The Frozen Screen:
Levinas and the Action Film
Reni Celeste

Zeno, cruel Zeno – that arrow . . .

  (Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow')

The cinema has long reigned as the kinetic medium of the twentieth century. Early in its development it secured its privilege over the more traditional arts through its unprecedented control and manipulation of time. In *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S Porter, 1903) and *Life of an American Fireman* (Edwin S Porter, 1903) crowds had their first experiences of film crosscutting between two different spaces and moments in time.[1] They saw a shot of a raging house fire, and then suddenly a shot of a sleeping fireman in the station. Between these two spaces is a simple cut, and yet here is the precise location of a vast frontier: the pleasure of waiting for something forever on the verge of arrival. This expectation of the event, the catastrophe, and the culmination, is the fuel for modern cinema. The Hollywood tradition has been a developing story of technology's attempts to exploit this passion, pushing the barriers of how much suspense can be introduced and resolved within the space of a screen and a segment of time, and in the

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[1] There are two different cuts of *Life of an American Fireman*. One uses sequential continuity editing and one displays traditional crosscutting.

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past thirty years the action film has become one of the most exciting genres, spinning off numerous subgenres and transforming the industry.

But what is the underlying meaning of this action? When Andy Warhol filmed *Empire* (1964), a single unmoving shot of the Empire State Building from dawn to dusk, he made three observations to his assistant. I am captivated by the third, a question more than an observation: 'Henry, what is the meaning of action?' Perhaps in the stagnancy of the structure, secured to its ground like a plant, Warhol saw something critical about screen action. Perhaps it is nothing at all. Perhaps action merely serves to disguise the reality that there is no action at all in the cinema, a mask for a frozen screen, in which no future or event ever really imposed.

This is the verdict Emmanuel Levinas would come to if he were to have directly contemplated action cinema. For it is here, in timeless, statuesque immobility, that he placed the aesthetic realm in all its forms, including such time-based forms as music, drama, and the cinema. His observation exceeds the well-known insight that cinema is a series of static photos projected at a rate of speed creating the physiological illusion of movement. His observation is not mechanical. Even the live theater for Levinas is frozen and timeless. Though his reflections on art would appear to be secondary to his more central ethical claims, I would argue that they are primary. The challenge Levinas is making to contemporary continental philosophy is foremost a critique of the position given to the artwork or the image.

I would like to consider here that cinema, rather than being simply subsumed along with the other arts into this general theory of aesthetics, is both the greatest example of the tragic state of the aesthetic that Levinas describes and its ultimate challenge. I have chosen to couple Levinas's thought with the action film for two reasons. First, action is a concept essential to both Levinas's and the cinema's ontology, and charting the distinctions between screen and world action is the very issue at stake. Second, action cinema is the genre that best promises to resist encapsulation into a statue and to delineate cinema's freedom from the photograph. And so it is here that we must search for an escape from the nightmare of the aesthetic Levinas describes and the theoretical implications of the split he proposes between art and ethics.

I will explore this question through three approaches. First, I will summarise Levinas's early thought on the artwork. It is here that he introduces the idea that

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representation brings into existence tragic time, what he referred to as *l'entre temps*.[2] Second, I will analyse the action film and demonstrate its involvement with *l'entre temps*. And third, I will pose the question of cinema's singularity and escape from the frozen prison of the aesthetic through the figure of high action.

Levinas on the Work of Art

In his early writings of the 1940s Levinas adamantly challenged the idea that art could be committed, insisting instead on a complete separation between the aesthetic and the ethical. In doing so he broke with the fashionable movements of that time: Sartre and the whole climate of 'l'art engagé',[3] as well as Heidegger's designation of the artwork as the privileged site of truth as *aletheia*.[4] And yet Levinas was not merely exercising the classic banishing of art and the image from the good city. Levinas had accomplished at this point a very rigorous reading of Husserl and had been deeply influenced and inspired as well by Heidegger's *Being and Time*. In the introduction to his first book, *Existence and Existents*, he writes: 'If at the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (…) they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian' (Levinas 1978, 19). In this sense Levinas is driven not simply by a desire to return to the classic separation between being and time, and between being and image, but rather by a 'profound need' to surpass the limits of a horizon achieved. Sixty years later these limits have never been more apparent. Heidegger's thought has proven to be monumental throughout the humanities, and his call for a deconstruction of Western metaphysics developed in the writings of Jacques Derrida has had a tremendous impact on literary theory, film theory, and cultural studies. Levinas's writings have had a decisive influence on Derrida's later work, where such concepts as responsibility, the decision, the gift, the proper name, and singularity have become prominent. Derrida and his apologists have promoted this

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[2] Usually translated as 'between time' or 'the meanwhile', this term refers to the absence of time in the artwork, specifically its failure to achieve the future.

[3] Levinas is here responding (see footnote 2 of 'Reality and its Shadow') to the post-war movement of ethical responsibility in the field of aesthetics, exemplified by Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes* in 1948, with its idea of art as the avenue towards the revolutionary transformation of society. And in the preface to 'Reality and its Shadow' (Levinas 1989), Hand calls it a response perhaps to Heidegger's 'Poetically Man Dwells', with the view that Levinas proposes criticism as the basic capacity for human dwelling in so far as the term signifies a primordial relation with the other. See Martin Heidegger 1971.

