Les Sensations fortes: The phenomenological aesthetics of the French action film

DISsertation

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Abstract

This dissertation treats les sensations fortes, or “thrills”, that can be accessed through the experience of viewing a French action film. Throughout the last few decades, French cinema has produced an increasing number of “genre” films, a trend that is remarked by the appearance of more generic variety and the increased labeling of these films – as generic variety – in France. Regardless of the critical or even public support for these projects, these films engage in a spectatorial experience that is unique to the action genre. But how do these films accomplish their experiential phenomenology?

Starting with the appearance of Luc Besson in the 1980s, and following with the increased hybrid mixing of the genre with other popular genres, as well as the recurrence of sequels in the 2000s and 2010s, action films portray a growing emphasis on the importance of the film experience and its relation to everyday life. Rather than being direct copies of Hollywood or Hong Kong action cinema, French films are uniquely sensational based on their spectacular visuals, their narrative tendencies, and their presentation of the corporeal form.

Relying on a phenomenological examination of the action film filtered through the philosophical texts of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Mikel Dufrenne, and Jean-Luc Marion, in this dissertation I show that French action cinema is pre-eminently concerned with the thrill that comes from the experience, and less concerned with a
political or ideological commentary on the state of French culture or cinema. The spectacular visuals of Luc Besson set the tone for the genre, while the narrative of the action-heritage film hybrid led it through its next phase, until finally arriving at the superiority of corporeal movement through sequential films in the mid-2000s and 2010s. By addressing basic and fundamental human experiences of vision, story-telling, and movement, these films invite a new appreciation of French cinema, apart from the typical moniker of the emotionally-driven “art cinema” while still evoking the concepts of the artistic endeavor.
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Cette opposition entre des genres cinématographiques qui constituerait « une forme d’expression culturelle collective » et des genres manipulateurs et réducteurs recoupe un clivage, plus fondamental, de la culture contemporaine entre deux positions, l’une valorisant les productions en série de la culture de masse, l’autre les dévalorisant comme des objets pauvres et aliénants. Ces deux attitudes entraînent deux conceptions antagonistes de la fonction sociale du genre (expression de « vérités » sociales/encadrement idéologique contraignant), mais aussi […] deux manières d’envisager le genre comme processus de communication (médiation utile/blocage de l’interprétation). Elles reflètent l’ambivalence essentielle des productions stéréotypées de la culture de masse.

- Raphaëlle Moine, *Les Genres du cinéma*

La vie quotidienne ne me donne guère accès à moi-même, elle me dispense en effet d’en avoir le désir et même le besoin. Car j’ai passé un accord tacite avec moi: je ferai comme si j’avais accès à moi-même, mais je me dispenserais de le vérifier trop souvent, en sorte de pouvoir mieux vaquer, l’esprit libre, à mes affaires du monde. Puisque je suis ici (ou plutôt là), pourquoi m’embarrasser de le confirmer? Je me suppose suffisamment assuré de la fidélité de moi-même à moi-même pour ne pas aller à chaque instant la constater. Ainsi s’écoule le cours des choses: trop sûr de moi pour jamais aller voir si j’y suis, je ne m’occupe que du reste des êtres. Puisque je suis bien gardé par un autre moi-même, je peux m’oublier. Je traverse ainsi ma vie en état de séparation de corps et de pensée d’avec moi-même. Je ne suis sans moi – sans soi. Mais, justement, suis-je vraiment assuré de pouvoir à volonté accéder à moi?

- Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît*
A burgeoning trend in French cinema is the homegrown production of action films, commonly following the Hollywood model of blockbuster productions. For some popular critics and critical scholars, this signals a state of instability for the French cinema production model, and brings discomfort to the industry’s proponents and supporters. As for the production of action genre films themselves, though, France has arguably been producing proto-action films since the beginning of cinema itself, from the purportedly frightening movement of *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Lumière 1895), to Abel Gance’s remarkable tracking shots and derring-do stunts of the titular hero in *Napoléon* (1927), to Jean-Paul Belmondo’s physical comedy feats in any number of Philippe de Broca’s films.¹ The action sequence has thus always been present in French films, yet the generic moniker of “action” has remained elusive.

There is a hesitance to label a film as “action” simply because of what that entails. One reason the label has been so contentious is because of critical reception that is anything but friendly to perceived Hollywood-style genre vehicles, in which of course action plays an outsized role. One issue of *CinémAction* has a particularly revealing title: “Quelle diversité face à Hollywood?”² The editors also begin by asking the question: “quel modèle alternatif à Hollywood?”, and subsequent section titles for their inquiry vary from “Un problème Hollywood?” to “Le système Hollywood: fondements d’une hégémonie,” or “Reproduire Hollywood? l’expérience européenne” and “Résister à

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² *CinémAction* is a triannual periodical that often features in-depth analyses and collaborative scholarship, and which has been published since 1978.
Hollywood: experiences et perspectives”. Each subsection has its own contention about Hollywood cinema and its production system, yet the proposed solution – stated again in the editors’ introduction – presumes too much about the dominance of Hollywood cinema:

Quel que soit le médium choisi, cinéma ou télévision, l’essentiel est de préserver l’invention créatrice dans chaque œuvre. Plus les images viennent d’horizons divers, plus cette exigence est facile à faire respecter. Et cette diversité est d’autant plus indispensable en ces temps difficiles, car elle seule peut ouvrir le public, stimuler la curiosité, le rendre capable de formuler un jugement propre plutôt que d’accepter les a priori, les idées toutes faites. (13, emphasis added)³

A national system overwhelmed by Hollywood fare would result in a loss of creativity, these editors claim. Yet creativity does not only develop from a diversity of sources.⁴ If that were the case, Hollywood would be the least creative film system on the planet simply because of its generic limitations, and that is observably not the case. There is creativity and innovation within and throughout genres, movements, and even the star system. There is also creativity in a spectator, and in a spectator’s experience of watching a film.

³ It should also be noted that this issue appeared in 2002, when France was undergoing a small crisis concerning the preservation of their film production model.
⁴ And the French should know. In the 1960s, the literary movement OULIPO (“Ouvrir de littérature potentielle”) was formed around the idea of creativity from within predetermined confines, such as Georges Perec’s famous novel La Disparition (1969), which does not contain the letter ‘e’.
Moreover, part of the initial reluctance to label a film as part of the action genre stems from its simple lack of historical use in generic labeling in France. In the engaging *Les Genres du cinéma*, Raphaëlle Moine employs two “guides des spectacles” – *Pariscope* and *L’Officiel des Spectacles* – to demonstrate the constant shifting and flexibility of generic categorization. Historically, France has not used action as a labeling device because other labels, such as “Aventure,” “Fantastique,” “Karaté,” or even “Arts martiaux,” have seemed to better serve as descriptors for these films. However, recent developments in action cinema and the subsequent expansion of its global influence have rendered those previous labels inadequate, or at least insufficient in also capturing audience and spectator expectations. Importantly, Moine argues that the genre labeling achieved by these guides is done explicitly so that spectators can have “une définition plus large susceptible d’orienter le choix,” and that the larger effect of “la determination générique a ici une function de repère et construit, chez le lecteur et futur spectateur, un horizon d’attente” (14-16). Audience expectation serves as a driving force for generic labeling, and action seems to encompass a broader cinematic experience than the prior labels, an experience that includes spectators as part of the genre creation process.

And so, the fear of using the action label is unfounded but not necessarily unwarranted. If the assumption is that the Hollywood production model is world-dominating and also unsustainable for any European-based, national film industry, then the editors are correct to be alarmed by Hollywood’s incursions. But beyond these concerns, it is wrong to assume that creativity cannot be had when copying a Hollywood generic model, or by playing within the confines of generic categories. There are
certainly worries with the reproduction and further dissemination of a Hollywood model that has different economic, sociopolitical, and cultural concerns than the French system; but again, there is a certain creativity that can be found within specific limitations, and the French action film invariably addresses these restrictions as best as it can.

This dissertation aims to demonstrate the creativity, innovation, and imagination that a specific group of French films, all belonging more or less to the generic label known as “action,” has added to the pantheon of French film history. In order to accomplish this task, it will be essential to define exactly what is so original in these films, and how this artistry manifests both in the film and in a spectator’s response, and not necessarily from the limiting viewpoint of production, distribution, or nationalism.5 In fact, a focus on the production model or the economic concerns of these films is arguably the approach that the editors of CinémAction took, and is only one aspect of generic classification. Another, equally important avenue of research is the sensational experience of a spectator when watching action films, and how generic labeling can actually help a spectator determine his or her viewing preferences. And while approaches that focus on distribution and industry obviously are important, this dissertation argues that the best way to read these films is through the lens of film phenomenology and the idea of excess, or saturated phenomena. By participating in the growing debate around film phenomenology, I contend that the creative act is found in these films’ ability to reveal saturated phenomena, a term derived from Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenological

5 This is not a dismissal of these approaches, simply an acknowledgement that they are different from my own.
theory, and that a spectator is capable of a creative experience when watching these films – even if the same spectator is unable to immediately define it or recognize it.

**National cinema**

To be sure, though, it must be shown how these films form part of French cinema, which demands not a definition of “cinema,” as it were, but instead a more exacting definition of what it means to be “French” from within a cinematic context. Considering the amount of scholarly and popular writing on French cinema, it will suffice to name only a few and use those as standard-bearers. Instead of trying to distill all work addressing French national cinema across history, I will here focus on a number of definitions proposed in works that address multiple audiences: scholars, students, and possibly even a more general readership, in order to show the consensus that has formed around French cinema, and how the labeling of a national cinema has both positive and negative effects.

For instance, in the 2006 *The Cinema of France*, edited by renowned film scholar Phil Powrie, the selection of twenty-four specific films to represent the cinema of France was based on film movements rather than genres (too Hollywood) or stars (too fluid), and Powrie’s choice is specifically limited to “French cinema as a metropolitan phenomenon” (2). For Powrie, co-productions could be classified as French films, so long as the director and the actors remain French, and so long as the featured location is identifiably French or in France (1-2). Again, though, the important feature of French cinema for Powrie has been the appearance of movements, ranging from Poetic realism in the 1930s
to the ‘New Wave’ of the 1960s, the *cinéma du look* of the 1980s, the emergence of the heritage film in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the *jeune cinéma* of the mid-1990s to early 2000s (1-9). Unsurprisingly, a lack of a strong or easily identifiable cinematic movement leads Powrie to critique certain decades: “The 1970s is … seen as a moribund decade no doubt for the same reason as the 1950s: the lack of an obvious school of filmmaking after the sparkle of the New Wave” (7). Yet he still chooses films from each decade that seem to belong to certain larger, generic categories, meaning he cannot truly escape this type of film labeling. His classification system at least attempts to set the French industry apart from its Hollywood rival that relies almost exclusively on genres.

Powrie’s overall definition serves as a useful starting point because it demonstrates the lengths to which scholars will go in order to distinguish national cinemas. Powrie opens his introduction by claiming that “Of all the World Cinemas, it is perhaps French cinema that matters most in the struggle against Hollywood domination” (1). When the conflict is staged as a fight against a domineering production model, it makes sense to establish different parameters of judgment than the generic model that has mostly worked for Hollywood films. This gives Powrie the cover to state in the next immediate paragraph that Luc Besson’s films are “American-style genres” with “clear Gallic inflections” (1); and despite Powrie’s own admiration for Luc Besson, the language gives the impression that Luc Besson’s films, and others like them, are simply derivative of Hollywood *because* they are genre films.  

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6 Phil Powrie actually edited, along with Susan Hayward, the fascinating *The Films of Luc Besson: Master of spectacle* in 2006.
to the Hollywood production model nor American cinema – just as film movements are not exclusive to French cinema – and films that trade in generic platitudes can be equally French through classification and dependence on other, equal criteria. Powrie’s classification system is therefore incomplete, since he seems intent on distinguishing French cinema from Hollywood film rather than just describing what a French model is.

Another helpful text to establish the limits of scholarly and popular definitions of French national cinema is Susan Hayward’s aptly named *French National Cinema* (1993). In her introduction, Hayward posits seven different definitions of what a practice of national film means, including such commonsense notions as “narratives, genres, codes and conventions, gesturality and morphology, the star as sign, cinema of the centre and cinema of the periphery, [and] cinema as the mobiliser of the nation’s myths and of the myth of the nation” (8-9). Hayward’s text expands the focus on specific films to include cultural and societal markers, and as such it more concretely encapsulates the idea of the French nation and its cinematic practices, thereby better situating the debate around national film systems’ particular, cultural considerations. Hayward concludes her introduction with the following:
A national cinema, then, is historically fluctuating. But it is simultaneously constructing a historicity of the nation in that it is reconstructing myths already mobilised by the nation as they are inscribed in the indigenous culture. Thus, although this textualisation of the nation reinforces the popular myth of cultural specificity (and, thereby, of difference), that specificity will necessarily change over the course of history. It will change because the signification of the term ‘national’ changes according to political, social and economic pressures and mutations, just as the state of the nation changes in time according to its position in the world. (15-16)

No doubt much has changed since the 1990s with regards to France, French culture, and cinema itself, but the fact remains that Hayward’s historically-contingent nationalism is best seen as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Moreover, she immediately allows for the definition to change based solely on the passage of time.

Outside of Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie, who have consistently been cataloguing and defining French cinema since the 1980s, many other treatises exist that take on the burdensome task of defining a national French cinema. Alan Williams’s *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* follows the production practices that gave birth to the cinema and that continued to inspire innovation and “aesthetic exploration” through the years (3); Michael Temple and Michael Witt open their *The French Cinema Book* with an intention to “explore as fully as possible the fascinating
range and diversity of films, people, trends and practices that together make up France’s rich film culture,” thereby demonstrating the presence of multiple factors in defining a national genre (1); and finally, Rémi Fournier-Lanzoni aims to “combine cultural, historical, formal, and theoretical analyses of French films from a range of French and world cinematic sources” in French Cinema: From Its Beginnings to the Present, in order to arrive at a chronological history of French film (2). What can be noticed is that these authors are more interested in the “how” of a French film rather than the “what” or the “why,” demonstrating the diversity of French film production and its continued growth throughout the years. Furthermore, these texts survey the landscape of French cinema in order to spot trends and historical continuities in production, cinematography, marketing, and audience participation.

Therefore, this “how” of French cinema has become a driving force of recent publications and informs a wide variety of scholarship on French film directors, French cinematic movements (à la Powrie), and even French actors and production practices. Phil Powrie himself wrote one scholarly text addressing his own definition of French cinema, French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the Crisis of Masculinity (1997), and then edited another titled French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference (1999) that continued his outlook on French cinema. Susan Hayward herself has published a work on a specific film director, Luc Besson (1998), as well as an edited volume with Phil Powrie on Luc Besson, titled The Films of Luc Besson: Master of Spectacle (2006). Current scholarship on French national cinema focuses on celebrities and filmmakers, sociopolitical representations including women and minorities, changing production
practices, and the emergence of a popular cinema. All of these trends form the contemporary basis of our understanding of French national cinema, and further reinforce Hayward’s conclusion that change is constant while also challenging any insistence on an absolutist definition of French cinema.

For my purposes, then, the definition of a French film does not need to adhere to the relatively specific criteria of Powrie – fitting into a critically accepted cinematic movement – since French cinema is shown to be diverse, unique, and open to technological and aesthetic innovations. Rather, Hayward’s relatively expansive definition is a more accurate descriptor of national cinema, and French national cinema in particular, and this dissertation is an attempt to broaden the horizons of French cinematic scholarship. Indeed, very basic criteria for determining a French film – as in a French director, or French actors and actresses, or a French production company, or even just the presence of the French language – can suffice to distinguish one national cinema from another, and are more than enough to distinguish the corpus of this dissertation as belonging to French cinema rather than another national model. The fact that the chosen films often model Hollywood or American cinema does not exclude them from being considered part of French cinema.

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Moreover, this diversity of products and scholarship proves that French cinema is anything but derivative of Hollywood, and at times stands in stark contrast to the deleterious effects of market-driven cinema – despite occasionally being a purely commercial endeavor. In the introduction to *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema*, the editors neatly summarize the importance of French film:

In contrast [to Hollywood], by refusing to allow filmmaking to become driven solely by marketing imperatives rather than creative ones – even while allowing greater scope for naturalized forms of mass-appeal genre cinema – contemporary French cinema stands for something different: a commitment to the value of artistic expression in the representation of human experience in all its complexity, along with the right of nations to preserve their cultural identity. (3)

Thus, this dissertation is actually participating in the ongoing and ceaseless debate of defining French cinema, expanding the borders of a national film industry and appreciating a new phenomenon, while still embracing the overarching artistic enterprise that embodies French cinema and that privileges creativity in film form. And that means a more expansive look at genre cinema and its specific spectatorial underpinnings.

**Film genre**

There is a common perception that French film does not identify itself as a genre-based system, and that such an identification is more appropriate to the Hollywood model than the French model. To reiterate Phil Powrie, “French cinema, it has often been
claimed, is not a genre cinema in the same way that the American cinema is. There are some staple genres such as the police thriller, comedies and the costume film; but these are popular films...” (3). As Powrie notes, it would be a mistake to classify French filmmaking history as just a continuation of generic categories, since that would eliminate some of the better-known and highly respected exemplars of French cinema, and would therefore do a disservice to a history of French cinema (3). But as he also clearly states, genres do exist and have existed for quite some time, not just in the minds of critics, but in the “popular” mind of a spectator, too.

This popular appeal of generic classification – and its subsequent use in the decision-making process of spectators – is something that Raphaëlle Moine tackles in *Les Genres du cinéma*, and is shown to not be merely derivative of the Hollywood moviemaking machine. Beginning with the introduction, Moine argues for the use of empirical genres as identities, “une *identité générique,*” and as belonging to a long tradition of textual classification found in any number of other venues, such as theater, literature, painting, or music (10-11). These classifications are open to interpretation and fluctuations, and whereas the majority of this work is completed by “des historiens et des théoriciens des genres,” Moine is quick to note that “il n’y a pas lieu de penser qu’elle [cette relecture critique conjointe] en soit l’apanage” (12). Importantly, the creation of generic film labels is less about a top-down approach to classification imposed by a dominant film production machine than it is about a bottom-up approach that sees democratic participation eventually result in categorical utility:
[...] il convient de rappeler que la construction, la conscience et la manipulation des catégories génériques est, au cinéma comme dans toutes les productions culturelles à caractère industriel, un fait transversal à la production et à la réception des films, puisque les producteurs, les distributeurs et les diffuseurs d’une part, les spectateurs amateurs, les critiques et les théoriciens et historiens du cinéma d’autre part, utilisent les dénominations génériques. (13)

The very simple fact that so many different entities employ generic classification for cinema is proof of “la force de la notion de genre au cinéma” (13). Yet as Moine notes, this strength can also be a burden and a hindrance when trying to precisely classify each and every film according to a specific generic category (13).

