain's excessive enjoyment of money drives him to murder and

¹¹⁴ As Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (13) point out, "narrative causality could be impersonal as well."

burglary. Frequently, in order to bring the immorality of the villain to light, the villain will attack the one who embodies the reverse of his position, namely the saint.

The Child

The eternal victims of the action genre are children, and it is not just any child that is at risk in the action genre. The victim is usually a child of the hero, a child of the hero's girlfriend or, at the very least, a child of one of the partners in the buddy film. Not only do children act as a stand-in for the Name-of-the-Father but the perceived innocence of children also locates them in what Fredric Jameson calls the "utopian"¹¹⁵ position. No matter how horrendous they may appear, children are nonetheless revered as both ethical and moral. A child in the action film will always suffer at the hands of the villain, but will not come to any significant harm. This emotional reliance on the need for a knowledge of children's safety is one that *Speed* exploited to its dramatic advantage through insinuation, as Flanagan point out,

we instinctively anticipate disaster to be averted, as children rarely come into harm in mainstream Hollywood movies...However, the pram turns out to be filled with aluminium cans and our initial reaction of horror turns to relief and then embarrassment that such a contrivance could catch us out.¹¹⁶

The potential attack of a child in action films is a gesture that not only establishes a villain's evil character, but also creates a space to establish a justification for the excessive violence that precedes a child's rescue (or follows a child's death). What distinguishes the action hero from the common vigilante is avenging a child's attackers. In *Commando*, in order to persuade John Matrix to agree to kill the president of Val Verde, the kidnappers show Schwarzenegger his daughter bound and gagged to a chair. Her hair is messy and upon seeing her father, she wails 'Daddy!' to which Schwarzenegger lunges at his capturers and yells, 'You bastards!' The implied gang rape of Jenny Matrix is further stressed when Sully leers, as he puts money in Matrix's pocket, 'Have some beers in Val Verde. It will give everybody a little more time with your daughter.' The crude innuendos give Matrix an apparently justifiable cause for full rein in his killing spree. So, when his boss stupidly asks at the conclusion of the film, 'Leave anything for us,' it is

¹¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, in Greimas, foreword, xiv.

¹¹⁶ Flanagan, 111.

designed to set up the equally profound, 'Just bodies.' But, in any case, because of the security that we invest in the Father's Law, that is promise that the good are rewarded and the bad do not escape unpunished—we knew all along that Jenny would be fine.

The masculine logic of the action dictates not only the positions and outcomes of each character, but it also determines the positive outcome. The endings of action films is the point where regulated enjoyment, closure and the one-liner all meet, because a happy ending is in itself upholding the Law of the Father and champions the power of the master. But the real question is, what happens upon the collapse of the security of the Father's Law in the action film?