[4] The Greek term for unconcealment, which Heidegger revives to rethink the meaning of truth.

relationship between Levinas and deconstruction to resist charges that deconstruction is nihilistic, apolitical, or unethical. Nevertheless, despite this relation and the significance of this work for promoting deeper, more responsible readings of deconstruction, there remain significant differences between Levinas and the deconstructive effort around the question of the place of the aesthetic. In this sense efforts to use Levinas as a patch or even a foundation of sorts for the claims of politicised art are troublesome and misleading, and a more careful analysis of the relationship between art and politics is required in the wake of the primary role of Levinas's critique of art.

Levinas's thought begins with the question of the artwork. This is not an early interest discarded in favour of ethics, but the hurdle that must be cleared before truth can be reintroduced as a possibility. The problem of truth in philosophy is inseparable from an idea of representation or resemblance. Traditionally art has been the other of truth, the reflection, further removed from reality than the original.[5] In postmodernism the argument is made that the structure of language or meaning precludes an original, and all is trace or image. Art becomes the best description of reality as difference. Though Jill Robbins has argued effectively that Levinas makes a transition in his later works towards greater receptivity to the aesthetic (see Robbins 1999), I want to concentrate on Levinas's early writings for the reason that there is much to be learned and questioned at the onset of this project from the radical rejection of the idea that the aesthetic dimension serves the role of revelation, in either an epistemological, religious, or political manner.

I will focus on the early essay, 'Reality and its Shadow', which I believe is decisive for Levinas's project (Levinas 1989). The main goal of this essay is to introduce an idea critical to his later work – the distinction between being (reality) and image (shadow). Levinas refuses to relinquish reality to the game. Instead he indicates a reality found only in the ethical relation – the difference of the other person. He begins by describing the place of the aesthetic as a false time that bears a certain fatality and tragedy – it can never arrive at time itself, it is forever frozen outside of time. This is summed up in the mysterious statement: 'The Instant of a statue is a nightmare' (Levinas 1989, 139).

Levinas argues that the time of the artwork exists in a zone of frozen time, of terror, of a dream turned nightmare where characters live as doubles of themselves,

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[5] The traditional reading of the Platonic worldview.

prisoners of their fatality, between time, suffocating in their own infinite repetition. The world of art freezes time within images and doubles and immobilises being. Levinas claims that 'to say that an image is an idol is to affirm that every image is in the last analysis plastic, and that every art work is in the end a Statue' (Levinas 1989, 137). His conclusion is that art is evasion rather than responsibility. Only real time can provide an opening to possibility and change through the existence of the other. In order to open up this position I want to speak about several key ideas in this essay that will help explicate the above sentence and open up the question of action film.

The Instant Is The Inseparability Of Action And Being

The instant is a topic that draws us back to *Existence and Existents*, for it is here in his first book that Levinas sought to describe the situation of existence at its emergence, in inwardness. This is the primal state of self-sameness. The important thing is that Levinas follows Bergson in his critique of the classical understanding of time and instant. Music affords the perfect analogy of the impossibility of dividing instants into before and after, and the perfect model of *durée*, or duration in melody:

> In listening to a melody we are also following its entire duration (…) and a melody was, in fact the ideal model from which Bergson conceived pure duration. It is not to be denied that musical duration can be broken up into its elements, which can be counted. But each instant does not count as such; the instants of a melody exist only in dying. A wrong note is a sound that refuses to die (Levinas 1978, 32–33).

The instant remains in Levinas as the arche opening of existence, where it divides between an existent and the state of existing, and takes up two-fold residence in inwardness. In the 'instant', being and action are inseparable. To exist is to have to act, and it is this action that defines the arrival in the instant of existence. Significant here is the fact that for Levinas this action is a symptom of weariness, not freedom. Action is always a lunging out of fatigue. There is always toil and forsakenness in action (Levinas 1978, 34–35). It is this action however that he uses to distinguish between reality and art. Art is pleasure and evasion, action is toil and reality. He is making a distinction between action and image, supporting action as authentic and image as a doubling:

> The most elementary procedure of art consists in separating for the object its image. Its image, and not its concept. A concept is the object *grasped*, the

intelligible object. Already by *action* we maintain a living relationship with a real object; we grasp it, we conceive it. The image neutralizes this real relationship, this primary conceiving through action (Levinas 1989, 132).

It is irresistible at this point to wonder what happens when action is converted into images, as it is in action cinema. The appearance of the action film immediately runs contrary to the grain of Levinas's designation of action on the side of being and reality. Of course the representation of action in the artwork would not qualify as a 'living relationship'. This question is answered by Levinas's denial that there is action in the work of art. Levinas would insist that the image puts the spectator into a position of passivity before a spectacle, dissolving all action that would appear to be in the room. This claim is deeper than the mere statement that we are passive before a moving screen. To go deeper into Levinas's idea of passivity we must look at the question of rhythm, which for Levinas is at the base of all the arts.