Referring to the “typologie impossible” of organizing films into stable categories, Moine nonetheless provides a taxonomy of five distinct, functional possibilities of genres that ceaselessly overlap and interact in various ways: “le niveau de l’énonciation” is interested in information dissemination, and is the level where the documentary film’s intentions stand in contrast to fictional film storytelling; “le niveau de la destination” implies a particular spectator, and the simplest distinction lies between a home video intended for personal and private use and the diffusion of a blockbuster usually for economic purposes; “le niveau sémantique” is where themes, motifs, and subject matter are all determiners of the meaning of the genre, and “le niveau syntaxique” is where the formal elements of a film (lighting, dialogue, camera angles, etc.) are syntactically organized in order to create a certain shape or a certain form of the film (20-23). These
last two categories – the semantic meaning and syntactic arrangement of film elements – have also been covered extensively by Rick Altman in his thorough *Film/Genre* (1999), and prove to be quite helpful in distinguishing one generic category from another.

For the purposes of my argument, Moine’s fifth category, “le niveau de la fonction,” is the most fruitful. As she describes it, “les noms de genres peuvent se définir par la fonction qu’ils prétendent accomplir, par leur programme en quelque sorte” (22). For Moine, this can have two different functions. The first, the “fonction illocutoire,” is the idea that genre films “disent le but communicationnel que les films et leurs auteurs veulent remplir” (22). In the case of an action film, the generic labeling clearly states what the film hopes to accomplish – the representation of action – whereas some other commonly used labels, such as “karaté” or “films d’arts martiaux,” imply a specific type of physical combat and less-than-fully encapsulate the increasing varieties within these types of films. The second, the “fonction perlocutoire,” is reserved for films that “visent à changer le comportement des spectateurs, à provoquer chez eux un effet: ainsi une comédie suscite le rire, un film érotique ou pornographique suscite l’excitation sexuelle, un film d’horreur le sentiment de peur ou d’ épouvante” (22). This evocation of a spectatorial reaction is not only limited to comedy, pornography, or horror; in fact, dramatic films evoke a reaction (whether it be anger, fear, discomfiture, or any number of other reactions), as do melodramas (melancholy and mournfulness, for instance) and thrillers (the excitation of suspense or uncertainty), as well as action.

Thus, a conclusion can be drawn about the reluctance of French critical and popular audiences to designate a film as belonging to only one genre, and the resonances
of generic labeling for French audiences as well as a growing international audience. Specifically for this research, the increasing stability of the generic title “action” for any number of films since the 1980s in both Hollywood and France has neatly crossed with France’s increasing production of these types of films, and the inability of previously used labels (film d’aventures, films d’arts martiaux, karaté) to fully encapsulate the variations of a vast genre. If the French-equivalent of the International Movie Database (IMDB.com) website Allociné.fr can only find eight “action” films from the year 2010, then something is arguably wrong – or at least underdeveloped and incomplete – with the classification system. Considering that other film genres, such as policiers or thrillers, are often allowed to stand alone as generic classifications (these genres contain 32 and 44 films, respectively), it is a wonder that “action” is used as infrequently as it is. Would it not be simpler to group all policiers as well as thrillers, and perhaps including aventure or guerre or science fiction, under the overarching rubric of action?

If the answer to this rhetorical question is that more specificity in labeling is an inevitable end-product of increased production and variety, and thus a positive development, then critics would be better served by having a larger mixed label, not just one or another. That is to say, a film marked as policiers does not signify to its audience and its critics that action sequences will be part of the spectacle, but instead only that the narrative arc follows the activity of a member or members of a police force. Still, would

8 Out of those eight films, four are French-Hollywood co-productions (The Next Three Days Haggis, Centurion Marshall, From Paris with Love by the French director Pierre Morel, and Resident Evil: Afterlife by Paul W.S. Anderson), one seems to not exist at all (Mission Firegame by Philip Chalong which does not seem to exist anywhere outside of Allociné’s website), another is a French-Scandinavian co-production that re-imagines Santa Claus as a violent action killer, and the other two are actual French action films.
it not be more helpful to give each of these films a hybrid generic label, such as *action-policier*, especially if a chase sequence or a scene of physical combat is integral to the film’s trajectory? Again, the term *policier* could simply refer to a dramatic plot involving police and an investigation, without any action sequences in the whole film. These labels therefore reveal an insistence on narrative as the defining characteristic of a genre and further demonstrate a neglect of spectator participation. In other words, “action” as a label reveals a general reluctance toward what “action” implies – that is, a classification system that mimics or just apes Hollywood’s style – and as such demonstrates French film’s unease with this all-too-foreign of cinema genres. Indeed, outside of *Allociné.fr* and its extensive database of action films, most other online websites (*Télérama.fr*, *Première.fr*, or even Moine’s preferred film classification websites *Pariscope.fr* or *Offi.fr*) classify most action films as belonging instead to science-fiction, adventure, or even the terribly unhelpful “*divers*”.9

Clearly, though, the reluctance to use “action” as a catch-all genre clarifier has less to do with Hollywood and more to do with utility. As Raphaëlle Moine states the dilemma in the above epithet, genre differences are most notable when questions of type-distinction or value are in play. Certainly the political and social impact that a national film industry has on its own population is worthy of study, but to only address those concerns, or worse, to actively cultivate only these areas of inquiry, is a failure on behalf of those responsible for expanding the conversation. Moine’s position reflects an

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9 The category of “*divers*” is found on *Première.fr*’s website and includes such films as *Rumble in the Bronx* (Tong 1995), *The Godfather: Part III* (Coppola 1990), *Assassin(s)* (Kassovitz 1997), and *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (Hogan 1997). Obviously, their classification system needs some help.
awareness of this “essential ambivalence” and of how it affects both interpretation and production; moreover, it opens avenues for research that touch on questions of agency and what seems to be the never-ending struggle between mass audience desires and critical acceptance.

Complicating the situation further, many films could, would, or even should fall under the category of “action” yet are classified elsewhere due to a perceived stigma or unhelpfulness of genre classification in general, before even delving into the specific category. Or, as Janet Staiger would claim, part of the problem of classification is that no genre has ever been pure and unsullied – all genres mix and match according to the aesthetics of the period, and so genres come and go as audiences and production companies demand (206). In her essay “Hybrid or Inbred,” Staiger warns other genre theorists against the inherently anachronistic approach of genre classification and “ordering”:

Where finding order may go awry, however, is when a subjective order visible in the present is mapped onto the past and then assumed to be the order visible in the past. This historicist fallacy is then compounded if the past pattern is assumed to be pure against a visible present that is not, that the visible present is some transformation, deterioration, or hybridization of a pure essence and origin. (204)

Staiger’s point is cogent if we apply it to specific genres that date from the 1970s (such as martial arts films or karatê) and which are no longer as useful as they once were. She is also perspicacious in recognizing that genre origins are diverse and mutable, and that
these same genres never began from a “pure” source but instead developed in tandem and in response to the films themselves. Genre classification is therefore aware of the past and of where genres began, and it is also open to developments and changes and a re-defining of the borders as needed.

Staiger’s argument in “Hybrid or Inbred” takes on a different tone toward the end of the article as she admonishes critics’ use of the term “hybrid” to describe a specific moment in Hollywood cinema history (213-14). She argues against employing the term “hybrid” to describe the post-Fordian Hollywood era, since it implies that the Fordian Hollywood era had a “purity hypothesis” for genres, which “is then used as the foundation upon which is built a critical difference” (213). Instead of this purity approach, Staiger proposes the idea that hybridity only makes sense if the culture creating these films is actively mixing culturally formed genres, where “the notion [of hybridity] ought to be reserved for truly cross-cultural encounters” (214). Considering that Staiger is focusing on Hollywood generic production, her point is well-taken, albeit not without its own controversy.10 But in the case of French cinema, where action has been part and parcel of the medium since its inception and where genre classification is, as Moine noted above, anything but stable, action may just be a more useful term that will lose its cultural implication once its utility is better appreciated.

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10 For instance, the use of kung fu or karate in action films could be seen as cultural appropriation if the directors, actors, and producers are using it nefariously. However, the increased presence of kung fu in action films – and its American-inflected cultural use in “gun fu” – seems to be more of an appreciation for a better presentation and representation of physical combat than a tendency to steal another culture’s history.
Staiger’s acknowledgement that genres can appear when needed, and so long as they do not retroactively reclassify certain films, is pertinent for the French system. The ideal of a singular film genre is palpably anachronistic and tangibly limiting in our contemporary moment of media saturation. *Policier or aventure, film noir or drame romantique*, can be helpful to a certain extent, but providing more than one generic label should not immediately lead to confusion and discomfort. Easily enough, substitutions or additions can be made that better elucidate the product being sold, and which more clearly illustrate the historical progress that has been made. Heralding Julien Leclercq’s latest film *Braqueurs* (2016) as just a *policier* arguably does the film and a spectator an injustice.¹¹ This classification accurately describes the narrative arc of the film and also the types of characters on screen, but it fails to fully encapsulate a spectator’s potential reaction to watching the film and the action sequences that are on display. Film genres can therefore function as warnings for audience expectations, whatever those may be, as well as a marker for industrial concerns and a quick summary of narrative exposition.

**The action film**

In the January 1998 issue of *Positif*, the popular French film magazine, Yannick Dahan denigrated the action film while also delimiting the genre’s boundaries, labeling action as a concept rather than a genre, and excusing certain Hollywood players (Harrison Ford) for only dipping their toes into the action film while remaining “bien ancré dans un

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¹¹ According to *Allociné.fr*, under the category “Genre,” “*policier*” is the only one given for the film. And multiple labels are given for other films on the site. For example, on the page for Chris Nahon’s *L’empire des loups* (2005), “*policier, action, thriller*” is found next to its “Genre” category.
vrai genre depuis longtemps confirmé” (85). Dahan firmly placed the emergence of the 1980s and 1990s Hollywood action film with Sylvester Stallone and Rambo (Kotcheff 1982), a film that, like its action brethren that Dahan mentions, absolves the hero (and America as well, according to Dahan) of any culpability during the Vietnam War; and which qualified Dahan’s unequivocal statement that action is “un genre qui, à ses débuts, n’avait qu’un objectif: corriger par la fiction les échecs de la réalité” (70-71). Dahan then listed a group of Hollywood stars who were – and still are – considered action film stalwarts: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Tom Cruise, and even Nicolas Cage. But he also went on to list other Hollywood mainstays (Alec Baldwin, Nicole Kidman, Sandra Bullock, George Clooney, Jeff Goldblum, Geena Davis, and Mel Gibson) who, unbeknownst at the time, would go on to have lucrative careers in many non-action films and television (85-91).

Dahan’s attempt to categorize certain Hollywood actors and actresses as only action stars highlights the larger problem that Janet Staiger noticed in her genre hybridity argument: that is, setting boundaries and limitations that, after only two short decades, no longer work without significant alterations.12 Dahan’s article thus reveals the nature of criticism toward the excessive action film – based on a perceived starting point in the 1980s and in Hollywood – while also displaying the stigma that action films have had to deal with since being labeled as such. The article also reveals a tendency to discredit participants in the action film genre, from producers to directors, and from actors to

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12 Action films are not now vastly different than their forebears, but significant changes (in ideology, in cinematography, and in respectability) are noticeable.
spectators. For Dahan, Hollywood action films are simply ideologically-driven extensions of violence that reinforce American mythology at the expense of thought (75).

Yet the cinema in general is, and genre films in particular are, more than an ideological apparatus – despite it inarguably being a commercial endeavor. And both Hollywood and French cinema have advanced in significant ways since the late 1990s when Dahan was leveling his criticism. More importantly, genre films have changed considerably since then, not the least of which being their growing reputation (and marketability) in both domestic and international markets.\(^\text{13}\) Consistently struggling against genre production thus only makes sense for politically- and ideologically-driven criticisms, and even then, these criticisms can be invalidated at certain moments. And if we look historically at the production of action films – whether in Hollywood or in France – the entrenched idea that it began in the United States of the 1980s becomes a pernicious viewpoint that is hard to disentangle.\(^\text{14}\)

In the specific case of Positif, the critical argument has somewhat turned away from haranguing the ideology of these films toward a more nuanced popular versus art film position. Lamenting that film critics “s’habituent au décalage entre leur opinion et celle de la masse des spectateurs” (1), as Michel Ciment did as recently as February 2016 in the pages of Positif, only further entrenches the idea of a battle between those who speak with their money (and who are perceived as unaware of their own complicity) and

\(^{13}\) To see the full extent of this shifting terrain, one need only look at Yannick Dahan himself. In 2009, along with Benjamin Rocher, Dahan co-wrote and co-directed the action-horror film La Horde, a genre film through-and-through.

\(^{14}\) Besides the proto-action films already mentioned earlier (L’Arrivée d’un train, Napoléon, or many of Belmondo’s films), France, the United States, Great Britain, and Hong Kong have been consistently making action films since at least the 1950s.
those who defend art. Moreover, it attempts to establish parameters of judgment that
certain spectators – those who read Positif, for sure – can use to distinguish one film from
another. However, that is exactly what genres have come to represent: a categorical
distinction between film varieties that gives a spectator more information about the film
than he or she previously had. It is possible that certain films, or even a majority of films,
within a generic category are simply bad, but the genre itself and the generic label are not
at fault for that. Besides, action film auteurs – James Cameron, Ridley Scott, Michael
Bay, Luc Besson, Julien Leclercq, Christophe Gans, Michel Gondry – prove that art and
economics are not mutually exclusive categories of criticism.

Moreover, the expansion of genre studies over the past two decades has led to a
generalized acceptance of certain generic categories (Western, melodrama, science-
fiction) that serve as overarching classifiers. Mostly based on Hollywood, these genres
have mixed and matched with national cinemas to create the ambiguity that Raphaëlle
Moine notes. In France in particular, as François-Xavier Molia points out in his “Peut-on
être à la fois Hollywoodien et Français?”, “Today’s popular cinema … has become a
mixed zone in which a national tradition of French-style entertainment and the ever-
stronger attraction of Hollywood production methods exist side by side, and on occasion
become intertwined” (51). This intermingling is not so bad, though, as Molia himself
admits that despite the direct or indirect copying of the Hollywood model, “these films
are driven by a quite different objective, namely that of affirming and promoting a
specifically French form of cinematic entertainment” (56). In spite of the beginnings of
genre classification and genre criticism, its current iteration is quite different from then
and will only continue to adapt. The action genre may be a quick way for a critical French press to discredit mass culture fare and genre production as only ideological in nature, but scholarship on the action cinema clearly demonstrates the richness of these films.

Still, an insistence that the action genre began in Hollywood in the 1980s is part of the historical discussion, and this mentality informs both my and others’ use of the genre. Tellingly, many scholars have written about the Hollywood or Hong Kong action film and its appearance around the mid- to late-1970s. Scholarship on Hollywood action cinema began as early as the 1990s and focused on some key elements prevalent in these films. For instance, Justin Wyatt’s High Concept, appearing in 1994, defined a certain type of Hollywood film that could be easily summarized, packaged, and marketed for a mass audience. According to Wyatt, these films rely “heavily upon the replication and combination of previously successful narratives,” and “[are] designed to maximize marketability […] and [are based on] a concept which taps into a national trend or sentiment” (13-15). For the action film, the theory of “high concept” is becoming increasingly important as the films tend to resemble each other in narrative structure but vary in their use of the spectacle. High concept is also important for the success of the film in the marketplace, something all national cinemas struggle with. In the case of France, big-budget productions receive financial support from the French state through a

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complicated tax system, which means that these blockbusters compete with both smaller budget (i.e. auteur films) and mid-level budget films.\textsuperscript{16}

Scholarship on the action cinema has thus tended to focus on the national cinemas of Hollywood and Hong Kong, and is concerned with the narrative of these films, the sociopolitical representations in each film, and the spectacle of it all. Yvonne Tasker’s \textit{Action and Adventure Cinema}, as a broad treatise on the genre that addresses those previously mentioned aspects and others, considers five overlapping concerns for action cinema: historical precedents; aesthetic tendencies; generic conformities; institutional practices; and political significance (1). Historical considerations and political significance are tightly related, since both are concerned with continuities in films as well as where action films belong in a national industry. Generic conformities have to do with how an action film is classified, whether it is a hybrid with another generic category (which it most often is), or how it uses the action moments to advance the story. Questions of narrative are also tied to questions of genre. The category of institutional practices has to do with how these action films are produced, and why they have appeared at a certain moment in time. The final category for Tasker, aesthetic tendencies, deals with questions of style and representation. Many of Tasker’s other categories overlap and interweave with the overarching aesthetic qualities in action films, but it is the aesthetic that sets these films apart from others.

\textsuperscript{16} For a thorough discussion on this trend as of 2003, see Charlie Michael’s “French National Cinema and the Martial Arts Blockbuster” in \textit{French Politics, Culture & Society} vol. 23, no. 3, 2005, pp. 55-74.
Aesthetic considerations for the action cinema can supply fertile ground for research. Certainly action films contain elements that are easily associated with the genre; but as José Arroyo points out in *Action/Spectacle Cinema*, there are distinct differences as to how these elements are used between different films within the genre. Arroyo’s argument hinges on the appearance of chases scenes in action films, as he sees a difference between the use of stagecoaches, cars, airplanes, horses, and any other mode of transport. He also distinguishes between where these chases occur – in a city, out in the countryside, through water, or in outer space – the duration of the chase sequence, and where it falls in the narrative progression (vii-xiv). All of these variations form the aesthetic tendencies of the action film, creating congruencies between Hollywood, Hong Kong, and other action cinemas. French action films are culturally specific and deal with bodies, movement, and editing techniques in a quintessentially French way, while still adhering to the basic tenets of the action genre. And whereas Hollywood and Hong Kong have been preeminent in both popular and scholarly approaches to the action cinema, France, Great Britain, Bollywood, and others have produced similar action films at the same historical moment.\(^{17}\)

What the generic formulation of action does, then, and more than anything else, is to categorize a spectator’s embodied experience of a film regardless of the country of production origin. Reflecting on anti-Hollywood sentiment among French critics that leads to the rejection of genre cinema, as well as the contrasting spectator desire for clear

\(^{17}\) One can trace the trend of action cinema through Britain’s production of James Bond films and James Chapman’s *License to Thrill* (2007), or one can read about Bollywood’s historical production of action films in Valentina Vitali’s *Hindi Action Cinema* (2008). For the French case, Philippe de Broca’s films are perfect examples of action and adventure cinema in the 1960s, though scholarship is hard to find.
generic categories, Raphaëlle Moine argues that this delicate balancing act can only be achieved by acknowledging that “les genres sont également un acte discursif, un outil de communication, une médiation culturelle, idéologique et sociale,” and that genre must intrinsically include “des catégories de production et d’interprétation” (7). If this is an acceptable position for the study of genre, then it would follow – as Moine herself notes – that genres are not some ineluctable Hollywood behemoth but rather nationalistic and differential, and serve a communicative function for a spectator. And realizing this, Moine promotes her own research as being partial to inherent biases in national systems for generic classification:

…une de ces intentions est au moins, pour être modeste, d’ouvrir ou de signaler des pistes permettant de penser différents régimes génériques, au nombre desquels figure le classicisme hollywoodien: il essaie donc de naviguer entre deux écueils, l’écrasement de la question du genre sous le paradigme hollywoodien, et l’élaboration de théories génériques “locales,” spécifiques à chaque contexte. (8) 

In other words, genre systems should be self-defining and self-supporting, rather than imported from a Hollywood “paradigm” that fails to address “local” distinctions. Furthermore, while it may seem to some that action is only ever an imported generic type, the true use of the term stems from its ability to best summarize a spectatorial experience.

In a helpful but uneven book regarding the classification of genres, Écoles, Genres et Mouvements au Cinéma, Vincent Pinel assigns the generic classification of
action only to American films beginning in the 1980s, while still being attached to traditions from the past:

La notion de film d’action a longtemps été une catégorie commode pour classer de nombreux genres. Un western, un film d’aventures ou d’espionnage, un film policier relevaient du film d’action s’ils réservaient une large place aux séquences d’action (poursuites, combats, bagarres, destructions, massacres) et s’ils ne s’encombraient pas de raffinements psychologiques ou de recherche formelle. Ce n’est qu’au milieu des années 1980 qu’il devint un genre à part entière du cinéma américain. (14)

In other words, the emergence of the term action to classify a group of American films from the 1980s was itself historically-situated. Yet the action cinema has been around since the beginning, going through fluctuations and variations and re-namings, while mostly maintaining its basic aesthetic structure. By classifying action films as belonging to and deriving from the American cinema system, Pinel only further reinforces the paradigm of the action label and entrenches the divide between Hollywood and French cinema.

Hollywood’s domination in the global action cinema continues to grow thanks to huge production budgets, action-inflected celebrity, and digital effect mastery. However, any other national cinema is free to participate in the basic aesthetics of the action cinema, including visual spectacle, the creation of an easily understood narrative, and an aesthetically-pleasing presentation of corporeal movement. That there is a nationally-inflected element to specific action films is undeniable; but the argument that any of these
cinemas are simply derivative of Hollywood – and specifically, a Hollywood machine that began in the 1980s – is outmoded and old-fashioned. The genre is really then only there as a placeholder, as a way to signify the type of film experience for a spectator and the cinematic aesthetic that will be used. French action films are diverse and distinct, yet still similar to their Hollywood and Hong Kong brethren. One way to read a spectatorial experience of these films, then, is through the lens of film phenomenology and the idea of excess, or saturated phenomena.

A phenomenology of film

Over the past twenty years, the growth of interest in the phenomenology of film, especially as it pertains to theorizing film, has led to the creation of new material and fascinating thought. Works such as Vivian Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye* (1992) or Laura U. Marks’ *The Skin of the Film* (2000) have reinvigorated the pursuit of experience in cinema, yet engagement with phenomenological texts, and how they relate to cinema, has really only just begun.\(^{18}\) Whereas many scholars have taken a similar approach to Sobchack or Marks – that is, using phenomenological ideas of embodiment or sense perception to address visual and haptic experiences in cinema – research has started to

\[^{18}\] This text by Sobchack, as well as her follow-up *Carnal Thoughts* (2004), has had such an impact on film phenomenology that it can stand alone as the scholarship that reinvigorated the field. However, it was definitely not alone. There is also Allan Casebier’s *Film and Phenomenology* (1991), Jenny Chamarette’s *Phenomenology and the Future of Film* (2013), Jennifer M. Barker’s *The Tactile Eye* (2009), Daniel Frampton’s *Filmosophy* (2006), Jane Stadler’s *Pulling Focus* (2008), Laura U Marks’ *Touch* (2002), Martine Beugnet’s *Cinema and Sensation* (2007), as well as other texts that treat cognitive film theory, such as: Torben Kragh Grodal’s *Moving Pictures* (1997), Gregory Currie’s *Image and Mind* (1995), David Bordwell and Noël Carroll’s *Post-Theory* (1996), Carl Plantinga’s *Moving Viewers* (2009), and finally Carroll’s *Engaging the Moving Image* (2003).
expand beyond the founders of this phenomenological approach – Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the case of Sobchack, or Henri Bergson by way of Gilles Deleuze in Marks – and to re-engage with Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others, in an attempt to elucidate the extent of phenomenology’s reach into the cinematic realm. This increased interest in phenomenology has led to an expansion of the philosophical and theoretical borders of film phenomenology, so much so that it has become harder and harder to determine an exact definition of the trend.

So difficult, in fact, that the editors Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich used the introduction of a recent issue of the journal *Studia Phænomenologica* to lay out the landscape of contemporary approaches to film phenomenology, first by arguing for a broad approach to the field of film phenomenology and loose uses of the term, then followed by a more strict definition of film phenomenology that labeled it as “an attempt that describes invariant structures of the film viewer’s lived experience when watching moving images in a cinema or elsewhere” (13). According to the editors, part of the problem with classifying film phenomenology is that many phenomenologists never even spoke about film, let alone wrote about it (14). Scholars who now write about film phenomenology, or a phenomenology of film, find themselves having to either resort back to the few texts that are available – such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work that

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19 For a helpful interpretation of film phenomenology and the recent trends, see Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich’s introduction “What is Film Phenomenology?” in *Studia Phænomenologica*.

20 Considering that, as Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich note, phenomenology as a theoretical concept and film as an aesthetic object appeared around the same time and so the theory was only rarely applied to the cinema (14).
directly addressed the cinema – or needing to extrapolate theories of phenomenology and apply these methods to film.

But rather than being a criticism of the phenomenological approach to film, the editors again see this as proof of film phenomenology’s growing popularity and large applicability. Importantly, the editors argue that phenomenology can be seen as a contrast to other, dominant paradigms of film theory, or as “being descriptive rather than explicative, diachronic rather than synchronic, immersive rather than distanced and objective, focused on expression and not on communication, synthetic and not analytic” (24). Especially when related to studies of genre film, phenomenology serves as a useful and needed counterpoint to traditional film theory and criticism. As noted above, much of the scholarship completed on the action film has taken a pointedly semiotic approach, where spectacle, narrative simplicity, and movement only serve to reinforce the image or the film as a sign of cultural, societal, or national sentiment. And whereas this scholarship cogently demonstrates the somewhat banal marketing imperatives and political glibness of the action film production machine – notably in Hollywood, but also elsewhere – as well as the need to appeal to a general, even standardized audience, it often neglects the lived experience of watching these films and the fundamental complexity of audience participation. As the editors again note, “the analysis of film reception and the experience of the film spectator […] is indeed almost unanimously considered to be the key issue of film phenomenology” (26). As a theoretical approach to cinema, film phenomenologists wonder about the human subject and posit that the film experience itself must be as
diverse and varied as the audience who watches, and therefore never predominantly about only one aspect.

As an expanding research paradigm, phenomenology is a big tent. This alone is reason enough to include the likes of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Mikel Dufrenne, and Jean-Luc Marion – the four main phenomenological theorists of my research, who will be described in more detail in subsequent chapters or in this introduction – all of whom are considered phenomenologists if not strictly film phenomenologists or even just limited to phenomenology. And despite the diversity in thought that each phenomenologist’s work entails, from Merleau-Ponty’s focus on embodied perception to Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology and the use of narrative to make sense of the world, or from Mikel Dufrenne’s aesthetic phenomenology and determinations of art to Jean-Luc Marion’s saturated phenomena and excess, each theorist contributes a significant insight into not only the action cinema but also my research on said cinema. Moreover, “la phénoménologie n’est ni une école ni une doctrine philosophique mais une nouvelle méthode pour philosopher, riche de multiples possibilités originales,” as the editors Pascal Dupond and Laurent Cournarie note in the Avant-propos to Phénoménologie: Un Siècle de philosophie (4). In other words, the variations on phenomenology matter more than a strict adherence to a narrow definition of phenomenology; or, more succinctly, the experience is as important as the interpretation of it.

21 There are perhaps further distinctions to be made between existential phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology, but the open access to film phenomenology granted by Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich’s article makes this distinction less pertinent for an analysis of cinema.
Un phénomène saturé\textsuperscript{22}

With the expanded notion of phenomenology and a phenomenology of film in mind, we must now reconcile this phenomenological approach with the growing dissemination and popularity of the action cinema. In a certain sense, and based on Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of givenness as developed in his *De surcroît: Études sur les phénomènes saturés* (2001), the action cinema itself may be read as a phenomenological act, complete with its stated intentions and its intuitions that reach beyond the object itself to create an excess of experience. To elaborate by way of analogy, Marion describes a lecture hall where he will eventually give a talk, and he understands that this entity existed before he arrived and will continue to exist after he has departed:

Car, en tant que toujours déjà là, disponible à notre entrée et notre usage,
cette salle s’impose à nous comme préalable à nous, étant sans nous, quoique pour nous, qui donc surgit à notre vue comme un fait inattendu, imprévisible, venant d’un passé incontrôlable. (37-38)

The hall provides a framework upon which, according to Marion, an idea “s’impose à moi en m’apparaissant; j’y entre moins qu’[il] ne m’advient de [lui]-même, m’englobe et m’en impose” (38). In other words, the definitional description of a lecture hall is perhaps limited in the language of the word, but the meaning or the sense of the space (and the word) gives so much that a singular experience of it could never suffice. And in a certain sense, this language game works for film genre descriptors as well, where monikers such

\textsuperscript{22} The first use of this term can be found in Jean-Luc Marion’s chapter in *Phénoménologie et théologie*, “Le phénomène saturé”.

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as action, horror, melodrama, or thriller denote expectations but not necessarily limitations as to what will be experienced when watching the genre film.

Marion continues his analysis by describing the event that will take place in his hypothetical lecture hall, an event that has been planned and organized and arranged according to the demands of the university, but that will never be planned or organized or arranged in exactly the same way ever again (38-39). Not that, whatever the event may be, it could not be attempted again, or even nominally repeated, but it would never be the exact same event. Moreover, this event extends beyond the confines of the physical space and into an emotional or psychological space, “où ce qui advient ne sont ni les murs et les pierres, ni les assistants, ni les orateurs, mais l’impalpable événement, dont leur parole va s’emparer, pour le faire comprendre ou pour le gâter” (38). The event’s unique existence, how it will play out for the evening, is unforeseeable and unpredictable, as well as inimitable. The event is thus unique not only because it gives a singular experience that can never be repeated in exactly the same way – and because of the way it transpires when being experienced – but also because it is different for every person who experiences it. Thus again, there is a saturation of meaning at this experiential level that is potentially infinite.

Marion concludes by hypothesizing the reaction of a spectator to the event and their ability to eventually recollect what occurred. Much like the unpredictability and abundance of the first two descriptions, this third act would need to be completely reducible to a singular event, agreed upon by all who were present, in order to be comprehensive for all parties involved. This is an impossibility, since it would be
necessary to “expliquer ce que je dis et ce que je veux dire, d’où je le dis, à partir de quels présupposés, de quelles lectures, de quels problèmes personnels et spirituels” (39). And that is only the personal problem that the individual spectator must contend with. The rest of the audience also must be considered: “Il faudrait aussi décrire les motivations de chaque auditeur, ses attentes, ses déceptions, ses accords tus et dits, des désaccords masqués en silence ou exagérés par la polémique” (39). All spectators bring something intangible and almost indescribable to the experience, and this variability once again leads to an abundance of experience and activity. That is, another level of expansive and excessive experience becomes part of the meaning of the event. Thus, an absolute description of the experience of the event is impossible because the experiences themselves are so saturated with phenomena; and this excess still exists despite attempts to categorize and accurately predict the event, for instance with action films in the form of genre labeling or even simply the cinema itself.

As an extrapolation of Marion’s ideas, we can extend his lecture hall analogy to the action cinema and a spectator’s response: as a category for classification purposes, a national cinema is irreducible to just its clearest borders (location, language, stars or icons) because not only have these boundaries been developed from the past, but they are still in the middle of being developed, and therefore contain elements that are in flux; the films themselves contain elements that can be predicted and planned, those defined by a genre or a cinema movement, for example, but which can never be completely reduced because of the variety within the films and throughout the classification system; and finally, a spectator’s own tendencies, emotions, thoughts and sentiments, which are
specific and contingent on any myriad factors that can also never be completely reduced to a singular definition. In all, the act of even just experiencing a film is irreducible to its contiguous parts, as it contains any number of factors that are inconsistent and variable. Thus the experience of the event, the description of the event, and the spectator itself is intrinsically saturated with an excess of phenomena.

And if these three levels are already saturated with elements that are irreducible, then it stands to reason that the films themselves will also be saturated with such a phenomenological force. Action cinema does indeed play with saturated images, but the impending result is less an inundation of sensory experiences that are incomprehensible or inconceivable than a revelation of basic elements that connect most human beings. Film phenomenology thus provides a pathway through which experience does not necessarily result in a complete re-thinking of existence in the world, as Gilles Deleuze would have it when describing modern cinema’s break with the sensory-motor schema.23 Rather, the excessive phenomena provide a moment to appreciate the foundational elements of both cinema and human existence, those which have existed and will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. This takes the form of three distinct yet connected experiences: the grandiosity of the spectacle that functions to draw attention to the primacy of vision and the visual experience in cinema; the simplicity and clarity of the narrative as it moves from conflict to resolution, and the profundity of story as forming a worldview; and the aesthetically-pleasing motion of the human form on screen, as well as the appropriate cinematographic movements (quick editing, high- and low-

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23See Gilles Deleuze’s Cinéma 2: L’Image-temps, and in particular his chapter “La Pensée et le cinéma”.

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angle shots, close-ups and zooms) that overemphasize the motion of the generic form. As we will see through the films in my corpus, when these elements are combined, the action film creates a sensation in a spectator that acknowledges these seemingly basic components and simultaneously extends beyond them to provide a philosophical and phenomenological understanding of existence.

In the helpful *Interpreting Excess: Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena, and Hermeneutics*, Shane Mackinlay summarizes the crux of Jean-Luc Marion’s argument as such: “A saturated phenomenon is one that cannot be wholly contained within concepts that can be grasped by our understanding. It gives so much intuition that there is always an excess left over, which is beyond conceptualization. Thus, it is saturated with intuition” (1). Mackinlay then clarifies the ideas of Marion further, stating that for Marion, “these phenomena give so much intuition that they exceed any concepts or limiting horizons that a constituting subject might attempt to impose on them” (11). Marion himself asked a similar question when he first proposed the idea of a “phénomène saturé”:

_Au phénomène toujours supposé pauvre en intuition, ne peut-on pas opposé un phénomène saturé d’intuition? Au phénomène que caractérisent le plus souvent un défaut d’intuition, donc une déception de la visée d’intention et, exceptionnellement, l’égalité entre intuition et intention, pourquoi ne répondrait pas la possibilité d’un phénomène où l’intuition donnerait plus, voire démesurément plus, que l’intention n’aurait jamais visé, ni prévu? (Phénomène saturé 102-103)._
The idea of going beyond the limits of phenomenological intention and into the realm of “immeasurably” excessive intuition is at the heart of Marion’s saturated phenomena, and provides fertile ground for all cinematic research.

What the action cinema provides is an experience that is properly phenomenological because it reveals a fundamental feature of experience: a signaling toward something experienced, even if not explicitly showing or stating what that experience may be – although genre, national cinemas, and even stars are an attempt to delineate categories and somewhat control audience expectations. For instance, in the case of action films, the genre signals toward “movement,” which conceptually all humans can understand, but which loses clarity when the phenomenological reduction is implemented to explain exactly how movement works. Perhaps the intentional aim of any spectator is simply to watch a film and enjoy it, but the action film becomes so saturated with an extremity of spectacle, or narrative, or movement, or even violence, that a spectator is forced to rethink his or her intentional aim of passivity and distracted entertainment and in turn actively engages with the text on screen. This engagement of course takes the position of either a wondrous perceptive act, or a relatable narrative story arc, or simple corporeal movement despite being static in a chair or theatre.

To clarify Marion’s idea of saturated phenomena and its relation to cinema, I turn to a recent entry in the growing annals of film phenomenology: Alain Bonfand’s *Le Cinéma saturé* (2007). Bonfand’s text is a relatively engaging read that attempts to situate the appearance of paintings – and artwork in general – in the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Jean-Luc Godard, Akira Kurosawa, and Michelangelo Antonioni. Relying on an open but
appealing interpretation of Jean-Luc Marion, Bonfand states his project as a search for “ce qui est intentionnel dans le cinéma, et ce qui est pour moi l’essence du cinéma, c’est-à-dire la liberté d’une surinterprétation, de sa puissance anticipatrice, ce qui en somme sollicite l’intuition et le pouvoir des analogies” (8). By engaging with these films and their excessive phenomena, Bonfand contends that they “poussent effectivement le cinéma à sa limite” (10), whether through the abundance of analogy in Hitchcock’s Rear Window where “chaque fenêtre ouvre à un film dans le film, et les cadres des fenêtres sont des écrans simultanés” and creates an “instant prégnant” that overwhelm and transcends the screen (40-41); or the cinema of John Ford that Bonfand describes as a search to “cadrer ce qui se refuse au cadre, l’immensité en premier lieu,” the vastness of Fordian landscapes and the movement within them being signals for the sublime (85-86). In these cases and others, Bonfand clearly demonstrates how certain cinematic images and sequences can evoke an intuitive interpretation of existence, and therefore be perceived as philosophical films rather than just entertainment. Yet it is entirely possible that many other films, knowingly or unknowingly, are creating these moments of excessive intuition that at first go unnoticed. Ultimately, Bonfand’s text opens the gates for an increased extrapolation of phenomenological ideas into the world of cinematic experience.

And furthermore, Bonfand’s text can help lead us to a clearer understanding of the type of spectator who may be attracted to the cinema in general, and the action cinema in particular. As the title of my dissertation suggests, les sensations fortes are those thrills

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24 It is no wonder that he spends the majority of his analysis on the films of Jean-Luc Godard.
that are typically found in extreme experiences, such as riding a rollercoaster, parachuting from an airplane, mountain climbing, or any other excessive experience too numerous to list. Action cinema can provide an experience that is thrilling because of its excessiveness, because of its saturated phenomena, which then allows a spectator to philosophically reflect on the presence of phenomena in his or her life. This kind of excessive cinema is not without its precursors. In a still fascinating article written in 1991 and titled “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Linda Williams categorizes the “body genres” of horror, women’s film, and pornography as giving the spectator a “sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion” (5). She adds that “the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen,” and further clarifies how each genre’s success could potentially be measured through a bodily response: “whether the spectator at the porn film actually orgasms, whether the spectator at the horror film actually shudders in fear, whether the spectator of the melodrama actually dissolves in tears” (4-5). Yet she concludes by questioning whether “a simple mimicry of the sensation exhibited on the screen” is the desired outcome of these genres, and leaves open the possibility of a development of a different type of understanding for these body genres (12).

For the action film, Jane Stadler’s work on neurophenomenology and action blockbusters is a contemporary example of trying to understand a spectator’s reaction to film. In “Experiential Realism and Motion Pictures: A Neurophenomenological Approach,” Stadler agrees that “cinema can enable audiences to share the sensory, motile, emotional, and introspective experiences of screen characters,” but then
challenges the predominant idea that this appears only in “naturalistic or representational realism,” and wants to disentangle “experiential realism” from being just a subset of the former categories (440-41). As a phenomenological experience, Stadler cogently argues for “the significance of sound and motion [in the blockbuster film] in fostering a sense of experiential realism,” and concludes that “a phenomenological understanding of spectatorship has significant implications for cinema studies” because it “prompts a revaluation of ideas about cinematic realism and the affective charge of film genres that convey the experiential thrill of motion and emotion” (459). For the purposes of my research, the sensational experience of a thrill or a sensation forte is present in the action cinema and is a fundamental element of its appeal for audiences. Moreover, it is explained phenomenologically by using Jean-Luc Marion’s idea of saturated phenomena, where the givenness of excess is so overwhelming that a spectator has no choice but to give an affective response to the sensation on the screen. And furthermore, this affective experience does not have to be limited to character identification, to “emulating human movements, expressions, and gestures” since the camera, the narrative, and the physical movement of the bodies on screen are often (or at least can be) disconnected from one or another specific character (461). Thus, any spectator attracted to the action cinema is necessarily attracted to thrills and sensations and excitement, in the same manner that other film genres attract spectators through a different but equal affected response.