An Image Is Musical

Rhythm for Levinas is pure passivity. This means that it is outside of freedom and will and can never be ethical. 'Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it' (Levinas 1989, 132). The subject is imposed upon and seduced by rhythm. He compares it to a waking dream, to magic, and to paralysis. Power is reverted to participation in music. It is not incidental that rhythm becomes for Levinas the crux of the aesthetic and that all images are described as musical.

Sound is for Levinas the most nonconceptual of the arts. It contains nothing of the object from which it emanates. It is detached from the material and the conceptual. 'To insist on the musicality of every image is to see in an image its detachment from an object' (Levinas 1989, 134). In this sense it is the musicality of the artwork that marks its distance from reality. Both classical art, with its attachment to objects (statues and paintings of people and things), and modern art (abstract art, music, art without an object) fit into his same overall aesthetics because they drive out real objects and break up representation:

> A represented object, by the simple fact of becoming an image, is converted into a non-object (…) The disincarnation of reality by an image is not equivalent to a simple diminution in degree. It belongs to an ontological dimension that does not

extend between us and a reality to be captured, a dimension where commerce with reality is a rhythm (Levinas 1989, 134).

Cinema is one of the best examples of how the combination of image and music holds sway over its spectator. The passivity Levinas describes in the face of the musically driven image is not merely our inertia in the dark theater, it is the trance we enter, and it is the loss of reality. The artwork for Levinas is without action, freedom or the responsibility these concepts generate.

Art Is The Shadow Of Reality

Resemblance for Levinas does not mean that the image has an independent reality and resembles the original. Resemblance is understood here not as the result of comparison between original and image, but rather as the very movement that engenders the image. Reality is itself and also its double, its shadow, its image. There is a duality in the person, a duality in being. The relationship between these two moments, in which being is itself and a stranger to itself, is resemblance. Every face also bears its caricature alongside it. '*Every image is already a caricature*. But this caricature turns into something tragic' (Levinas 1989, 138).

Arguments about abstract art bearing no resemblance to an object in the world, or cinema ultimately bearing no resemblance to the original world, are not valid against Levinas's claim because he is not talking about comparison, where two separate realms identify themselves in one another. Resemblance is attached to truth; non-truth is the echo of truth. Whether or not they compare is not the issue. They are a product of one another. They have no independence. The argument is that we should not mistake one for the other.

> Non-truth is not an obscure residue of being, but its sensible character itself, by which there is resemblance and images in the world (…) The discussion over the primacy of art or of nature – does art imitate nature or does natural beauty imitate art? – fails to recognize the simultaneity of truth and image (Levinas 1989, 136).

It is the simultaneity of being and image that distinguishes Levinas's idea of resemblance from Plato's worldview and idealism generally. Levinas wants to bind truth and image without conflating one into the other. They are separate yet bound.

L'Entre Temps Is Tragedy

Levinas's final verdict on the artwork is that it is tragic, and that tragedy is a form of evasion, discrete from time and ethics. Of the arts Levinas was closest to literature, maintaining a life-long friendship with Maurice Blanchot and devoting full-length essays to such writers as Michel Leiris and Marcel Proust. He also makes repeated reference to modern art, theatre, and even cinema. The concept that extends across the arts is tragedy. Sometimes he discusses tragedy in concrete, theatrical terms, conjuring up Juliette's redress into death or Hamlet's knowledge, and other times refers to the entirety of the aesthetic realm, and even more generally to the ontological, being itself.

Tragedy is for Levinas something that falls between history and transcendence. The temporal position in which Levinas places the work of art is neither transcendent (beyond system), nor is it interior and simply empirical (historical). It is in a place between these two realms, a space he calls *l'entre temps*. For Levinas this space is ultimately *without time*. It resembles time, but never gets anywhere. As such it is a realm not of freedom but of necessity. While tragedy has often been understood as the encounter between freedom and necessity (Levinas 1989, 138), Levinas argues that tragedy is pure necessity. It is the tragic nature of the work of art that introduces the tragic into being. Authentic time bears a future, as well as freedom, mystery, and the possibility of otherness:

> Fate has no place in life. The conflict between freedom and necessity in human action appears in reflection: when action is already sinking into the past, man discovers the motifs that necessitated it. But antimony is not a tragedy. In the instant of a statue, in its eternally suspended future, the tragic, simultaneity of necessity and liberty, can come to pass: the power of freedom congeals into impotence. And here too we should compare art with dreams: the instant of a statue is a nightmare (Levinas 1989, 138–139).

Levinas's theory of action versus art is best understood in his unique interpretation of freedom and necessity. This perspective on the artwork comes neither from the viewpoint of spectatorship nor production. Surely there is freedom in the creative production of a work and in interpretation of the work.

Levinas uses the literary tales of Edgar Allen Poe to illustrate *l'entre temps*. Poe's literature is preoccupied not merely with the death of organic forms, but with the torment and paradox of bearing witness to one's own death in the figure of premature burial:

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> The time of *dying* cannot give itself the other shore. What is unique and poignant in this instant is due to the fact that it cannot pass. In *dying*, the horizon of the future is given, but the future as a promise of a new present is refused; one is in the interval, forever an interval. The characters of certain tales of Edgar Allen Poe must have found themselves in this empty interval. A threat appears to them in the approach of such an empty interval; no move can be made to retreat from its approach, but this approach can never end (Levinas 1989, 140).