And this then brings us to an understanding of the action cinema that typically goes without saying: that is, the genre’s approach to fun. Fun is not exclusive to or exclusive of the action cinema, since it is a quintessential element of many cinema genre
forms. And Daniel Frampton’s *Filmosophy* opens with a simple statement arguing that he is “quite happy to admit that going to the cinema can be a classic wish for escape – a daydream drug. The expectation as you arrive and take your seat is part of the pleasure: it is an expectation of enjoyment, of gaining knowledge, of aesthetic rejuvenation, of spectacle and forgetting” (2). Film inevitably leads to a further comprehension of life and philosophy, but the fundamental escapist fantasy seems to never go away. Thus, there is a notion of enjoyment in watching the action spectacle on a film screen that exceeds the scholarly discourse surrounding the action genre, without necessarily superseding the latter’s meaning. What the action cinema can offer is not only the thrill of saturated phenomena and excess, but also an experience of fun for a spectator who may just want a simple yet enjoyable experience.

**Research corpus**

Leaning on film phenomenology and a further development of the action genre, the chapters in this dissertation will each address a saturated phenomenon of experience that manifests in the action film. The first chapter presents the cinema of Luc Besson, famed French director who is known around the world for his science-fiction action films, recently filmed almost exclusively in English. Starting with his earliest films in the 1980s and using the phenomenology of embodied perception of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I will demonstrate how the images in a Besson film transcend the relative simplicity of his narratives, and bring the spectacle of vision to bear on the film viewing audience. The excessiveness of this visual experience emphasizes vision as an everyday phenomenon
that is often forgotten, if not taken for granted by those who have access to it. The spectacular nature of Besson’s films lends credibility to the idea that vision is so intuitive that we almost forget how much we rely on it.

The second chapter will address a grouping of films that are connected through a specific narrative trend, and how narrative can be used to construct a worldview. Using another phenomenologist, Paul Ricoeur, and his theory of narrative as a hermeneutic for human comprehension of the world, the chapter addresses a curious French hybrid, the action-heritage film, and how it presages and privileges story for a spectator. These specific French action films take the trope-filled narrative tendencies of action cinema and filter them through the lens of heritage cinema, resulting in a more thorough apprehension of how we create our lives, how we define our existence, and how we interact with the world surrounding us.

The final chapter argues for one more fundamental aspect of human existence: movement. The body has become a site of importance for film analysis, yet like vision and story creation, a deeper understanding of human existence and experience is based simply on corporeal movement. The French action film takes an exaggerated bodily movement and puts it on display for a spectator, and through the aesthetic presentation of fluidity, renders palpable the primacy of gestures and motion. Relying once again on a phenomenologist, the chapter presents Mikel Dufrenne’s aesthetic experience of bodily activity in art as mimicking a spectator’s own experience living in the world. The films magnify movement and bodily distinctions to such a degree that a spectator is forced to return to his or her own body and its intuitive interaction with the world. The saturation
of movement and the body exerts an act of self-recognition that once again brings meaning to the cinematic experience.

By combining these three elements – visual perception, story-telling, and body movement – into the filmic medium, action films succeed in overwhelming a spectator through experience, and saturating the screen with such intuitive phenomena that interpretation becomes overshadowed in favor of the lived moment. These *sensations fortes*, the thrills that are experienced from the point of view of a spectator, make the action film a formidable addition to French cinematic history, and anticipates the fundamental preeminence of human experience for the cinema.
Chapter 1: Luc Besson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the action spectacle

Nous voyons les choses mêmes, le monde est cela que nous voyons: des formules de ce genre expriment une foi qui est commune à l’homme naturel et au philosophe dès qu’il ouvre les yeux, elles renvoient à une assise profonde d’« opinions » muettes impliquées dans notre vie.
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*

Le fait de recourir à cette forme d’art, le cinéma, et non pas à la solitude de la littérature, m’a peut-être permis de surmonter mes difficultés à m’insérer dans la réalité. On dit que je reflète le goût pour les clips vidéo et la B.D. On dit aussi que je viens de la publicité, ce qui est faux. Mes humeurs, ma façon de percevoir la vie et la violence sont celles de ma génération, et j’écris en harmonie avec mon temps, en commençant à vieillir.
- Luc Besson, interview from Giraldi’s *Luc Besson*.

As briefly outlined in the introduction, a French action film must deal with a wide variety of factors that both limit its artistry and yet expand its cultural and economic influence. Variations in French cinematic production, as well as the types of films enjoyed by a French cinema-going public, demonstrate that diversity of product is at the forefront of French cinema. In 2014, France’s highest-grossing films included *Lucy* by Luc Besson, *Brick Mansions* by Camille Delamarre, *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon Dieu?* by Philippe de Chauveron, *Miniscule – La Vallée des fourmis perdues* by Thomas Szabo and Hélène Giraud, *Nymphomaniac* by Lars von Trier, and *Belle et Sébastien* by Nicolas Vanier. These are not completely French-based productions, as all of the aforementioned
films are co-productions with French companies such as Gaumont, EuropaCorp, or Entre Chien et Loup, among others. But concerns about the changing production habits of French cinema, and France’s need for larger budgets in order to maintain its competition with Hollywood cinema, do not completely explain what is happening within the films themselves. This chapter, therefore, will deal with an aesthetic and stylistic approach to French action cinema that incorporates the perceptive experience of the film, an approach that does not attempt to understand why these films are popular on a massive scale, but rather discusses the specific cinematic encounter of these films by a spectator, using the philosophy of phenomenology.

Critics and scholars who study genre cinema for both academic journals and popular presses tend to focus on how genre films that possess the action moniker are supposed to work for audiences. Action films are responsible for following generic guidelines, where the heroic narrative leads a spectator through predictable obstacles and an expected conclusion. Variation comes in the form of ever-more-spectacular stunts, literally larger-than-life explosions, and dizzying special effects which continue to attract audiences just to see what can blow up. If the interest in action cinema were limited to production standards and economic viability, then these specific elements of the action genre would only be secondary concerns. However, the spectacle of the action film is equally important for these films, and must be considered as part of the general appeal for action cinema. This does not deny the increasing need for larger production budgets to create ever-larger spectacles, but it acknowledges that there is more to film than a budget, and it contends that a spectator is more interested in the experience of the film than the
cost to make it. Audiences keep returning to action films because they enjoy the same stories told with a new, often visually-spectacular twist. It is arguably more fruitful, then, to look at the spectacle within the action film itself as the main reason for repeated viewings, sequels, and recurrences. Film economics and generic production are important, as these almost certainly guarantee a return on investment through marketing and sales – but that guarantee is still founded on audience participation and dissemination, therefore making it a reciprocal agreement. Action films tend to break with tradition in many other respects – cinematography, for instance, or digital effects – and demonstrate that generic cinema is advancing in other ways that have less to do with economics and more to do with the spectacular.

Genre film analysis thus needs to further address what drives an audience to continually derive pleasure from a predictable and generic formula; or more importantly, how the surrounding cinematic techniques – lighting, camera movements, sounds and music, or even costumes – change while the narrative supposedly stagnates. If we presume that the story remains unchanged, the stars repeat frequently enough, production and marketing follow patterns that guarantee economic success, and character development is as shallow as ever, then what inspires audiences to keep going back for more must be the spectacular elements that are on display. And the reason that these various cinematic techniques continue to “work” for production purposes and also audience desires is due to the phenomenology of an action film.

With these ideas of repetition and predictability in mind, the epigraphs above from two very different representatives of French culture must be seen in a certain
context. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, famed phenomenologist, the ideas of seeing and perceiving are essential for an interpretation of the world. For him, existence revolves around a conception of the visual that is world-affirming, which allows for an interpretation of cinema that is all about perception. “Quand je perçois, je ne pense pas le monde,” he states in his *Sens et non-sens*, “il s’organise devant moi” (64). Arguably, this forms the foundation of the action aesthetic, and could serve as a base structure for interpreting all of cinema. That is, the visual aspect that dominates the medium has its own identity, its own embodiment, which answers to different standards than economic or narrative. For film phenomenology and action films, the grandiosity of the explosion matters, the speed of the car chase is essential, the struggle in the hand-to-hand combat scene is vital, the physicality of the stunts is necessary. The audience must perceive the “action” world for what it is: visually spectacular.

Luc Besson has had a different experience with his personal perception of his own films and his home country’s acceptance of them in the pantheon of French cinema. Besson has not by any measure been rejected by film critics or audiences, but rather he insists on highlighting that his films follow his vision of the world. As the epigraph above attests, Besson has the tendency to reject outright the criticisms of others and to find justification in his own view of filmmaking. He typically rejects requests for interviews, and usually only conducts them for the purposes of marketing his films. As a result, the film industry in France somewhat reluctantly works with his caprices and demands when they need to, and then disregards Besson as simply a Hollywood-type producer, or just as
an enigma who has yet to be decoded, when they do not. In any case, what Besson’s intransigence toward the media demonstrates is that his films can speak for themselves, without the help of his authorial interpretation, critical voices, or economic players. The visual text is again at the forefront.

And so we arrive at the crux of this chapter on phenomenology and film, and how these concepts relate to the French action aesthetic as seen through the films of Luc Besson. Besson’s spectacular visuals as well as his visual spectacles have continued to develop throughout his career, and each new film brings a new interpretation of the action genre from within a French context. Even though Besson’s early films are not typically considered part of the action genre – films such as Le Dernier combat (1983), Subway (1985), or Le Grand bleu (1988) – these films formed the foundation of Besson’s eventual action approach, as seen in Nikita (1990), Léon: The Professional (1994), The Fifth Element (1997), and most recently in Lucy (2014), and audiences can see the flourishing of visually-stunning action tropes by returning to these first films. By leaning on the development of Besson’s later films through his earlier work, and addressing the phenomenology of the visual spectacle through the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I will demonstrate how Luc Besson has developed the idea of an action film in French cinema, and how this visual aesthetic helps determine the action film experience for a French and international audience.

25 Again, Besson rarely gives interviews, and claims to only do them for the purposes of promoting his films. Even biographers are rejected from his world, as the most recent one, Luc Besson: L’homme qui voulait être aimé. La biographie non autorisée, written by Geoffrey Le Guilcher, proves. In the unauthorized biography, Le Guilcher dwells on Besson’s intransigence and justifies his own approach: “On peut penser que tout travail sur Luc se trouve faussé par cette inaccessibilité. En réalité, c’est précisément cette porte close qui rend inévitable l’effraction” (14).
Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and the spirit of cinema

Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s vigorous study of sight and perception Le Visible et l’invisible marks the primacy of vision and its correspondence with the body as a unifying concept for existence. This visual field is persistently invaded by other visualizing persons and even objects, yet the body remains naturally comfortable and adaptive to these changes. Merleau-Ponty thus analyzes this phenomenon and concludes that the act of perception is a culmination of two different spheres of interpretation – the mind and the body – and that this coherence defines how humans adapt to the world. In fact, Merleau-Ponty rejects the Cartesian idea that the mind and the body are separate, and much of his work is aimed at breaking the traditional Cartesian dualism. His phenomenology of perception presents vision as appearing before interpretation, before the cognitive processing of a sensory event, and thus full of “perceptual complexity”. Contemporary film theorists and phenomenologists have taken Merleau-Ponty’s ideas and updated them from a haptic and tactile perspective, and have given a lot of emphasis to the embodied experience of the film itself, the camera, and a spectator. From Jennifer M. Barker’s The Tactile Eye (2009) and Martine Beugnet’s Cinema and Sensation (2007), to Laura Marks’ Skin of the Film (2000) and Jenny Chamarette’s Phenomenology and the future of film (2012), Merleau-Ponty plays an essential role in each scholar’s understanding of film phenomena. Each author has a different outlook on haptic cinema and perception, and each will be useful for my analysis of Luc Besson; but it also seems
prudent to return to the source, to Merleau-Ponty’s own writings, as a way to comprehend phenomenology from the beginning and its eventual interaction with film. This does not mean that the approach to film phenomenology is exhausted simply by addressing Merleau-Ponty and contemporary scholarship on his work, but rather to identify Merleau-Ponty – as many film phenomenologists have done before me – as an accessible philosopher and as a preferred theorist for a perceptive experience of cinema.27

The idea of cinema as the quintessential medium to reveal the connection between the body and perception is not immediately evident in Merleau-Ponty’s work. Except for one key essay written about cinema, “Le Cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie,” first given as a lecture and then reprinted in Sens et non-sens, Merleau-Ponty barely touches on the medium. Whether he would have developed further his ideas about cinema later in life or not, his vast body of work coincides with contemporary developments in the cinematic experience. Born in 1908, Merleau-Ponty was heavily influenced by the divide between psychology and philosophy that drove critical inquiry at the turn of the century. In simple terms, and according to Ted Toadvine, the problem that Merleau-Ponty articulated was the need, on behalf of philosophers and psychologists (generally speaking), to reduce a phenomenological experience – something as simple as the perception of a light – to a causal relationship (“Maurice Merleau-Ponty”).28 A very basic experience is thus quantified and qualified to be derived from an analytic starting point, where the

27 A complete history of phenomenology would of course start with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, before moving on to Jean-Paul Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, to name only a few. For the purposes of film phenomenology, however, Merleau-Ponty plays a significant role.

28 For a brief biography of Merleau-Ponty and its connection to his works, see The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s entry “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” written by Ted Toadvine.
combination of disparate elements which seemingly have distinct beginnings leads to a culmination of experience. This critical approach to psychology is seen in Merleau-Ponty’s early work *La Structure du comportement*, where he takes aim at the oversimplified cognitive approach to visual perception that deconstructs every act into a conglomeration of processes, resulting in sense being made of the world through the simple addition of bodily functions. By these standards, every human being would have the exact same reaction when perceiving the same visual stimulus. Merleau-Ponty finds this assumption absurd.

[Le sujet] vit dans un univers d’expérience, dans un milieu neutre à l’égard des distinctions substantielles entre l’organisme, la pensée et l’étendue, dans un commerce direct avec les êtres, les choses et son propre corps. L’ego, comme centre d’où rayonnent ses intentions, le corps qui les porte, les êtres et les choses auxquels elles s’adressent ne sont pas confondus: mais ce ne sont que trois secteurs d’un champ unique. (204)

The multiple elements that make up any experience may be reducible to objects, thoughts, personality or ego, or any number of different categorizations. But the experience itself consists of, to put it simply, a holistic sensation that is difficult to quantify. This unique experience is at once comparable and relative, similar yet distinct, universal but individualized.

Merleau-Ponty would continue to challenge this tendency in psychology and even philosophy throughout the rest of his works. In his short essay “Le Cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie,” Merleau-Ponty reiterated this thought, arguing that “Ma perception n’est
donc pas une somme de données visuelles, tactiles, auditives, je perçois d’une manière indivise avec mon être total, je saisie une structure unique de la chose, une unique manière d’exister qui parle à la fois à tous mes sens” (*Sens* 101). Thus he envisioned the cinema as a unique medium capable of illustrating his philosophy:

Le sens du film est incorporé à son rythme comme les sens d’un geste est immédiatement lisible dans le geste, et le film ne veut rien dire que lui-même. […] C’est le bonheur de l’art de montrer comment quelque chose se met à signifier, non par allusion à des idées déjà formées et acquises, mais par l’arrangement temporel ou spatial des éléments. Un film signifie comme nous avons vu plus haut qu’une chose signifie : l’un et l’autre ne parlent pas à un entendement séparé, mais s’adressent à notre pouvoir de déchiffrer tacitement le monde ou les hommes et de coexister avec eux. (103)

Merleau-Ponty was quick to perceive that the cinema rendered in a visual medium that which humans experience on a daily basis, but which we too simply forget because our bodies are naturally attuned to this perceptive act. He was also quick to realize that, by default, this process was bound to change as generations progressed. “Si donc la philosophie et le cinéma sont d’accord, si la réflexion et le travail technique vont dans le même sens, c’est parce que le philosophe et le cinéaste ont en commun une certaine manière d’être, une certaine vue du monde qui est celle d’une génération” (106). As an adaptable and adaptive medium, cinema was always already a sign that the world – and a human’s subsequent understanding of it – changes.
But this was by no means the end of his expansive understanding of perception. In a fascinating example demonstrating the fluidity of perception, he compares two plates, equally illuminated by window light, and perceives that they are of the same color. When a sheet is draped in front of the perceiver’s eyes, however, and a hole punctures the sheet which allows for a blocked view of the plates, the color of one remains white while the other takes on a gray hue due to the play of light from the window and against the sheet.
Si nous regardons deux assiettes inégalement éclairées, elles nous paraissent également blanches et inégalement éclairées tant que le faisceau de lumière qui vient de la fenêtre figure dans notre champ visuel. Si, au contraire, nous observons les mêmes assiettes à travers un écran percé d'un trou, aussitôt l'une d'elles nous paraît grise et l'autre blanche, et même si nous savons que ce n'est là qu'un effet d'éclairage, aucune analyse intellectuelle des apparences ne vous fera voir la vraie couleur des deux assiettes. La permanence des couleurs et des objets n'est donc pas construite par l'intelligence, mais saisie par le regard en tant qu'il épouse ou adopte l'organisation du champ visuel. Quand nous allumons à la tombée du jour, la lumière électrique nous paraît d'abord jaune, un moment plus tard elle tend à perdre toute couleur définie, et corrélativement les objets, qui d'abord étaient sensiblement modifiés dans leur couleur, reprennent un aspect comparable à celui qu'ils ont pendant la journée. Les objets et l'éclairage forment un système qui tend vers une certaine constance et vers un certain niveau stable, non par l'opération de l'intelligence, mais par la configuration même du champ. (103-04)

Analytically speaking, the perceiver realizes that this is simply a trick of the lighting. The perceiver’s mind reminds itself that the plates are the same color, regardless of the perceptive color differences. But this knowledge, however profound, does not change the visualization of the different colors of the plates. Instead, that phenomenological
experience is a fact of perception, a conglomeration of diverse instances that come together to form a stable consistency in the perceptive act.

For contemporary cinema, not to mention contemporary cinematic viewing practices, this simple thought experiment has profound effects. Perception is the first experience, the beginning of understanding, and analysis derives from this perceptive act. It is easy to see how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can affect the contemporary spectator who chooses to see a film in a packed theater for a blockbuster opening weekend or on a small screen in the privacy of one’s home, because the physical experience plays a role in the experience of the film at every moment. Perception thus opens the ability for an excessive experience that exists in the spectacle of cinema itself, and which goes beyond any analytical constraints for a specific, universal meaning.

With this in mind, analysis of the French action film can focus on the congruence of spectacular elements (chase scenes, acrobatics, special and digital effects) at the visual or perceptual level and from a technical viewpoint. The resulting conclusion can hypothesize a state of being or becoming for a French film audience who may be drawn to the spectacle of an action film. The cinema obviously plays a vital role in the portrayal of human emotion and in the process of expressing and symbolizing a state of being in the world. Blockbuster films are thus no less expressive in their signification than any other genre film or art film or even documentary, although they may be more exaggerated. They are part of a generational approach to cinema, as Besson’s epigraph

29 Viewing practices are rapidly changing and this is unfortunately not the space to analyze how they are affecting spectatorship. For an interesting look at how all of this is influencing contemporary society, see Henry Jenkin’s Convergence Culture, New York University Press, 2006.
implied, where production standards are at times overrun by economic concerns. However, these films still belong in the conversation surrounding a general philosophy of cinema. It therefore becomes integral to look at the effect that increased spectacle has on film at the moment of perception.

**The visual appeal of narrative**

Focusing on what is in the films, on the specific elements that constitute the works of Luc Besson, will help clarify what makes him the prototype for contemporary French action cinema, and exactly how he achieved this. The fairy tale history of Luc Besson, beginning with his preference for nature and diving before suffering an accident, followed by his precocious self-integration onto the sets of films in order to learn, and finally with his learning first and foremost the cinematographic techniques necessary to become a filmmaker, is well documented.\(^30\) I will thus focus on answering a non-biographical question: how does Besson help develop a contemporary action cinema aesthetic that ostensibly rejects the narrative profundity that “French” cinema typically offers, and what about his spectacular visual approach to cinema reveals more than initially seems? That is, how do these films play with the action spectacle to offer more than what is commonly considered part of a French film history and aesthetic?

A look at Besson’s past films can give us a deeper insight into where this visual spectacle started, and where it may be headed in the future. Speaking generally about

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\(^30\) For a thorough treatment of Luc Besson’s early life and its influence on his later choices, see either Susan Hayward’s *Luc Besson*, Massimo Giraldi’s *Luc Besson*, or any of the trade books that Besson himself wrote about the production and creation of his films.
film, incessant and even uncontrollable variation in the spectacle might be seen as destabilizing; but in the cinematic world of action, it is the desired effect. Indeed, many aspects of the action film try to emphasize this destabilization, from the quick editing cuts to a shaky camera, differences in spatial composition between long shots and close-ups, even the continuity of scenes that appear as clunky transitions from action to exposition. The visual excess, not just in the presentation of what is on the screen, but also in the manner that it is presented, leads a spectator to be overwhelmed by sight. As such, a spectator is forced to reckon with this saturation and realizes that spectacular visuals bring attention to the simplicity of perception as an everyday act. Sensations of excitement, suspense, hopefulness, heroism, fear, wonder, and amazement are perceived phenomenologically in the action cinema.

Luc Besson’s first full-length film, *Le Dernier combat* (1983), begins the presentation of disparate yet spectacular elements that draw a spectator’s attention to the visual spectacle. *Le Dernier combat* is a considerable achievement in the career of Besson, containing narrative elements that are stripped down – characters’ names are as easy as “The Man,” “The Doctor,” “The Brute” – as well as visual elements that are denuded – the image itself is stripped of color, filmed in black and white. The film presents a dystopian story that is relatively easy to decipher, and there is not any dialogue because the film takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where humans have lost the ability to speak.31

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31 In this case, the narrative can be seen as determining the lack of dialogue.
The film follows “The Man,” played by Pierre Jolivet, as he struggles to survive in a wasteland and searches for sustenance and companionship. He begins on the outskirts of a powerful gang that uses the old sewer systems to find trinkets and water, and eventually is forced to leave as the gang discovers that “The Man” has been pilfering their horded objects in order to build an airplane. As Jolivet makes his escape and begins his own quest for water and food in an unfriendly environment, we meet a doctor (Jean Bouise) who has been hiding in an abandoned office building, trying to avoid an attack by a brute (Jean Reno) who wants nothing more than to kill everyone. Once we realize that the doctor’s motivations for hiding are driven by his desire to repopulate this land – and that the doctor is holding captive the last woman potentially alive – we explicitly understand his reluctance through the narrative arc. Pierre Jolivet, having arrived by chance into this ongoing struggle, is befriended by the doctor and is given access to the woman in the hope that he and she will bear offspring and repopulate the world. Jean Reno is persistent, however, and eventually breaks into the building, impaling the woman and attacking the Man before Jolivet is able to defeat the Brute. Afterward, our hero returns to where he started and takes control over the gang that had been chasing him, and the film ends when he fortunately finds another woman hidden in an abandoned room.

The narrative about the search for Woman among a world of brutish and combative men is the stuff of adolescent fantasies, or perhaps nightmares. And while Le Dernier combat was critically-acclaimed at the time of its release, Luc Besson’s narratives have not really developed that much. What has been missing from this
discussion, though, is how this film presaged the Bessonian move toward perceptual exaggeration, where the visual experience of the film became more important than narrative content, therefore somewhat avoiding spectator and critical judgements. By drawing attention to the spectacle on display, and presenting an often facile narrative, action cinema attracts audiences with the appeal to the cinematic experience, to a vision of action feats that provides a phenomenal experience. Besson’s instinct for spectacular cinema thus fits well with the action genre.

Emphasizing sensation in cinema is not a new approach, but it rarely figures into discussions on genre cinema and blockbuster films. In a fascinating treatise on sensation in cinema titled, appropriately enough, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, Martine Beugnet delineates the standards of haptic cinema:

Beyond the needs of narrative clarity, the cinema of sensation thus plays on the material qualities of the medium to construct a space that encourages a relation of intimacy or proximity with the object of the gaze, privileging primary identification with the film as event, rather than identification with characters caught in plot developments. The effect is an unsettling of the conventional vision-knowledge-mastery paradigm, in favour of a relation where a spectator may surrender, at least partly, a sense of visual control for the possibility of a sensuous encounter with the film – where the subject affectively yields into its object. (68)

Beugnet’s “sensuous encounter” seems an unlikely description of the spectacle in an action film, where an explosion or a car chase might take a spectator on a thrilling ride
that for the moment seems like a distraction from the narrative trajectory. However, visual spectacle and its associated qualities – amazement, wonderment, and excitement – are concepts that are experientially felt and that extend beyond the world of the film.

Moreover, cinema and film theory have a long history with an idea of “attractions,” developed by Tom Gunning in relation to early cinema. “Attractions could be opposed to narrative construction in a number of ways,” writes Tom Gunning.

First, attractions address the viewer directly, soliciting attention and curiosity through acts of display. As moments of spectacle, their purpose lies in the attention they draw to themselves, rather than in developing the basic donnees [sic] of narrative: characterization (motives and psychology); causality (or the causal concatenation of actions …); narrative suspense (spectator involvement with the outcome of events, …); or the creation of a consistent fictional world (the diegesis of classical film semiotics). (190)

There is a connection between the visceral sensation that Beugnet describes and the spectacular attraction that Gunning sees; and whereas the former might arguably be connected to the whole film experience, the latter is just as important when discussing action cinema as a spectacle-driven experience.

But *Le Dernier combat* is often not considered an action film, although it does contain moments of spectacle which serve as precursors for the eventual development of Besson’s action aesthetic. Susan Hayward, one of the better analysts of Besson and an obvious fan of his work, gives an interesting reading of *Le Dernier combat*.
[The film] is a metaphor for the death of ideology. It is also a metaphor for our living death. The film shows us what we already know, but refuse to acknowledge, preferring instead to transmogrify death by projecting it onto technology, and subsequently willing its death. And the film shows us how we deny that knowledge through social, cultural and sexual regression, which leads, ultimately, to the death of the sexual, social and political body. In this regard Besson’s film is a science fiction film with a strong moral message. (96)

Hayward’s commentary emphasizes the generic classification of the film and its ideology, and posits both as the main message. It also does a thorough job of connecting the social world outside of the theater with Besson’s filmic choices, demonstrating how one serves as a sign of the other.

It is entirely possible, though, to simply enjoy the film for its spectacle, and also to see a connection between Besson’s cinematic techniques and the subsequent sensations created. Technology is the key to the actual existence of the film, as we cannot deny that the cinematic experience relies on cameras and the actual film reel to convey its message. Instead of giving the audience a static image onto which this ideological reading can take place, Besson gives us the dynamic experience of movement and physicality, bringing life back to the cinema through the simple act of “action” on the screen. Thus when Hayward goes on to say that the film “combines comedy with violence,” remarking that “the fights within the film are clumsy but deadly and simultaneously very funny,” (31) she is demonstrating that the film can itself relate an analytical interpretation, but that the
perception of action remains the first experience before anything else. “Clumsiness” or “funniness,” especially when related to physical action fight scenes, are perceptive analyses that begin with seeing the stunts. Hayward goes on to say that “there is no background provided to what has happened [to bring about the post-apocalyptic world] nor why; nor is there any cause provided for extraordinary occurrences (such as the raining of fish and, later, stones) – we merely see the effects and how they are dealt with” (31). Indeed, the audience simply experiences the film without needing to ask questions or to justify answers about ideology or genre, which only come later through exposition, if they even come at all. The narrative is arguably unnecessary – it provides a useful point of departure for Hayward’s thoroughly convincing reading, but at the level of perceptive experience and an enjoyment of the visual spectacle of the film, it remains extra or in addition to the spectacle.

**Sounds, soundtracks, and the spectacle**

Besides the visual play with technology or a lack of technology, the film also plays with the aural field of perception. Part of the setting that is revealed in *Le Dernier combat*, which is that of a derelict and rundown Paris, is due to a nuclear holocaust that has happened prior to the film’s story arc. Technology has mostly been destroyed, which could serve as an explanation as to why the film is in black and white. But just like the fish falling from the sky at a random moment in the film, the lack of dialogue is never explained. Nonetheless, a spectator is able to make a connection between the perceived
image and sound – grunts and footsteps, but no human communication – without any verbal explanation.

In a chapter titled “Le Sentir” in Phénoménologie de la perception, Merleau-Ponty suggests that certain phenomena – colors, sounds, even the size of objects – exist not as individual indices but as relations within the world of experience. “Les sensations, les “qualités sensibles” sont donc loin de se réduire à l’épreuve d’un certain état ou d’un certain quale indicibles,” Merleau-Ponty argues, “elles s’offrent avec une physionomie motrice, elles sont enveloppées d’une signification vitale” (243). A spectator is thus able to make sense of the created world of Luc Besson in the film not because of preconceived notions of post-apocalyptic Paris – although we would acknowledge that this has some effect – or because of a narrative reveal that forces us to recall earlier features – which again helps – but mostly because he or she notices the absence of one significant feature of contemporary, filmic interaction – words – and that this pushes a spectator to become more attuned to the filmic experience than otherwise necessary.

The loss of this form of communication then forces our perceptual experiences into overdrive. By focusing on the sounds that are present in the film, as exaggerated as they may be while also lacking in coherent dialogue, a spectator quickly notices that something is amiss. An audience then proceeds to re-situate the filmic experience so that it will make sense, reading the sounds, the images, and the visible character interactions, together as part of the perceived diegetic world. The moment when the fish rain down from the sky makes sense aurally and visually, if not also narratively, and not necessarily because of the preconceived intellect of audience expectations. Instead, this random
occurrence makes sense because the rest of the film has already established our existence in an alternate reality. As such, without narrative conventions of dialogue, a spectator is much more attuned to the world of sounds, of the subtle noises that may seem blended together when dialogue dominates, but that become more and more distinct when language is removed. Attention is paid to the cinema technique on display, as perceived, rather than the narrative which may give rationale to its appearance. This lack of dialogue in Besson’s first film presages the limited use of dialogue in his later films, preferring instead to let sounds, music, and images say all that needs to be said.

Similarly sound in Besson’s films is not limited to just the aural field of effects, but also relates to the musical soundtrack. Gérard Dastugue confronts the music in Luc Besson’s films, highlighting the filmmaker’s continued collaboration with Eric Serra, and remarking on how the music soundtrack is used to “create emotions” which “guide the scriptwriting,” notably before or even during filming rather than in the post-production phase (44). The audiovisual aspect of film phenomenology is undeniable, as it is the most apparent congruency between two commonly separated perceptions: vision and hearing. Daniel Yacavone considers this to be a “symbiotic union” where visual montage is “interwoven with an in principle perceptually coequal auditory montage of sound and speech” (168). He suggests that a truly creative film would use sound differently rather than a “mere appendage to the visual,” thus the majority of Besson’s film might be considered unoriginal since, despite its lack of dialogue, the sounds and musical soundtrack still coincides with the character’s emotions.
At one specific moment late in *Le Dernier combat*, however, the score creates a different type of atmosphere than could be expected based on the post-apocalyptic narrative or the bare images. This perceptive incongruity does not break apart the whole of the film, but considering its appearance at a climactic moment in the narrative, it does not seem innocuous. After the Doctor has been killed by a falling rock and the Man is left alone, he yet again encounters the Brute who tries to stop his progress. A chase scene erupts between the two men, and the music quickly intervenes with another accelerated tempo, but this time with a funky, fun vibe to it – a bass guitar riff, staccato trumpet blasts, and fast rhythmic drums. Considering that the Brute has just killed the sole woman in the world and that the Man is recently abandoned by his one friend and protector, the music should probably coincide with a sentiment of dread if it were simply following the narrative.

Instead, the music correlates with the fun motion of the camera, running through corridors, bounding up and down stairwells, and quickly tracking along with the movements of our protagonist as he weaves in and out of rooms of the abandoned building. It is as if the camera is equally enjoying itself as much as Pierre Jolivet and Jean Reno by bounding through the open space, and the music also resembles this fun. While discussing sounds as part of the perceptive act, Merleau-Ponty comments on the ability of certain blind persons to perceive colors based on what they hear: “les sons sont régulièrement accompagnés par des taches des couleurs dont la nuance, la forme et la hauteur varient avec le timbre, l’intensité et la hauteur des sons” (62). Through the
perception of one field of sense, hearing, an “exceptional phenomenal” act can create a representation of color:

La lumière ou les couleurs qui agissent sur l’œil n’agissent pas sur les oreilles ni sur le toucher. Et cependant on sait depuis longtemps que certains aveugles arrivent à se représenter les couleurs qu’ils ne voient pas par le moyen des sons qu’ils entendent. […] Mais on a longtemps pensé qu’il s’agissait là de phénomènes exceptionnels. (62)

Rather than being an “exceptional phenomenon” that is only perceived by those who lack another perceptive ability – such as vision in the case of the blind – the soundtrack in Besson’s film is heard and then immediately associated with the spectacular image.

This moment in the film, which is short but visually and aurally striking, could be seen as an outlier – and based on Dastugue’s analysis, it seems more likely that audiovisual harmony is Besson and Serra’s main aim. But the film mimics the perceptual experience of the camera at this point in the narrative rather than the story, and as such the music attaches to the quick phenomenon of motion by the characters. In turn, a spectator sees it as an enjoyable break from the conventional cinematographic storytelling that up until that moment followed the dire situation of the conflicting heroes, and also returns a spectator’s attention to the visually-striking images on display. The music, the motion of the camera, and the gestures and running of the characters are all working together to emphasize vision as an excessive and exciting phenomenon that is easily forgotten.
As a precursor for Besson’s films to come, then, the fact that a musical score can break away from the diegetic narrative and attach to the action of the scene is indicative of a move toward perceptual variation. Dastugue also notices this phenomenon, stating that “even a superficial awareness of [music’s] function will demonstrate that it is used playfully, cutting through the boundaries of the diegetic world, to construct spaces of audience fantasy (54),” but he does not equate it to a sense of cinematic experience. However, Merleau-Ponty would: “L’expérience sensorielle est instable et elle est étrangère à la perception naturelle qui se fait avec tout notre corps à la fois et s’ouvre sur un monde intersensoriel” (260-61). By drawing our attention to this connection between the aural world and the visual world on one side, and the narrative world on the other, between what could be labeled spectator experience on the one hand, and narrative expectation on the other hand, Besson achieves what Merleau-Ponty describes: a true perceptive experience that draws us away from an analysis based on understanding the exposition of the script. An emphasis on the spectacle and the experience, that is, rather than an interpretation of the story.

**Luc Besson aims for more**

As Besson’s first film, *Le Dernier combat* may be seen as distinct from his others, as a certain attempt to break into French cinema by following specific conventions. But patterns begun in 1983 would continue to appear in all of his works, and especially in his first big action film *Nikita* (1990). *Nikita* came shortly after the commercial success but critical failure of *Le Grand bleu*, and Besson was feeling the pressure to create something
different and new. Les Cahiers du cinéma was particularly apposite in its review of
*Nikita*: “Bonne nouvelle: Luc Besson n’est pas uniquement un cinéaste zen. Il sait filmer
des scènes d’action et il les filme plutôt bien. Mauvaise nouvelle: le scénario est
complètement improbable. […] L’inspiration surprise du film n’était qu’un pétard
mouillé” (Giraldi 53). A film review in La Revue du Cinéma also noted that “*Nikita* est
un film d’action, avec un beau portrait de femme dure et fragile, pas si gratuit que cela,
une œuvre inhabituelle dans le contexte du cinéma français” (Giraldi 53). Members of the
French critical press noticed that Besson’s style was anything but traditional, and that this
style could be part of the appeal of the film, much like Besson’s cinematic style in *Le
Dernier combat*.

The film tells the story of Nikita, a young, drug-addicted street dweller (portrayed
by Anne Parillaud) who gets caught robbing a pharmacy and is sent to the judicial courts
after killing a police officer in the shootout. Instead of shipping her off to prison,
however, the plot takes an unexpected twist: Nikita will be trained as an elite agent and
will work for the French government, living a normal life for the most part yet
occasionally answering the call of the state to perform random assassinations. As the
story progresses, Nikita becomes more and more disenfranchised with her unpredictable
and precarious position, until eventually she disappears – abandoning her lover and her
father figure – to start a new life elsewhere. Massimo Giraldi, author of *Luc Besson*, sees
this internal conflict for Nikita as revolving around her lack of a secure identity. Having
to don many different hats in the film – apprentice to Bob, lover to Marco, expert assassin
to other government foot soldiers – her identity crisis comes to a climax in the scene
where she is in a bathroom in Venice, Italy while her boyfriend, Marco, professes his love for her. Unbeknownst to Marco, Nikita is on the other side of the door preparing a sniper kill of an important political figure. For Giraldi, the successful sniper attack, followed by Nikita’s inability to return Marco’s love, signifies all too well this failure of identity because she is always struggling between different demands on who she actually is (47-51).

There is a certain harmony to Giraldi’s interpretation and the narrative trajectory of the film, where one substantially reinforces the other. But there are extra-perceptive elements that are also visible, and I would see them as privileging the experience of the film rather than an interpretation of the character’s inability to love, as well as demonstrating Besson’s growing ability to bring the spectacle to the fore of the film experience. Within the realm of the everyday, “love” is one of the few emotions that is allowed to be completely experience-driven, even though at times it can be both predictable and unpredictable. Merleau-Ponty attempts to clarify:

L’amour qui poursuivait à travers moi sa dialectique et que je viens de découvrir n’est pas, depuis le début, une chose cachée dans un inconscient, et pas davantage un objet devant ma conscience, c’est le mouvement par lequel je me suis tourné vers quelqu’un, la conversion de mes pensées et de mes conduites (451, my emphasis).