He gives no concrete examples of this suspension between here and there, but it is clearly seen in the figure of Madeline Usher in Poe's 'Fall of the House of Usher' (Poe 1983, 25–42). She suffers from a gradual wasting away of the person, an inexplicable dying, not unlike the organic process itself – a condition that baffles the medical community. However, once entombed she revives, and her call is heard faintly throughout the house of Usher. M. Valdemar is also suspended in death as if in a dream (Poe 1983, 50–58). His vibrating black tongue speaks from across one shore to the next. The greatest horror is that the message is cast out without arriving. Premature burial entails something worse than an awful silence. It entails a screaming without voice, and without a suffering that is not only lost to those above ground, but that will perhaps never be observed or comprehended. The horror in these horror tales is not death, but the failure to ever adequately die: death without death.

In *Existence and Existents* Levinas expresses a thought that may help elucidate the horror that he perceives in *l'entre temps*. 'Is not anxiety over Being – horror of Being – just as primal as anxiety over death? (…) Existence of itself harbors something tragic, which is not only there because of its finitude. Something that death cannot resolve' (Levinas 1978, 20). The nightmare for Levinas is not death, but perpetual being – the inability to die. The artwork, as he describes it in 'Reality and its Shadow', is the incarnation of the problem that 'the time of dying cannot give itself the other shore' (Levinas 1989, 140). Before a parallel is drawn between existence and tragedy it must be remembered that for Levinas tragedy is not the state of being but of representation, even if, in a post-Heideggerian worldview, these two things are bound together. Tragedy is brought into the world through art and resemblance. He does not propose a reality without a shadow, for every face carries its caricature along with it, but he does condemn the shadow to non-truth.

For Levinas the tragic is not a narrative structure ending in fatality. It is the fixity inherent in all works of art, a fixity that poses as time. While he includes such time-based forms as music and cinema, his theory would seem to best serve photography, sculpture

and painting. It can be more fully tested by looking at the opposite end of this spectrum of works. Could the action film, with its flurry of movement, activity, force, and consequences resemble a statue? A fatal pose?

The Action Film as Tragedy

Action has been placed thus far in a very broad frame in order to assert its ontological significance. It has been described as the essence of drama, and of Being itself. But action as living movement and action as image are not equivalent. This is the crux of Levinas's argument, that, despite their co-dependence, there is a break between being and image that renders the latter negative and tragic. The question at this juncture is how cinematic action relates to this broader action, tied to being. Action in the cinema is surely not the same as action on the streets, and it is not even the same as action on the stage. I will explore this question by placing a narrower frame on action and speaking of the action film specifically. Of course, in seeking the ontology of the action film I will still be speaking rather broadly about action film, doing an injustice to the singularity of the films. In focusing on a genre of film as well, one is limited to the repeating motifs and patterns of a form.

The Approach

On the stage, action is the province of the body of the actor and the movement of the narrative. With the invention of the cinema, action becomes significantly more complex. The action film does not emerge with the advent of serial photography (Muybridge's galloping horse), or with the astonishing moving figure of actuality films captured by one lens, although this may be the origin of the moving image. The origin of action cinema is in suspense, a product of the collision of simultaneous actions born of the cut (editing) and the manipulation of time environments. The ability of film to displace the viewer from one space to another, or from one time to another (flashback, flashforward, dream sequence) invoked a new level of suspense and waiting, as well as a certain level of internal violence to the form. One waits to return to the original space, or to see what relations these two spaces produce. As the cut became increasingly integral to film experience, continuity became one of the major issues of classic Hollywood. This era sought to provide stability and comprehension in the midst of this violence by creating a predictable pattern for linking shots together. Changing points of view were held in place by prescribed angles, eyeline matches, and cuts on action. Cinema became itself a form

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of conflict, a drama between two battling forces, continuity and discontinuity, waged across the human consciousness. Despite contemporary film editing, it could be said that continuity was victorious through the creation of a language, and the gradual education of the perceptions of its spectators.

This attempt to upset, confuse, disorient and yet stabilise the spectator is at the heart of traditional narrative as well, as it moves from exposition to conflict to resolution. The detective film epitomised this image of film drama on both the formal and narrative levels. As a precursor to the action genre it is already dominated by the prevailing figure of the male will, the game-like suspense of an evolving mystery, the fragmentation of views in a repeating pattern, and the eventual conquest of the hero. The detective is important because it is here that the idea of the secret and the alignment of spectator knowledge within the field of the central figure emerge. The question of will and identification is for the cinema an art of point of view. The gathering of evidence built a slow and steady approach towards revelation. The climax of the film was exposure of the mystery. The male figures that governed this logic had to remain cool and in the shadows, collecting information from a variety of sources and clues. The rhythm was akin to jazz or blasé classical compositions. The pathway towards this climax was littered with betrayals, damsels in distress, surprises, misleading convictions, and plot twists.