Love is a physical action, dependent upon a harmonization between conscious thoughts and subconscious conduct into physical movement, mostly related through vision. It thus
disposes of its need to explain itself by intelligence, preferring to let the phenomenon of experience summarize it as just happening.

So the fact that Nikita does not achieve love through the progression of the narrative is important, but Besson’s camera and Anne Parillaud’s acting also reveals this sentiment through their movements and the spectacle that a spectator experiences. Just before Nikita enters the bathroom to perform the assassination, she receives a phone call giving her the instructions. As she answers the phone, and as the person on the other end of the line recites the code name “Joséphine,” Nikita visibly begins to tremble, embodying the physical confusion between her personal life with Marco and her professional life as a secret agent. She is also presented in shallow focus, while Marco is completely visible but only as a blur in the background, rendering him as an unclear aspect in Nikita’s life and foregrounding her body – and her personal dilemma – as the thrust of both the narrative and the cinematic form. The visual spectacle, then, is saturated with such an excess of movement and focus – the trembling of Nikita and the shallow focus of the shot – that a spectator senses him or herself the precarious experience of love.

In an everyday perceptual act, the viewer is capable of choosing between different visual configurations, as the whole world is capable of being viewed in shallow focus or deep focus as the viewer desires. Using the example of an optical illusion, Merleau-Ponty argues that we group our perceptions based on a specific formula, but that a different grouping is equally probable:
Nous groupons les étoiles en constellations comme le faisaient déjà les anciens, et pourtant beaucoup d’autres tracés de la carte céleste, sont, _a priori_, possibles. Si l’on nous présente la série : ab cd ef gh ij, nous accouplons toujours les points selon la formule a-b, c-d, e-f, etc., alors que le groupement b-c, d-e, f-g, etc., est en principe également probable. (Sens 61)

Here, though, a spectator is not given the choice because Nikita is presented exclusively in shallow focus and is centered in the camera’s view. A spectator is thus offered only one choice of perceptual experience or one point of identification.

As she moves through the bathroom searching for the hidden pieces of the sniper rifle, the final action of building the rifle and aiming it out of the window demonstrates the film’s aesthetic understanding of love as perceptive, as a construction that is based on a phenomenological sense of vision. Furthermore, as Nikita stands at the ready, she trembles again and even sheds a tear, while at the same time her bathroom position is juxtaposed with an unstable “sniper shot” that places at least six different characters in her crosshairs. With the tension rising as the assassination approaches, the camera pans and tilts more rapidly, Nikita’s hands wipe the tears and sweat away from her face more frequently, and the killing act is a quick cut between the female victim and Nikita. All of these cinematic variances – camera movement, physical acting, and quick editing – visually and spectacularly reinforce the instability of Nikita’s love, on top of and in combination with Giraldi’s narrative connections.
As a spectator perceives this spectacular increase in physical movement, he or she realizes that love is also something that must be spectacularly, and often visually, lived—and not just interpreted. Love is not something that a spectator can pinpoint and designate on the screen, but rather is felt through the saturation of images that serve to reinforce the instability of Nikita’s love. Luc Besson’s action film presents Nikita’s love as a lived experience through the film’s montage, quick edits, and camera movement. “La force expressive du montage consiste en ce qu’il nous fait sentir la coexistence, la simultanéité des vies dans le même monde, les acteurs pour nous et pour eux-mêmes” states Merleau-Ponty (68-69). Phenomenology thus helps explain the connection between the spectacular image and human qualities. In both love and this French action film, the visual elements together create a reverberation of the sensation of tension within an audience, and that has a greater effect on sensations than what is revealed through the story.

**Luc Besson and visual style**

It is possible to see the development of a sensational film experience, rather than an insistence on narrative progression, in Besson’s second full-length feature *Subway* (1985). Generically speaking, *Subway* is not an action film; but like *Le Dernier combat* before it, cinematic elements of a Bessonian style are developed and used later in his distinctively action oeuvre. For instance, the music video feel of the film, as described by Janet Maslin in the New York Times, who labeled the film as “eccentric” and containing a “highly energetic visual style,” but condemned it ultimately as being “far more impressive for Mr. Besson’s visual ingenuity than for his philosophical pretentions” (The
Screen: Subway). Despite the negative critique, Maslin’s first instinct was to praise the visual character of the film, as seen in short bursts, and that is a feature that is consistently present in the action genre.

An important feature of the music video aesthetic is its duration and its appearance – these moments in a film typically tend to deviate from the general arc of the story in order to present something spectacular, but only for a short period of time. As such, this aesthetic can create a sensation of fun or fear, of excitement or even entropy, but these moments are not meant to expand into the rest of the film. From a phenomenological film experience position, the appearance of the music video aesthetic in an action film coheres with the overall aesthetic of the action spectacle. In the Address of the Eye, Vivian Sobchack states that “A film simultaneously has sense and makes sense both for us and before us. Perceptive, it has the capacity for experience; and expressive, it has the ability to signify. It gives birth to … the pervasive and as yet undifferentiated significance of existence as it is lived rather than reflected upon” (11). Developing Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as an implicit experience between a spectator and the film, Sobchack goes further to clarify the point of the film experience:

Perception is the bodily access or agency for being-in-the-world, for having both a world and being. Perception is the bodily perspective or situation from which the world is present to us and constituted in an always particular and biased meaning. Throughout Merleau-Ponty’s writings, the lived-body is both a subject in the world and an object for the world and others. (40)
It is obvious from Sobchak’s writings that film has a realm of significance beyond that of a spectator’s interpretation of it. Not only is a spectator bringing a consciousness as well as a bodily experience of perception to bear on the cinematic space, but any film itself is also carrying the weight of these differing yet connected experiences, even if the music video aesthetic sequences seem disconnected from the rest of the film. In all, a spectator and the film are interacting in a filmic space where cohabitation is helpful but not necessary. Thus it becomes crucial to analyze the coherence of spectacles in an action film as instances that are experienced and “lived rather than reflected upon,” as moments that deserve their own analyses rather than as distractions from purportedly more important features of a film. And it is equally important to note how in a Besson-styled action film, the filmic excitement of the spectacle permeates the rest of the film.

To return to the film, then, Subway follows the exploits of a young ne’er-do-well Fred, played by Christophe Lambert, as he attempts to win the affection of the high-class Héléna, played perfectly by Isabelle Adjani. As the title suggests, the film takes place in the underground metro system of Paris, where Fred uses the intricate tunnels and byways to evade capture from both the police and a gang of thugs, from whom he stole some documents. The opening scene itself, a high-speed car chase between Fred and the ensuing criminals, lasts for about seven minutes and seems to imply that the film will employ some action aesthetics to tell its story. However, the rest of the film has a more conventional pace to it. But the speed of the opening scene is remarkable, as the two cars careen through the streets of Paris, from the peripheral highway to the old cobblestone paths, and the pursuit ends with Fred’s car itself descending the steps into the subway.
The visual spectacle of an up-tempo pace at this opening moment invites an audience to experience the thrill of a ride, to jump into the spectacle of the film, to “live” the moment rather than “reflect” upon where it may be going, or how we got there. This sense of physical enjoyment and thrill is also visible in the positioning of the camera, switching from the interior of the chase vehicle to the interior of Fred’s car, from a mounted position on the car in the direction of movement to a stable camera that captures the flight of each car as they jump a curb. At every moment, movement is prioritized, whether through the high-speed passing of the background image, or the quick editing cuts to show the progression of the jump, or even a shaky hand-held camera used as a point-of-view focus. In turn, this movement creates not only tension, but action and excitement.

Movement is not exclusive to the action genre, nor does it find its ultimate manifestation within the films of Luc Besson. An understanding of its function, however, leads to an understanding of the aesthetic choices that Besson often uses. In *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, Jennifer M. Barker uses Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *The Mirror* (1975) to illustrate how motion can induce a slew of interpretations:

Indeed, the same patterns [of opposing camera movements] marks the film as a whole: it experiences and expresses emotion through motion, drawing us temporally, spatially, viscerally, and emotionally back and forth, toward and away, so that we exist in a state of tension between here and there, now and then, presence and absence, body and spirit, memory and dream, childhood and adulthood. (14-15)
Through the use of camera movement, a spectator vicariously lives the emotional experience of the film’s protagonist; and thus through the use of editing and camera placement, a spectator in Besson’s Subway feels the thrill of the chase, the excitement of speed, the vigor and vitality of movement. That it makes only a brief appearance at the beginning of the film, and that it ultimately leads into the underground dead-end of the Parisian metro system, says more about how directors understand and use these techniques than how effective they are. The use of extreme movement at the beginning of the film, then, elicits spectator awareness of fun and enthusiasm, even though the rest of the film slows down.

Whereas the action chase scene might seem out-of-place in Subway, the subsequent re-use of action aesthetics to emphasize experience would crop up more frequently in Besson’s second action feature Léon: The Professional (1994). If Nikita’s emotions play on a spectator and the camera in the action moments, Léon would continue this trend while adding a more significant emphasis on motion and movement. Filmed partly in New York and completely in English, Léon follows the story of a former assassin (Jean Reno again) who befriends a young girl, Mathilde (Natalie Portman), after her parents and family are killed by a corrupt police corps headed by Stansfield (Gary Oldman). As Giraldi recounts, “Léon marque le climax de l’hyperréalisme bessonien. […] Pour le réalisateur, c’est un drame à l’état pur, où la violence et la corruption absolue se trouvent confrontées à l’amour absolu” (65). The “hyperrealism” of the film leads to the ultimate sacrifice of Léon for the safety of Mathilde, and the path we take to get there is once again part of a filmic experience that surpasses our preconceived notions of how
to get there. “L’instabilité de Léon est celle de l’étranger qui veut prendre racine mais qui sent que la terre s’effondre sous ses pieds,” continues Giraldi. “[I]l perçoit la présence confuse de quelque chose qu’il n’est pas en mesure de comprendre: une sensation, un frémissement, un instinct positif qui ne parviennent pas à se frayer un chemin pour se manifester” (65). Should it be surprising that Giraldi’s analysis of the narrative and the character of the assassin Léon – so accurate and revealing at the same time – completely reflects the sensation that an action spectator has to Léon the film in general?

The connection between the movement and the speed of the camera with the overall experience of the film is undeniable from the opening credits; but instead of being only the beginning sequence, it portends the type of movement that appears in the rest of the film. After the obligatory production notes, a beautiful blue hue fills the screen, and a light, Japanese-inspired musical score transmits a sense of peace and ease. As the scene progresses, we notice that the camera is positioned in a helicopter and that this amazing tracking shot is cascading over the sea, eventually arriving at a forest filled with verdant greens. Still flying, the camera finally pans up to an extreme long shot of New York City, revealing that the aerial view was of a bustling city. A quick edit leads to a moving shot through the streets of New York City as the camera is placed on top of a vehicle, and the eventual arrival into Little Italy and an Italian-American restaurant, just until the camera comes to rest on Léon’s hands and his iconic circular sunglasses. A sequence of extreme close-ups – on Léon’s hands again, on a black and white photo of a bad guy, on a drag from a half-smoked cigarette, and on another character’s left eye – renders the size and the speed of New York down to a manageable, stationary, and comprehensible
dimension. The film tells us from its beginning that cinematic movement is visible not only on a grand scale, but also in the details. Wherever it lies, though, its sensation stems from its speed and its scale. From fast to slow, from large to small, or vice versa, quick changes in speed and scale are used to convey the sensations of grandiosity and agitation which remain throughout the film.

The next sequence reinforces the ability of camera movement and quick editing to relay a sensation of suspense and exhilaration and pace through tiny changes. Having accepted the “job” as presented in the previous sequence, Léon goes to a hotel to convey the message of his employers. Since he is an unwelcomed guest, Léon must sneak and fight his way into the room where the leader of the gang resides. At one point, Léon drops a wire-fashioned noose down from the ceiling, strangling and hanging one of the bad guys. The sequence is violent, but the quick edits arouse a delightful sensation at the alacrity of Léon’s ability, deftly moving from Léon in the ceiling to the noose closing in around the enemy’s neck, and finally to a low-angle shot of the bad guy’s squirming and dangling cowboy boots. The camera thus marks the superiority of Léon to his enemies.

Perhaps a spectator should be more concerned with the presence of guns, but even these are filmed in such a way that tempo becomes the more pertinent sensation. When Léon finally corners the head baddie, the latter desperately shoots his quick-fire hand-gun through the shutters of the windows, at where he believes Léon to be hiding on the other side. Changes in the mise-en-scène (added bullet holes to the screen), the camera angles (low shots of the criminals haywire firing, side shots of the tattered window), and the length of shots (those where the gun is blasting lasting less than a second, much like a
bullet being fired; or those where the villain is running for more guns and the shaky-cam follows his movement in approximately two-second bursts) give the moment a hyperreal velocity. The film is thus not a realist depiction of crime in New York City, nor is it completely the search for absolution by its main characters. The film is just high-speed, up-tempo, and overstimulated visual sensation, from beginning to end: the ultimate thrill ride of action.

In the preface to the English translation of Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception*, translator Colin Smith provides a thorough understanding of one basic approach to the world:

> It is because we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world that for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity, to refuse it our complicity…. Not because we reject the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things—they are, on the contrary, the constant theme of philosophy—but because, being the presupposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted, and go unnoticed, and because in order to arouse them and bring them to view, we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them.

(xiv-xv, emphasis added)

In this phenomenological spirit, amazement and wonder is returned to the realm of the everyday because the human steps back from overwrought analytical thought and returns to the very basis of life: quick and punchy visual experience. *Léon*’s hyperreality is palpable because the film is first experienced at its most basic level of movement and
juxtaposition, rather than at the successive level of what it all may mean. The film helps us to “suspend” our activity of thinking, and freely allows a spectator to experience the film spectacle at the level of sensational cadence, flow, tempo and rhythm.

Phenomenology emphasizes that understanding only comes after the experience, and that this comprehension can sometimes lead us to conclude that the original experience itself was banal, mundane, quotidian, even boring. But Léon rejects a reversion back to that interpretation because the experience of the film must be lived rather than remembered, and living it reinforces the visual sensation of speed and scale that the Bessonian action film wants to convey.

Both Léon and Subway use speed, pace, and quick edits to draw attention to the visual spectacle that is the foundation of these films. In turn, a spectator realizes his or her own ability to quickly change the visual field through movement and focus, and the capacity that he or she has to control perception. The saturation of so much visual phenomena then renders visible wonder of sight that is typically ignored on a daily basis.

**Luc Besson and the beautiful image**

Continuing this progression of Luc Besson’s past films and his contemporary cinematic output, I want to focus on one last pairing of films from earlier in Besson’s career. After Le Dernier combat and Subway, but before Nikita, Besson helmed another non-action film titled Le Grand bleu (1988). The narrative follows the exploits of Jacques Mayol (Jean-Marc Barr) and Enzo Molinari (Jean Reno) as they compete against each other for the title of deep-sea diving champion, as well as for the affection of the
beautiful Johana Baker (Rosanna Arquette), but the narrative is secondary to the experience of the film itself. The work contains a beautiful cinematic style that Besson would use in his later films, notably that of the depiction of the action event itself on the screen. A large portion of the film is shot underwater, where dialogue is impossible and narrative exposition stagnates. As such, the beauty of the image and the action of the actors comes to the foreground of the cinematic experience because the other elements are forcibly jettisoned from perception.

For instance, in one sequence, Jacques attempts to break the diving record that was previously set by his friend and rival Enzo. Over the duration of about four minutes, the camera swims along with Jacques diving ever-deeper into the dark abyss of the Mediterranean, simply tracking and centering his dive as he plunges and as his team tracks his life vitals. Along with another Eric Serra created accompaniment, there is little extra added to this sequence outside of the spectacle of an amazing feat: Besson simply films the action of diving. In many of his films, his style came through in the circular movement of the camera, preferring swivel shots and tracking swing shots around his characters, especially when dialogue is happening. In this scene, Besson is finally granted the ability to swim his camera, to float as he naturally sees it. When Jacques eventually ascends after having broken Enzo’s mark, the moment where he breaks the surface of the water is juxtaposed with shots of dolphins breaching the surface and jumping out of the water. Besson’s editing decision renders the moment playful and a bit silly, but it also emphasizes the playfulness of a Besson film experience and a phenomenology of the film which could forestall a spectator’s need to think. Moreover, the moment of descent
creates a phenomenon of wonder in a spectator, watching the progression and feeling amazed by the physical abilities of Jacques and the surrounding camerawork. At the same time, the ascent above water of both Jacques and the dolphins stimulates a sense of joy at the wonder of nature, and an understanding that vision can occasionally be overtaken by inexplicable phenomena.

But this is not the only level of phenomenological comprehension. Again Vivian Sobchack is helpful when she outlines the need to take film as a phenomenological experience, a space where its language is based on the relation of a “direct experience” between filmmaker, film, and spectator, to see film as a new place where cinema can be seen as “life expressing life, as experience expressing experience” (3-7). It is therefore not misleading to see the diving experience of humans as similar to the life experience of dolphins, even though these two occurrences seem so dissimilar. In a sense, this fantastic element of the very content of the film is imperative to the action spectacle, where spectacular stunts, extravagant explosions, flying fists and acrobatic agility – not to mention the nimbleness of the camera and the filmmaker in capturing and editing these scenes – are the pinnacle of cinematic excellence.

Importantly, the emphasis on the experience of film as well as the commensurable physical connection between action stunts and a spectator is often overlooked, but it is also key to understanding the style of a Luc Besson action film. As Sobchack continues, viewers not only directly experience the film as a physical entity, where we “see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved,” but also on the level of structural semiotics (10). This level,
where the “need and power to signify are synonymous with embodied existence in the world,” gives new meaning to the action scenes that permeate the action cinema. The fantastic derring-do of the action protagonist symbolizes both the fantasy world of physical fitness and the ability of this person – and by extension the everyday spectator – to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that are encountered. Through the help of an external force or even the realization of internal power, both the protagonist and a spectator can finally overcome their troubles which prevent them from achieving their full potential. In other words, the physical and semiotic ability of the action star to overcome its enemy symbolizes a spectator’s desire to surmount its antagonistic obstacle, whatever that may be. The action cinema gives birth to a continual hope on behalf of a spectator – the hope that the world will become a better place once the dark forces are defeated.

The symbolic power of the image can be, however, overshadowed by the spectacle itself and the sentiment of wonder. Thus in *Le Grand bleu*, Jacques may have bested Enzo’s record, and he may be perceived as having the physical abilities of a dolphin, but from a spectator’s perspective, the impressionistic sensation is most easily summarized as a fulfillment of its own desires. The wonder of diving deep into the sea, of not knowing what will happen next or how, followed by the emergence at the surface and the enthusiasm of the surrounding characters, suggests that a spectator enjoy its progression through the obstacles of life – beautiful in their own way – and just waits for the revelatory moment of pleasure that will inevitably appear.
The visual imagination of Luc Besson, and his ability to manifest it in film, arguably gave rise to the term *cinéma du look*, an expression used by Raphaël Bassan in his 1989 article in *La Revue du cinéma* titled “Trois néobaroques français: Beineix, Besson, Carax, de *Diva* au *Grand Bleu,*” and reprinted in English in Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie’s *Luc Besson: Master of Spectacle*. In the article, Bassan sketches an argument for classifying these three directors as part of the same cinematic movement: a style more concerned with the aesthetic look of an advertisement than any substantive societal critique or political position. But Bassan takes that and turns it into a commentary by the directors on the contemporary state of French society. As a glossy cover that promises abundance and hope just around the corner, advertising was part of the reality of 1980s film, television, radio, and culture, and Besson and his brothers were “amazed by this non-verbal way of expressing things, and have used it” (15). Bassan argues that, rather than unknowingly using this *look* to express their own superficiality, the filmmakers used it to convey a message about France in the 1980s: “All the seductive elements (neon lights, extravagant hairstyles, hi-tech hi-fi, and so on) are negatively connoted. They are no longer signs of well-being, but signs of death” (18). But perhaps the *cinéma du look* was appropriately categorized in the first place, since the *look* of Besson’s films is what gives them such perceptual and phenomenological weight.

Whereas Bassan saw Besson’s style as “probably the least thought through of the three directors,” (20) I would prefer to see it as the most insistent on the most fundamental of filmic perception: the visual image. And this insistence would manifest itself fully in his visually stunning *The Fifth Element* (1997), a radical envisioning of a
future metropolis where sensation – diving through the air into a flying taxi cab, an opera/R&B remix sung by an alien, revealing costumes or elaborate makeup – drives the story from one scene to the next. Everything in the film is visually important, from the costumes to the mise-en-scène to the acting. Susan Hayward claims that “the effects themselves tell part of the story,” that they are “a force driving the narrative and constitute, therefore, as with the fashion designs, a strongly motivating sign of the narrative” (97). She even summarizes the film as one which “spectacularises costume, set design, sexuality and technology,” and goes so far as to claim that it is a “conscious spectacularisation” (96). The style of Besson is the first perceptual experience of any spectator. Like Le Grand bleu before (and Le Dernier combat before it), visuality is foregrounded and the dystopian science fiction future is only a useful narrative ploy for the presentation of Besson’s filmic vision.

The director’s playfulness can be seen throughout the film. Soon after the hope of the universe is created in the form of Leeloo (played by Milla Jovovich), she must fight off a gang of space creeps in order to retrieve the titular “fifth” element and restore order to the universe. The irreverent fight scene is full of comedic action tropes, such as a gymnastics-tumbling Leeloo, gunfire, hand-to-hand combat, and parallel editing that juxtaposes an aria sung by a diva and the mimicking gestures of Leeloo. There is no time to become distracted or bored by this scene because sensation is driving us headfirst and haphazardly from start to finish. The only sentiment to be conjured is one of “fun,” of an enjoyment had for the sake of the spectacle and through the priority of vision. Thus the fun of the characters, as symbolized through the dance of the diva and her upbeat song, or
through Leeloo’s Three Stooges-type slapping and surprise strike of the evil alien creatures, actually defines a state of being in the world that is commensurate with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.

Voilà pourquoi l'expression de l'homme peut être au cinéma si saisissante: le cinéma ne nous donne pas, comme le roman l'a fait longtemps, les pensées de l'homme, il nous donne sa conduite ou son comportement, il nous offre directement cette manière spéciale d'être au monde, de traiter les choses et les autres, qui est pour nous visible dans les gestes, le regard, la mimique, et qui définit avec évidence chaque personne que nous connaissons. […] Pour le cinéma comme pour la psychologie moderne, le vertige, le plaisir, la douleur, l'amour, la haine sont des conduites. (Sens 119)

By now, a spectator should know not to attend a Luc Besson screening for the story, but rather to go for the one sensation that his films illustrate, the one experience that runs like a common thread throughout all of his work: spectacular visuals and fun. The Fifth Element is a thrill ride like Besson’s previous films, yet this time the vehicle is not just the spectacular action moments but rather the film experience as a whole. “Fun” is the principle “conduite” of the film, and every individual element works together to bring this sensation to bear on a spectator.

We have thus seen how Luc Besson has developed his own visual style through his early works and into a full-fledged filmic experience. Whether it be the tempo of his music, the spectacle of his imagery, the positioning of his camera, the speed of his cuts,
the scale of his shots, the playfulness of his editing, the acting of his stars, the extravagance of his costumes, or even the humor of his stories, Besson pushes these perceptive actions to the fore of his films and invites spectators to enjoy them for the sake of enjoyment.

Spectacle of the Master\textsuperscript{32}

After the wild success of \textit{The Fifth Element} and a final film before the turn of the millennium, \textit{Jeanne d’Arc} (1999), Luc Besson took an extended hiatus from filmmaking, only to return in 2005 with a highly-stylized drama (\textit{Angel-A}) and a trio of animated, action/adventure tales for children (\textit{Arthur et les minimoys} 2006, \textit{Arthur et la vengeance de Maltazard} 2009, \textit{Arthur 3: la guerre des deux mondes} 2010). Each of these films continued the stylistic tendencies of Besson from his earlier career, and each contained key elements of the Besson touch. Rather than focus on each of these films, however, I want to end this chapter on Besson’s most recent action blockbuster \textit{Lucy} (2014), a thrilling and fast-paced spectacle which serves as a culmination of the cultivated Besson aesthetic throughout the years. Audience and critical reactions were mixed, as usual. \textit{Variety} labeled the film as an “aggressively stylish, self-consciously feminist, gratuitously globe-trotting pulp-trash extravaganza” (Chang 90); or some others, such as Violet Lucca writing for \textit{Sight & Sound}, labeled the film’s science – which is admittedly ridiculous – as politically connected to “an age where misinformation abounds thanks to super PACs,” but then reversed course and stated that “like all things that are bad for you,

\textsuperscript{32} This title is a direct play on Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie’s book on Luc Besson, \textit{Master of spectacle}. 88
this tastes really, really good” (78). Lucca also comments on the scene where Lucy uses her enhanced brainpower to suspend criminals in mid-air, and therefore does not bother to engage these enemies in a fight when she is already far superior, stating that “it’s not worth her time, nor ours, as we’ve seen all this before” (79). Indeed we have, but not in other action films as Lucca implies – in Besson’s other films. As the main precursor for contemporary French action cinema, the spectacular phenomenological experience of a Besson film plays by its own rules. *Lucy* is a combination of the multiple phenomenological sensations that the films of Luc Besson address, and the result is a culmination of the Luc Besson aesthetic and a prominent and preeminent phenomenological viewing experience. Despite the presence of formal characteristics – the kind of formality that is present in any film – *Lucy* asks its audience to put these aside and instead to buckle in for the ride. The film fits under a general rubric of French action cinema because it needs to be seen rather than interpreted, lived rather than remembered. It contains a wealth of varied information – genre-mixing, gender play, romantic confusion, conventional and unconventional storytelling – that firmly disrupts a spectator and his/her preconceived expectations. But that is exactly why the phenomenological model of the film experience is productive.

To begin with, the very first images of the film are digitally-created cells splitting and dividing while the music resembles a slightly off-kilter, electronic bass heartbeat. The film thus invites its spectator to experience the film at this invisible layer, at the

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33 Lucca’s critique is a bit misleading, since she must have interpreted the film as being part of the Hollywood blockbuster machine rather than a French production. Nevermind that Besson, despite the prominence of the English-language and Hollywood stars, is still a Frenchman who has a different conception of politics and super-PACS than Americans.
cellular level that is always functioning yet rarely seen, constantly churning yet hidden—much like the daily act of vision for any spectator, rarely contemplated yet always working. As such, we are invited to let our sensations determine our interpretation of the film, where the digitally-rendered natural process of cellular life is a symbolic and mimetic representation of naturally-occurring reactions and sensations. As the scene widens to the streets of Taipei, the pace of life is shown through the use of speeded up imagery, fast cars and even faster humans zooming past on the screen in fast forward, demonstrating the pace of life and the film. And in a final apparent sign, the first scene with Lucy (played by Scarlet Johansson) and her soon-to-be-dead boyfriend juxtaposes their conversation—where the boyfriend tries to convince Lucy to complete a task for him—with images of a mouse approaching a piece of cheese set in a mouse trap. Like Le Grand bleu, both human nature and animal instinct are part of the same experiential milieu.

Yet Lucy as a film has only just begun. The film follows Lucy, our heroine, as she reluctantly becomes part of a larger scheme to transport a new synthetic drug throughout the world. She is forced to carry a package inside of her intestines, and through an unlucky event, the package tears and the drug slowly begins to sift into her system. Since this synthetic drug is extraordinarily powerful in small doses, the large amount that leaks into Lucy’s bloodstream gives her the ability to control technology and even other people. As she discovers the breadth of her new superpowers, the drug cartel who initially used her body as a transport mechanism tracks her down to a university in Paris, hoping to eventually confront her and recover the remaining drug inside of her. At the
very last moment, though, the drug allows Lucy to transcend the confines of a physical existence and transform herself into a supercomputer.

When Lucy is being held prisoner by the drug cartel who wants to use her as a mule, and after the mind-enhancing drug has begun to leak into Lucy’s intestines and she commences her transformation into a superhuman being, she makes a daring escape from captivity. Approaching a table of card-playing, heavily-armed thugs, Lucy disposes of them quickly, and then notices that she was shot in the shoulder in the process. Because of her euphoric state, she did not at first register the bullet, and even after realizing it is there, she continues to be numb to the pain. She proceeds to a hospital where a doctor operates on her while she is still awake, and she holds a conversation with her mother in the process. The phenomenon of the perceptive experience, the shock of seeing a fight scene involving bullets, or of Lucy’s superhuman strength, does not cause the startling reaction that one could expect. Indeed, much like Lucy, this perceptive experience is almost too banal to be noticed, almost like the daily experience of vision for any given spectator that passes by unnoticed. We expect a higher form of action, one which has evolved beyond simple gun fights, and the film will provide these moments (a high-speed drive through the streets of Paris, a riskier and bigger gun fight near the end) in time. But for now, as simply an opening experience in the film, it hardly matters if we record these action tropes.

However, this character’s bodily perceptive act also entails an ability to overcome the limits of an embodied experience of a film. Jennifer M. Barker lays out her understanding of the phenomenological film experience:
As a material mode of perception and expression, then, cinematic tactility occurs not only at the skin of the screen, but traverses all the organs of a spectator’s body and the film’s body. [...] Tension, balance, energy, inertia, languor, velocity, rhythm - ...all of these [are] “tactile,” though none manifests itself solely, or even primarily, at the surface of the body.

The superficial wound of the bullet hole for Lucy represents a physical embodiment of the action aesthetic piercing the surface of the skin, but the sensation is registered at a deeper level of sensation, where a spectator is struck by the power and strength of our superheroine. Lucy’s actions also ignore the bodily sensation of pain, as she gorges on leftover food to fulfill her character’s sensation of hunger. Overall, excess in eating, excess in pain, and excess in action (with the previous gunfight) are so exaggerated that a spectator must acknowledge his or her excess in vision, thereby drawing attention to this primary mode of living in the world.

Moreover, Besson’s editing is choppy and incongruent, choosing to mix different shots of the same scene together rather than filming it as one continuous shot. This sense of amazement transcends the physical boundaries of bodily sensations and manifests in an understanding of invincibility and infallibility, in the understanding that the act of viewing *Lucy* at this moment is an acceptance of the fantastic and the hyperreal. We do not necessarily need the film to make sense based on some criteria of reality or an adherence to actual science; we instead accept that we experience the film at the level of bodily perception, and that sometimes it may delve even deeper into something as of yet
inexplicable. The character’s sensation of hunger overshadows the sensation of pain, just as a spectator’s sense of the film narrative is overcome by the pure spectacle.

Only through the presence of an intelligibility borne through perception, where a spectator is able to make sense of all of the disparate elements in a Luc Besson film in order to follow its logic, can his body of work be understood. During a screening of a Besson film, one can easily determine the trajectory of the image, the editing, the narrative, and character motivation, without having to strain too much. But once the film is finished, a spectator might be hard-pressed to explain a completely holistic, all-encompassing logic to the film – to answer the simple question of what the film was about. And that is because, despite the simplicity with which one understands the narrative, hears the music, envisions the action, or views the image – especially taken separately – the ensemble of these different parts leads to an overabundance of sensation, culminating in an experience that can simply be described as fun and thrilling, as exciting and action-packed, as exhilarating and enthralling full stop. The spectacle of vision forces a spectator to become aware of his or her own spectacular visuality in everyday life, whether through the act of watching a film, or even just as a daily reminder of humanity’s interaction with the world.

In terms of action spectacle, then, Luc Besson’s films are full of frenetic action sequences that have tended to become larger and more frequent than in his first films, and his latest film *Lucy* is a continuation of this trend.\(^{34}\) In a special issue of *Variety* magazine

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\(^{34}\) For instance, *Le Dernier combat* contains four action sequences which are all relatively short: Pierre Jolivet’s escape from his rivals, The Brute’s attempt to enter the compound of The Doctor, Jolivet’s first fight scene with The Brute, and then their final fight and chase scene. In comparison, *Lucy* contains at least four different action scenes, each one lasting longer than a minute, including multiple fight scenes and a
about the production of *The Fifth Element*, the cover states “Luc Besson: Sixth Sense for *The Fifth Element*,” succinctly and cogently presenting the director as having a certain comprehension of the visual aesthetic. The magazine cover also revealed a phenomenological approach to Besson’s cinema that Merleau-Ponty perceived critically in his only essay on the cinema: “C’est un lieu commun de dire que nous avons cinq sens et, à première vue, chacun d’eux est comme un monde sans communication avec les autres” (62). Indeed; though, as Merleau-Ponty would show, all of the senses work together and are better seen as an ensemble rather than individually. And yet while the films of Luc Besson mostly engage the sense of vision and hearing, the conglomeration of these basic senses results in the appearance of another sensation, indescribable perhaps, but palpably present nonetheless. The experience of watching his films provides a spectator with an explicit understanding of what it means to be a human and to envision the world.

Besson’s style is tantamount to a phenomenological film experience that relies on the action aesthetic to incite sensations of wonder and excitement in a spectator. French action films in general, then, have adopted this stylistic insistence on experience being more important than interpretation. The current group of French film directors who film action movies mostly in Hollywood have taken their cues (and often their money) from Luc Besson: Pierre Morel (who started with the Luc Besson-produced *Banlieue 13* (2004)

chase scene, the exchange of gunfire at various points in the film, and Besson even uses action aesthetics (quick cuts) for normal scenes, such as one where Lucy is simply eating food. As a more tangible comparison, the website Cinemetrics, which measures the average shot length for certain films (user-created), lists *Léon* as having an average shot length of 4.6 seconds, whereas *The Fifth Element* sees Besson crunch that down to 3.1 seconds.
and then helmed the opening of the *Taken* franchise in 2008); Gérard Pirès (who directed *Taxi* (1998), which was written and produced by Besson, and then eventually the high-flying jetfighter film *Les Chevaliers du ciel* in 2005); Olivier Megaton (who took up both the *Taken* franchise in 2012 and the *Transporter* franchise in 2008); Louis Leterrier (who started the *Transporter* films back in 2002 before heading to Hollywood and trying his hand at a superhero movie, *The Incredible Hulk* in 2008); and finally Patrick Alessandrin (who after serving as the assistant director on both *Subway* and *Le Dernier combat*, finally got his own chance to direct the 2009 sequel *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum*). Each of these film directors owe a debt of gratitude to Luc Besson not only for his financial support, but also for his artistic influence on a clearly French action aesthetic that is present in each of these films, privileging the visual experience over the analysis.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the influence of Luc Besson on French action cinema relies less on his production endeavors with Europacorp or his engagement with the English language than on a firmer understanding of the phenomenological experience that is part of the action film aesthetic in France. However, this visual approach is not the only way to address the action film in France. Much of this chapter was spent on emphasizing the spectacular visuals of the Luc Besson film, and how this abundance of vision allows a spectator to re-envision his or her perceptive understanding of the world around him or her. Ultimately, the excessive visual spectacle creates a saturation of vision, which in turn allows a spectator to comprehend the primacy of vision as the basis for an interpretation of the world he or she lives in. However, visual spectacle is not the
only aspect of the French action film. In the next chapter, I turn to narrative, an equally important yet often oversimplified element of the French action film.
Chapter 2: The action-historical hybrid, Paul Ricoeur, and narrative

Quel ne fut pas mon étonnement, lorsqu’à la lecture du premier volume et d’une partie du second, je m’aperçus que ma rédaction avait été entièrement changée, et qu’à une narration dans laquelle se retrouvaient à chaque instant, les saillies, la vivacité et l’énergie de mon caractère, on en avait substitué une autre, tout-à-fait dépourvue de vie, de couleur et de rapidité.
- Eugène-François Vidocq, Histoire complète

ACTION-ADVENTURE – All Westerns; war movies; cops and robber films; [..]
Narrative Trajectory – The main character knowingly undertakes an impossible mission to save a society from a state of siege, and willingly faces death to defend a personal code of honor that the society shares as a value.
- Neill Hicks, Writing the Action-Adventure Film

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the spectacular and ingenious work of action film directors (and specifically Luc Besson) lends credibility to a genre that is often criticized for its excess. Whereas Luc Besson is typically appreciated for his specific action framing and camera movement, he is often harshly criticized for the sheer inanity of his stories, whether by American or French critics. Writing in Positif, Michel Ciment ridiculed Besson’s film Nikita because it did not live up to his standards of cinema, claiming that:

35 Neill Hicks has a whole list of film genres that he describes through narrative, character motivation, how the environment is constructed, and the defining moment which clarifies the generic terms. See his Writing the Action-Adventure Film (2002).
Le film, on le voit, ne brille pas par son intelligence, comme si Luc Besson qui se réclame – avec certains de ses jeunes confrères – d’un cinéma “visuel” pensait que l’ablation des facultés intellectuelles allait accentuer en retour la puissance de l’imaginaire comme, dit-on, l’amputation d’une main gauche donne à la droite une vigueur redoublée. C’est se tromper grandement. Car les plus grands visionnaires – Kubrick, Fellini, Boorman ou Tarkovski – sont aussi des cinéastes au propos complexe, l’image chez eux renvoyant toujours à l’idée. (44)

Peter Travers, in a *Rolling Stone* review of *Lucy*, also claimed that “Besson lets the fun drain out of [the film],” especially when “things get all pokey and ponderous,” leading him to ultimately label it a “buzzkill” (“Lucy”). Despite these relatively harsh reviews, Besson’s stories are crucial elements of his films. In fact, narrative is paramount for most film genres, and is typically the most noticeable aspect of a film by spectators, critics, scholars, and fans.

As one of the foundational features of the action cinema genre, narrative must take its cues from a culturally-specific but also globally-understandable standard. At times, and specifically with regards to action cinema, narrative is considered to be a secondary concern to spectacle. Geoff King dedicates the majority of his illuminating text, *Spectacular Narratives*, to debunking the primacy of spectacle and raising narrative to be on par with explosions. Historically, action films were seen as breaking with classical Hollywood storytelling because of the presence of action set pieces, which were seen as distracting from narrative coherence and integration. But King counters this idea
by arguing for Hollywood action films’ coherence with notions of classical Hollywood story-telling, stating that “These films still tell reasonably coherent stories, even if they may sometimes be looser and less well integrated than some classical models” (2).