The cowboy of the Westerns of the 1940s through the 1960s exemplified this space beyond law; he is driven by a justice of his own making in a territory in which human will and individualism dictated the codes. He is a prototype of the action hero. The American Western was a myth that spawned works from around the globe. The mythology such films promoted was of the lone male and his contest with other males, leading up to the showdown or moment of truth. The territory was the frontier, loneliness, mystery, freedom, adventure, and miles of space contained in a viewpoint. Male wills battle in silence and the viewer learns to read the gesture, the shot, and the eyes over the voice or the word. The action and suspense in the Western was explosive and physical, exemplified by the bar-room cliché of a man thrown through windows or saloon doors. But the real drama of the Western took place in the silence prior to action in the dust rising on the grounds, in the eyes exchanging glances, in the gun, the hip holster, and the hand – all silently posing the same question: who will remain standing? Again the need for cool and moderation was essential to the rhythm of the approach.

The late 1960s introduced a new level of violence and moral ambiguity to the screen in such films as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967). While these films often challenged the traditional schema of harmony-conflict-harmony, by ending in an explosive and often unhappy climax, they still exemplified the idea of the long movement towards harmony. As in Levinas's *l'entre temps*, they functioned in the time of waiting. But is it possible to relate this structuring role of the wait, the suspense, the moving towards, with what Levinas has called *l'entre temps* and delegated as the fatality of art work? Is not Hollywood cinema ultimately defined through the arrival, the climax?

The Arrival

By the 1970s the action sequence (the car chase, the pursuit, etc.) became increasingly essential to the body of the narrative as a tool for the build-up of tension and excitement. With the advent of steadicam and developing use of dollies and the hand-held shot, the camera became a kinetic force competing with character movement. Gradually a kinetic pace was being developed that challenged the traditional narrative flow and introduced a steady level of agitation into spectatorship. Movement, speed, action, and anxiety were invoked by shortening the shots, increasing the sound, and moving the camera. By the late 1970s and early 1980s it was clear that a new genre had arrived. The monosyllabic narrative of traditional drama, with one or two serious strains of climax, was replaced by the emergence of multiple climaxes throughout the narrative, marked by rapid cutting, excessive sonic environments, and outrageous special effects. Such films were most often led by a dominant male action figure whose goal was often global and apocalyptic in nature.

If the action of early cinema was defined by the *approach*, the focus shifts to the *arrival* with the emergence of the modern action film. Such films take place in the present, the event. They possess an entirely different rhythm, consisting of a seemingly endless string of action sequences, each exceeding the last. Magnitude, force, and shock become the leading forces. The explosion is the icon of this new metaphysic. Like the scream, the explosion serves a structuring role.[6] It is the black hole of the film, the opening to ground zero. By the 1980s the race had commenced for the ultimate explosion. The exploding White House in *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) was a summation of sorts as it took the icon of ultimate power in the United States and

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[6] I am making an analogy with the screaming point. See Michel Chion 1999.

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exploded it with ultimate force. The irony is that in the age of high action, films passionately pursue the explosion under the guise of its evasion. The movie trailer's enticement often consists of a fiery ball of flames exuding heroic bodies. While suspense is still the fuel to lead the spectator through a series of escapes serving to justify the morality of the film, the audience pay-off is not the escape from violence, but the consistent delivery of violent explosion and high-end special effects. The film *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994) dramatised this shift by pitting two bomb squad officers against one another – one working to create the explosion and holding the city in terror across a series of transports, elevator, bus, and subway; and one working to stop the detonation at all costs. The film is a non-stop action sequence that scarcely contains enough lulls to get from one vehicle to the next. (This is a reality literally written into the plot: if the bus goes under 50mph it will explode – the film itself appears to operate under the same threat.) The most stunning truth of the film comes when the retired-cop-turned-terrorist, Howard Payne (Dennis Hopper), tries to educate his young pursuer, Officer Jack Travern (Keanu Reeves), into appreciating and succumbing to the beauty of the explosion. The essence of a bomb, he explains, is its explosion. A bomb was meant to explode. To spend your entire career trying to stop the explosion is simply impotence and servitude, which he compares to his retirement gift: a cheap gold watch. Officer Travern responds in disgust and accuses Howard of madness. It is this madness that defines the new Hollywood, determined to provide ultimate payoffs and not cheap gold watches.

Alongside the explosion is the explosive sound environment. Rather than simply hearing a punch, film began producing punches that sounded like explosions. The sound environment, which had previously favoured dialogue, was now driven by sound effects and music, producing a sonic environment of exaggeration, rapid adrenaline, and even shock. What was classically delegated to the background of the film now becomes the foreground. Modern action film literally becomes a form of musical agitation and rhythm.

The blockbuster, with its gargantuan scale and economic stakes, sought to generate an insatiable need for narrative action. With the emergence of a genre of action films a variety of forms or genre-hybrids were spawned (sci-fi or space thrillers, crime-drama, war, horror, etc.), and an independent special effects industry rose up to supply its necessary stunts, explosions, and technologies. The arrival of the action film represents the culmination of a long process in film form that emerges at its origin. This genre is definitive of the American film and filmmaking process and one of the reasons

for its expansion as a multi-million dollar entertainment complex. Action in the cinema has created the language of the cinema.

If the structure of early film threatened to resemble Levinas's *l'entre temps* – with its focus on the wait, the moving towards, and the perpetually delayed climax – the action film would seem to dispel all such resemblances. But, in the midst of so much death, climax, and arrival, one must ask if there is really any climax at all? Does this excessive action merely signal an irresolvable, insatiable quest? Does action merely attempt to disguise the reality of the artwork, that we are going nowhere? Is the Hollywood ending in fact no ending at all?

Dying Hard

It is the serialisation of action that exposes its eidos at last, the failure to ever really arrive or die. On one hand death serves a structuring role in narrative. The possibility of radical physical damage and the end of life is the ultimate stake. Without it there is no reason for the action. But equally essential to action is the idea of passing limits. Death is essential because there must be an ultimate limit in order to have transgression. Action film is about pushing the limits of the screen, body and machine. The threat is always death, but the power is the strategy through which it is perpetually evaded. So, despite dying bodies, climaxes and endings, the ultimate goal is to evade arrival, to surpass the limit of the end. Although the action genre often takes the stakes to a global level, the possibility of extinction is played out across the body of the action figure. He must survive against dire odds in order to maintain the world, the universe, or a way of life.

Terminator (James Cameron, 1984) introduces the possibility of being incapable of death. The unkillable figure emerging again and again from the flame, factory and explosion is the ultimate product of the action genre. Once the shock of such protracted life and dismissal of narrative conventions set in, there was no turning back. Serials such as *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) made the unsinkable figure mythological, his survival a feat of modern miracle, blowing across the screen in thousands of shards, he projected out of the explosion. Today we witness the 10th episode of *Friday the 13th*, titled *Jason X* (James Isaac, 2001), bearing the tag line, 'Jason gets an upgrade'. The process is now complete. The film and the figure have become one singular technology or invention. For the figure to die the serial film would also end, and so both must be kept alive at all costs. The 'upgrade' signifies both the film's new special effects

technology and the way it extends the body of Jason, surpassing his limits. The technology of the future he inhabits is now capable of repairing limbs and bodies torn to fragments, and of bringing back the seemingly dead. In this endless dying the stake of action would appear to have been removed or lost. The action figure would appear to be an immortal mortal, to be unable to provide the closure of the end, replacing it with a mere series of reconciliations.

The Action Figure

Even though the action genre fulfills cinema's displacement of the actor as the source and origin of action, the figure has perhaps never been more important. The action figure is an American icon. The ability of the mortal character to thwart death, overcome opposition, and provide salvation to the masses marks his heroism. He is the moral centre of the drama, whether he is good, evil, or beyond both. The monster or natural threat is without will, and so beyond blame, ethics, or value. The action figure is an essential element in the face of such abstract villains. He revives the possibility of meaning. Without him there is no moral dilemma or obstacle and we have nothing but force and flurry. Nevertheless, the cinematic figure is in no way to be confused with the face of the other, that which Levinas calls the origin of the ethical. The screen character does not offer 'face' in this regard. Representing the face kills it. If anything, the screen character issues the opposite of the command of the living face. He is quite far from true individuality or singularity. He is merely a figure, an action figure – detective, cowboy, spy, cop, outlaw, monster, adventurist and cyborg.

Many celebrity careers were launched in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s through their alignment with the action film, including Steve McQueen, Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, Harrison Ford, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis, and yet the action figure even eclipses celebrity, which is uncommon for modern cinema. In this sense, he is akin to a comic book hero. Unlike the cult of unique singularity that fuels star worship, the star in these films is replaceable. Five different actors have played the role of James Bond. The action figure is most compelling in his emptiness. Anyone can occupy his form. The action figure exhibits all the vitality of a mask, a type, a doll and a figurine. And yet for two hours the salvation of the world is vested in him.

While both classical tragedy and modern action film rely on a mythology of the heroic, the action film, with its victorious heroes who repeat their heroism over and over, would appear to be the opposite of the tragic hero, who is unable to resolve his

contradiction, moral double binds, and achieve truth and justice before he is subsumed by time, fate and existence. The action figure is not tragic in the traditional sense. The action figure is not engaged in an existential contemplation of his fate, and does not battle with the metaphysical forces that engulf him. Rather, he is simple, crudely cut, melodramatic, a stereotype that is hopelessly sociological, representing the fashionable fears and neuroses of his period. John McClane (Bruce Willis) in *Die Hard*, for example, is a working-class cop who must prove his worth in the face of both gender and class humiliation brought about by his wife's success and promotion in the international business community.[7] As such he serves to rally not only the disgruntled working class, with civic pride and patriotism, but also every man who has ever been outdone by a woman or suffered the threat. The action film lends itself easily to sociological, political, or psychoanalytical theories of identification and suture. Though each figure represents an assortment of sociological and political meanings for the given period in which he appears as character, the ultimate anxiety he represents is the loss of human power and freedom, to the machine, the law, the disaster, the alien and ultimately the cinema.

The genre represents a paradox within cinema, born of its modernism and humanism, it seeks to convince its viewers that the individual remains the locus of will and freedom, while its existence as a composite technology resists this claim. The threat that such a figure resolves – technology escaping the control of the individual – is a repeating theme in action cinema. The action figure has a tragic task he only appears to fulfill repeatedly to maintain the hegemony of human will and freedom. *The Terminator* is a classic example of this struggle. The terminator is a monster/machine, the product of newly acquired machine will. But this is nevertheless a will without humanity, the pure pursuit of power. In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) this now outdated model is reprogrammed to serve human will, and as such gradually learns to suffer loss and understand human tears. His ultimate battle is with new technology, the T1000, a digital 'man'. Their struggle becomes a metaphor for the larger contest between competing technologies of the cinematic apparatus as it moves from analogue to digital, from the old monster to the new. His victory is sentimental, nostalgic, and a perfect example of the role of figure in cinema and the attempt to sustain the victory and

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[7] The action film lends itself well to a study of gender politics. Though recent films have cultivated female action, such figures are often either made masculine, *Terminator*, *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), or overfeminised and ironic, as in *The Power Puff Girls* (Craig McCracken, 2002) or *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2001).

hegemony of the subject despite the growing reign of non-human forces. Figure and film are one.

This contest between body and machine plays itself out repeatedly, with the cyborg representing both sides of the duality. But it also has an interesting appearance in the recent transnational partnership of Hong Kong and US Cinema. In Hong Kong cinema a great deal of focus is placed on the relation between physical and mental prowess in the highly developed martial arts. Hong Kong cinema uses the body as the vehicle of the fantastic, allowing it to perform superhuman actions, such as flying through the trees, but it is useless without the focus and will of the mind. In the US action cinema figures are often unremarkable physically and intellectually, and even inadequate, with the exception of the cycle of such beefcake figures as Rambo. This serves to highlight the democracy of the hero (it could be anyone), the pleasure of the movement between failure and success, and to foreground the use of technology – both within the narrative (explosives, artillery, hi-tech invention) and in the cinematic apparatus (camera, special effects, sound). Such East-West hybrid creations as *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) and *The One* (James Wong, 2001) push to the limit both body and machine, exemplifying well this contest between the human figure and its machinery. In the West, however, the modern divide between mind and body reduces the action film to a lower art form unworthy of serious reflection.

Conclusion

I have argued that the action genre takes place in that futureless landscape of suspended time, *l'entre temps*, and is therefore tragic, according to Levinas's definition. While it would appear that action is a success at the box office because it affords the ultimate payoff of cinematic pleasure, suspense (desire), the surpassing of limitation, and climax (satisfaction), perhaps its popularity is a product of its inability to arrive. Despite a happy ending, the action film cannot reach complete closure. As such it is a feasting without satiation, and it gives itself to serialisation. It is a perfect example of the closed and timeless loop of *l'entre temps*.

L'entre temps would appear to be a perfect description of desire in its endless pursuit and movement. But it is not desire. Desire is becoming, and Levinas argues that there is no movement in the work of art, only stasis. In order to have movement one must get somewhere; there must be a possibility of escape into an uncertain future. Levinas's depiction of tragic time reduces all arts to the fatality of the pose, the frozen

gesture. Cinema becomes no different from photography. But what is the relation between the photographic (pose) and filmed action (movement)? Can they be conflated into one? It is the action film that best marks their distinction and similarity.

Roland Barthes's goal in *Camera Lucida* was to distinguish the essence of the photograph, and he found it in the elusive insight generated between witness and photo. The photograph's truth was found in the stickiness of the referent, the inability to deny, 'this thing has been there' (Roland Barthes 1981, 76). To look into a photo is to see, even if in advance, the death of the photo's subject. The photo is an icon of the catastrophe of loss. This horrible recognition creates an immediate link between reality and image. Though recent digital technology and its scholarship would appear to have rendered Barthes's observation obsolete, it has not. Barthes is not talking about whether the contents of the frame offer an undistorted representation. 'Not a question of exactitude; but of reality' (ibid. 80). Barthes makes a distinction between the studium (the cultural interest, social meanings) and the punctum (the almost mystical non-intentional detail that flashes up and pricks the individual). Sociological attempts to understand the photograph are hopelessly bound to the studium. The punctum escapes sociology. It could even be described as preontological, in the space that Levinas secures for ethics. Barthes after all seeks 'the impossible science of the unique being' (ibid. 80). The photograph is in this sense beyond representation, like the face, which, as Levinas explains, we have not truly seen if we have observed the features or appearance. Similarly Barthes says: 'Ultimately – or at the limit – in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes' (ibid. 53). For Barthes, photography offers our greatest access to truth.

In defining the essence of the photograph Barthes makes several attempts to distinguish it from its close alliance with cinema. Despite the Newtonian centrality of an unmoving camera in this example, the idea of passing breaks up the pose. As Barthes says:

> This explains why the Photographs' *noeme* deteriorates when this Photograph is animated and becomes cinema: in the Photograph, something *has posed* in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever (…) but in cinema, something has passed in front of this same tiny hole: the pose is swept away and denied by the continuous series of images (ibid. 78).

For Barthes the cinema is not melancholic because the image ultimately passes by into a 'future' and dissipates. Like a sustained breath, the photographic image keeps returning, and truly realises the timeless paralysis of loss before an inevitable death. The realism of the photo instant inspires for Barthes a reflection on temporality that is not equal to temporality itself, but in a reflexive gesture realises that temporality. It is the truth of temporality so to speak. Born of the same technology, can the photo and the film be conflated, or must a distinction be made around this image of emergence and loss that defines the cinematic? The action film demonstrates both their sameness and difference. Though both cinema and photography depict *l'entre temps*, and never really arrive or possess a real future, they both evoke recognition of the meaning of time, and as such express fatal truth. The photo and the cinematic image become a *memento mori*, a marker of real time and mortality. As Levinas has argued, it is the resemblance (doubling) between being (truth, what is) and image that gives the work its tragedy. Yet it is also this resemblance that bears the task of connecting being and image through recognition and understanding. Levinas would like to hold being and image apart, so as to secure truth on the side of being, yet allow them to remain simultaneous.

The photo and cinema bear a family resemblance to being, regardless of how distorted and manipulated this originary link remains. The link can be quite tenuous with the advent of digital cinema, and the moving image's conversion into animation, graphic, or collage. They are simultaneous and yet distinct. Similarly, despite cinema's resemblance to the photographic, it bears a singular phenomenology. The action film offers a fine depiction of this singularity because of its proclivity for the manipulation of time. But the pose is not vanquished in the cinema. It is in the dialogue or exchange between a frozen picture and a moving image (or picture of movement) that the action film defines itself. Like the art of the comic book that the genre often imitates, the pleasure is in assimilating an image of speed through a series of frozen frames. At any moment the flurry might congeal into a pose. The action figure maintains his life force and heroism through just this pose. The pose, the still frame, and the temporary halt of movement, serve to attest to screen action, highlighting its speed and shock. *The Matrix*, with its bullet time photography that turned the moving image into a series of detailed stills to be digitally manipulated, exposed the paradoxical time that makes up the pleasure of action by presenting an exploding photo. Hi-speed is best assimilated in minute detail, as exploding pictures, lest it pass by too quickly. The action film combines action, stasis and every speed in between, allowing the spectator to wallow in each

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attack, escape, victory and redemption at various impossible speeds and angles. There is more slow-motion photography in action cinema than any other genre. A complex, man-made time has emerged in action cinema that does not equal either movement or stasis, but instead evokes force, disruption, and violent agitation. In the action sequence the spectator is pounded by the ghost of movement and the shadow of spectacle. Most importantly s/he is haunted by time itself.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, reading Hölderlin on tragedy, isolates this recognition of 'time' as being at the centre of tragedy. Tragedy is not simply what excludes time, but paradoxically what realises it by forgetting it:

> It is a moment of reciprocal forgetting: man forgets himself and forgets the God, 'because he exists entirely within the moment'; the God forgets 'because he is nothing other than time' (Essays 107), and that is to say, the law of irreversibility: the 'this is irretrievable of tragic destiny. Or, at the *limit*, (the possibility of) death' (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe 2000, 134).

Lacoue-Labarthe shows in this passage that Hölderlin, like Levinas, draws an equivalence between God and time, but that Hölderlin describes tragedy as the recognition of the limit imbedded in this divine time. Whereas Levinas stresses the futurity and hope of lived time, Hölderlin stresses the utter irreversibility of time – the loss of the past, in forgetfulness, and in the inability to will backwards and undo the tragic event. Labarthe raises the question of whether actual time is the source of a limit that representation merely imitates. Film is of course free to reverse time, after all. Even if the finished work lacks freedom and exists as *l'entre temps* it raises the question of whether time is in no sense free of the tragic, either outside or inside the artwork.

In conclusion, I have shown how, despite appearances, the action film accommodates Levinas's definition of the tragic, but in the final analysis it escapes Levinas's valuation of the tragic as a realm completely severed from truth. Not only because, like the photograph, it marks the limits of time and mortality, but also because the action film is a tragic form based in pleasure. The action film does not merely serve our fascination with time, speed and sequences of arrival, but attests to our basic pleasure in witnessing the body surpass limits and involve itself in the moral web and conflict of existence. Human will and intention battle again and again the specter of global or personal justice. This is one of its critical links to tragedy, which Nietzsche has argued is our ability to transform the cruel nature and violence of existence into pleasure

and affirmation (Nietzsche 1967). For Levinas neither being nor non-being, lived action nor tragedy, is a source of pleasure. As he says in *Existence and Existents*: 'Despite all its freedom effort reveals a condemnation; it is fatigue and suffering' (Levinas 1978, 31). Levinas describes the toil and labour of activity, but not its pleasure. For Levinas the time of the artwork is a nightmare, a frozen state of terror. The action film calls into question the value given by Levinas to both action and the work of art. Its forte is perpetual evasion, a form that appears to be forever passing by.

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