The reality of the action cinema is that it uses narrative and spectacle in tandem to relate its story, and a filmmaker’s ability to bring these two elements together can make the difference between a good and a bad film. As Geoff King again notes, “Viewers are offered the sensual pleasures of high-impact action but are also invited to take part in a measured and enjoyable game of knowing and not knowing, concealment and revelation” (113), showing that part of the appeal for action cinema lies in the progression of the story. Still, others choose to see narrative as being a necessary but perhaps superfluous component for large-production, blockbuster (or action) films in general. Take, for instance, Justin Wyatt’s look at the Hollywood-based idea of “high concept” cinema in his eponymous High Concept: “…within the film and television industries, high concept most frequently is associated with narrative and, in particular, a form of narrative which is highly marketable” (12). In other words, in high concept films – which includes action cinema – narrative is again of limited importance, and only insofar as it provides a simplification to marketing imperatives and audience comprehensibility. To be sure, Wyatt is himself critical of this oversimplified debasement of high concept cinema, yet he still sees it as a movement away from classical Hollywood cinema and towards a “post-classical Hollywood cinema: a style with strong ties to classical cinema, yet with some significant deviations in terms of composition” (16). These deviations, however, are important.
To reiterate, there are thus two competing approaches to the action cinema: the first approach purports to discredit spectacular films because their narratives can be summarized simply and their productions place an emphasis on the return on investment; the second approach defends action narratives as well-constructed and enlightening, and as following classical Hollywood storytelling norms and therefore coherent. Of course, neither of these claims is absolutely correct, and the truth lies somewhere on a spectrum of marketing imperatives, cultural considerations, standards of spectacle, and narrative nuances. Fundamentally, though, narrative plays a large role in the action cinema and is better understood as a necessity to these films, rather than an accessory which can be sidelined or even sidestepped if needed.

The action film narrative is, then, both imperative and superfluous to the genre. This binary is counterintuitive, and it demonstrates the difficulty that scholars and critics have had in classifying the action cinema. In narrative film, the story is what separates films into generic categories, or more importantly, what distinguishes a fictional film from a documentary, or from avant-garde cinema. Thus its importance is evident, and warrants less a justification than acclaim and explication.

And hence the importance of the first epigraph above. Writing in the 1820s in Paris, France, Eugène-François Vidocq – known by only his family name Vidocq – chided the literary gatekeepers of his epoch because they criticized his affected prose style. Due to an unfortunate accident involving a broken arm, Vidocq was forced to employ the services of a scribe, only later to realize that this young man lacked the vigor
that only Vidocq could muster. Shortly after the aforementioned incident, Vidocq explains why the scribe assigned to him by the publishing house where he sold his memoirs was inadequate at expressing the very harrowing and provoking details of Vidocq’s escapades, dedicating the majority of his introduction to a polemic against the transcriber. Obviously, Vidocq was angered: such an action-packed and interesting life could only be recounted by one who experienced it, and not some writer who was more worried about grammar than gusto.

The most cogent criticism that Vidocq could levy against his transcriber was that he lacked the ability to depict Vidocq’s memoirs as they actually happened – that is, complete with the energy, action, and spirit with which Vidocq lived them. Hence his caveat to the reader, his warning ("avis au lecteur") that literature, despite its many positive attributes, may be incapable of rendering the action-packed life in prose. Vidocq himself would do his best, giving as much detail and substance to his work as words would permit, but even he sensed that this inability to render action in written form could not be overcome through the writing tradition.

What Vidocq’s personal memoir reveals, then, is an innate sense of the inability of certain mediums – certain theoretical and sociocultural models as well – to fully describe the sensation of action that goes beyond the confines of the literary page, or the film script. Words can take us only so far; yet narrative exploits – of Vidocq or any other story, fictional or historically-based – have become crucial to a contemporary

36 For instance, even the recounting of the broken arm is given vigor simply by the way Vidocq describes the possible outcome. “Je me cassai le bras droit, et comme il était fracturé en cinq endroits différents, il fut question de me le couper.”
understanding of action cinema, and without story, the recorded image would lose its status as film.37 The vaunted style of the story is easily one of the most important and significant elements of an action film – and along with spectacular explosions, perhaps also the most revealing of the genre. Hence, Neill Hicks’ epigraph is capable of clearly distilling the story of an action film into a compound sentence, and readers can nod in agreement knowing that, for the most part, this shorthand classification is completely correct. More than that, though, it demonstrates a line of reasoning that the narrative of an action film is just as distinct as the spectacular explosions, car chases, or fight scenes which are usually found in the genre.

With these clarifications in mind, it is possible to claim that action cinema relies on a simple and understood narrative style, which renders its aesthetic extravagance more palatable. This is generally true, and occasionally the material is drawn from fairy tales or mythology or history because these stories are well-known and also easy to follow. So what exactly happens when literature and action combine to create an action-heritage hybrid that is specific – but not limited to – a national cinema? There inevitably is a cultural-historical productivity at work that goes beyond just the stories. That is to say, narrative works in tandem with production standards and spectacular visuals to create, once again, a sensation of excitement and intrigue, of suspense and resolution, in a spectator. Moreover, a growing trend of action-heritage films in France exploits historical

37 For instance, sport is a recorded or live image of extreme action, yet it is not considered to be directed by narrative, even though a narrative through-line is given to each match by sports commentators after the fact. Home video of children playing is similar, where the narrative is non-existent and the image itself is all that matters.
events to create a subgenre that effectively challenges conventional culture and shifts the terrain of not only filmic narrative, but cultural history and societal narration as well.

The action-heritage film in France demonstrates a narrative vision of history and culture through the lens of heroic deeds and individual efforts, and in turn, spectators begin to understand and appreciate their own worlds differently. This chapter will address this notion of progress through the action-heritage film and its specific French bona fides, as seen in a group of contemporary films: *Vidocq* (Pitof 2001), *Le Pacte des loups* (Gans 2001), *L’Instinct de mort* (Richet 2008) and *L’Ennemi public numéro 1* (2008), *L’Assaut* (Leclercq 2011), and finally Matthieu Kassovitz’s *L’Ordre et la morale* (2011). I will show how the action-heritage film adheres to both action and heritage film generic standards while also emphasizing contemporary notions of an expanding, global cinema. As such, this rendering of French film through typically foreign (Hollywood and British cinematic traditions, respectively) genres reveals an expansion of French cinema that helps maintain its position as one of the world’s greatest cinema producers, but also as a reconfiguration of French history through non-traditional lenses.

**Hermeneutic phenomenology; or, narrative as worldview**

Understanding that narrative plays a foundational role in the fictional telling of films is one thing, but realizing how this specifically happens is another. As in the previous chapter, I will rely on a phenomenological understanding of film narrative and time, developed from the works of Paul Ricoeur, in order to elucidate the importance of narrative for structuring a view of the world. For Ricoeur, phenomenology is based on a
Husserlian concept of the ability to “saisir ce qu’il y a de spécifique dans ce qui est vécu,” and like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this comprehension begins with an act of perception (L’Attention 26). However, for Ricoeur, narrative can also play the role of intermediary, of that which allows humans to understand the concept of time and to make sense of a life lived. As such, narrative fundamentally plays a central part in how an individual, a community, or even a society defines itself. At the very beginning of Temps et récit (1983-86), Ricoeur sets up this idea as the driving force for his research:

Le monde déployé par tout œuvre narrative est toujours un monde temporel. Ou, comme il sera souvent répété au cours de cet ouvrage: le temps devient temps humain dans la mesure où il est articulé de manière narrative; en retour le récit est significatif dans la mesure où il dessine les traits de l’expérience temporelle. (Tome 1 17)

Ricoeur’s initial clarity gets slightly lost in the sheer length of his study, but he continually emphasizes the natural temporal component to narrative and its relation to human understanding of the world.

For the purposes of the dissertation and this chapter, three narrative and temporal ideas of Ricoeur’s will serve as the basis for the analysis of action-heritage films. The first section will deal with Ricoeur’s development of mimesis and metaphor and their relationship to human action, taken mostly from Temps et Récit and La Métaphore vive (1975). The conclusion that RICOEUR searches to defend is that narrative and human action are mimetic, where the story helps humans understand their actions, and where human action forms the basis of temporally-constructed narrative in the first place. Moreover, in
comprehending this tautological use of mimesis, we can ostensibly create a worldview, or a mythology, through the use of metaphor: “la métaphore est le processus rhétorique par lequel le discours libère le pouvoir que certaines fictions comportent de redécrire la réalité” (Métaphore 11). Thus it is not simply the representative model of mimetic action which is imitated on screen and in a film (or in literature and poetry specifically for Ricoeur), but rather the conversion of the mimetic act, through the metaphor of film, into a mythology.

The second argument of Ricoeur that will be fruitful for this chapter is found in his writings on “l’intentionnalité historique” (Tome 1 247) and his contrast of the “récit historique” from the “récit de fiction” (Tome 2 11); or rather his attempt to distinguish between historiography and fiction based on “la prétention à la vérité” (12) that only the former purports to achieve. The films in this chapter somewhat blur this relatively clear distinction between history and fiction, or between truth and invention, through the use of the mise en intrigue and the positioning of historically-known events in the narratives. This has the tendency of flattening out any distinctions between events and rendering them all equivalent in the eyes of the film spectator, despite the obvious historical weight that one moment might contain, especially when compared to another.

The final use of Ricoeur will be taken from his short essay “L’identité narrative” (1988) where he attempts to answer the question of “qui suis-je” through the narrative act. Seeing this tendency to identify through a narrative as paradoxically static and dynamic at the same time, Ricoeur aims to clarify his definition of temporality and selfhood – “l’ipséité” (296) – by implying that narrative can fill in the aporia of personal
identity by simply accepting the circularity of the argument. “Nous égalons la vie à l’histoire ou aux histoires que nous racontons à son propos” (300), he states halfway through the article, leading the reader to realize that the inexplicability of certain events or states of mind can be explained through narrative, even if the resulting narrative does not necessarily explain the situation either, but instead emphasizes its inconclusiveness through iteration. Long sequences in a movie where very few events happen except for the slow, forward progression of the film narrative illustrate that repetition is explanation simply through recurrence. Gaps of knowledge in historical films, or specific sequences of a loss of identification, then, also illustrate Ricoeur’s profound and confounding theory.

Perhaps a good clarification of Ricoeur’s narrative approach to cinema can be found in his Préface to André Gaudreault’s well-reasoned Du Littéraire au filmique: Système du récit, where Ricoeur introduces the importance of Gaudreault’s work that separates film narrative from scriptural and textual narratives (ix-xiii). In the Préface, Ricoeur states that “la diégèse est alors subordonnée à l’action de représenter de façon créatrice les actions humaines, tout en subordonnant la distinction platonicienne entre exposition par le narrateur et imitation-personnification par des personnages qui font l’action, sans oublier les formes mixtes … [comme] le cinéma entre autres” (xi). In other words, cinematic narration is a creative act and resembles theatrical narration more than written narration, since the former is intrinsically interested in showing the temporally-situated récit rather than announcing it teleologically in written form (xi). But cinema still creates its own narrative form that coincides with montage and cinematography to
generate a distinct, narrative approach to cinematic storytelling. Importantly, Ricoeur acknowledges that this cinematic narrator is as indefinable as the scriptural narrator:

Mais – et c’est là une nouvelle originalité de l’univers du cinéma – le narrateur filmique est moins encore que le narrateur du récit scriptural, qui n’est déjà pas l’auteur en chair et en os, un être singulier, même à titre “d’être de papier”; il est sans nom propre, dans la mesure où il rassemble un collectif de faiseurs d’images. Et pourtant il faut bien recourir à un grand narrateur pour agencer monstration et narration, et, dans la monstration même, comme on l’a dit, mise en scène et mise en cadre. (xii-xiii)

Without diving too much into Gaudreault’s own text, it can be seen that Ricoeur supports the idea of a grand narrator who controls the natural, filmic progression – a narrator who logically organizes the scenes to cohesively and comprehensively move from one to another. And much like the creation of a worldview as constructed by human beings in their everyday lives – and who are also spectators in the cinema – moviegoers create their own life stories based on filmic narration, and vice versa. The heroic narrative of the French action-heritage film is thus individually distinct and culturally relevant, and therefore integral to a French understanding of existence.

**The tradition of heritage**

Since narrative is such a strong foundation for action films and the stories they tell, it follows that a look at other, narrative “genres” would be fertile avenues of
research. And whereas film has its own set of story-driven generic categories to contend with (drama, thrillers, adventure, science fiction, war), another link for narrative variability is a return to history or even literature for the truly story-based progression. Vidocq once again is a precursor and an inspiration for this, but he is far from being alone. In fact, and at least as far as cultural awareness is concerned, he is still a minor character in the grand scheme. More often than not, these adaptations are taken from high literature and culturally-appropriate texts, or only those which represent France in its best light. So more than just reinforcing the heritage film trend in France, Vidocq the film raises new questions about what a film adaptation or a heritage film actually is or can be.

Fortunately, the heavy lifting of defining the parameters of the heritage film, and specifically how it affects French film, has been well-documented by previous scholars. Seen as traditionally a British genre, the heritage film has become an ample part of many European cinemas, from Germany to Italy to France. Its main features include elaborate costumes and sets, larger-than-average budgets in production, and, most importantly, archetype narrative. These films also touch on features of national and transnational identity. In Past Forward, Dayna Oscherwitz highlights how the cinematic production of French historical moments in the early 1990s “… projected a certain structure of the past, an implicit, linear, historical progression that framed the images within a given film and implicitly situated the events within the broader, linear narrative of the national past” (4). Belén Vidal, in Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation, sees the heritage film

38 See Lutz Koepnick’s essay “’Amerika gibt’s überhaupt nicht’": Notes on the German Heritage Film” in German Pop Culture: how “American” is it?
as also global in its reach, as “highlight[ing] the strategic positioning of national film industries in the global markets and their need for expansion through transnational alliances” (3). Thus the heritage film touches on themes of national identity while also exploiting transnational cinema marketing and production trends. Hilary Radner also sees heritage or “historical films” in this way, but emphasizes the duality of “celebration and critique” that marks the biopic, and specifically how it demonstrates a “shift in emphasis from the meta-historical to an emphasis on biography” (295-309). Thus three distinct trends appear throughout the analysis of “heritage” films: they rely on previously-known narratives and history to project a linear understanding of national identity; they are economically connected to transnational marketing schemes, which of course complicates the national narrative position; and, finally, they both praise and pan the history and heroism that is presented.

Classifying a film as part of the “heritage” tradition lends it a certain cultural cachet, which tends to reinforce the importance of the carefully culled cultural history that is filmed. From the epic film (for instance, Ben-Hur and the re-appropriation of another’s history) to a melodramatic period piece, a war film to a biopic, types of historical films – both fictional and non-fictional – find sustenance in re-presenting the already acceptable. “Heritage as generally understood is inherently backward gazing and nostalgic,” writes Dayna Oscherwitz, “idealizing the past and condemning the present” (Past 2). In this light, heritage films tend to recreate a collective memory because they emphasize a collective past, as borne through film (4). Who determines this collective past is not completely clear, although in a production model heavily indebted to the state
in France, it can be deduced that mostly those heritage films that glorify the past will be privileged.\textsuperscript{39}

Ginette Vincendeau, in the introduction to \textit{Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader}, pays close attention to all of these variations yet still tries to siphon the categorization down to a few, specific characteristics: “Heritage cinema thus refers to costume films made in the past twenty years or so [1980-2000], usually based on ‘popular classics’ (Forster, Austen, Shakespeare, Balzac, Dumas, Hugo, Zola)” (xvii)\textsuperscript{40}; or “Heritage films also draw on a wider popular cultural heritage that includes historical figures and moments, as well as music and painting,…” (xviii); or finally, and perhaps most importantly, “Heritage films […] concentrate on the careful display of historically accurate dress and décor,” (xviii) and are thus often criticized for having an artefact quality to them, as if they are museum pieces meant to be seen as historically-accurate representations of the past that they present.

What is telling about Vincendeau’s introduction is not just the sheer amount of films that can be considered heritage films according to her classification, but remarkably the amount of heritage films that have been produced just since the 1980s (the “Introduction” alone rattles off at least forty different heritage films from both Britain, the United States, and France). In fact, her discussion of ‘popular’ European cinema and the tendency of American audiences to ascribe ‘arthouse’ labels to these films simply

\textsuperscript{39} Any glance at any list of “heritage” films that many of these authors cite follows these patterns: adaptations of Marcel Pagnol, almost anything filmed by Jean-Paul Rappeneau (\textit{Cyrano} 1990 is the best example), and other films based on French literature (\textit{Les Misérables}, \textit{Madame Bovary}, \textit{Germinal}).

\textsuperscript{40} Vincendeau marks the emergence of heritage film at this time, with the arrival of films such as \textit{Jean de Florette}, \textit{Cyrano de Bergerac}, \textit{Les Destinées Sentimentales}, or even \textit{La Reine Margot}. These are just the French examples, but there are almost twice as many English examples to draw from (xvii).
because they come from Europe, further widens the heritage film label. Moreover, she notes trends which mix pulp genres – thriller, horror, science-fiction – with the high-end production and budget model of a heritage film, and therefore redresses the low-class categorization that often plagues these other genre films, marking instead a transition from one genre to another and a concomitant move up the scale of cultural acceptability rather than down (xxii). Despite Vincendeau’s intentions, her analysis actually opens up the possibility for more hybridization and for a broader sense of generic classification rather than a more limited approach.

The heritage film often resembles the grander Hollywood production model that many European, national cinemas struggle against – if not simply in terms of budget, also in terms of popularity and competition. The heritage film necessarily marks a distinct moment of the nation’s past, but it does so in such a way that, with the cinematic medium through which it acts, seems intrinsically designed and designated for an international audience – detailed and vertically-integrated marketing or publicity schemes, higher quality of production, and the presence of big-name, international stars (xxiii). But even these qualities are not always present, as is evidenced in Hilary Radner’s argument that French heritage films now contain more women and minority characters – who historically have not been huge stars internationally nor in the French system – and thus relocates them “more centrally as part of the social and cultural fabric of a particular period” (308). Again, a broader tent rather than a narrower one seems desirable.

But what happens when, as would inevitably be the case in the history of filmmaking, the heritage film meets the action film? The immediate question of fidelity –
to the source material or simply to the heritage genre – slightly fades, as an action film would almost certainly be viewed as a false representation of the historical moment. For instance, *Rambo* may have garnered a cult following that gave it a heritage-inflected cultural cachet, but any spectator would hesitate to label it as strictly belonging to the heritage genre. Indeed, how could anyone perceive of John Rambo as an accurate representation of a post-Vietnam soldier living in America, irrespective of the obviously allegorical nature of the story? Vincendeau’s conclusions give us particular insight into what these films accomplish rather than what these films are: “…under their own nostalgia, the films respond to changes in social and cultural mores, re-interpreting texts in ways which echo new agendas, be they of politics, gender, or ethnicity” (xxiv). The “heritage” film and the “action” film already have so much in common, and both terms can be considered as more than a generic categorization but still less than a mode of storytelling (the narrative mode is still the dominant form). The films of this chapter not only participate in a hybridization of genres, histories, production standards, and traditions, but also in the importance of the narrative for conveying a particular aesthetic style.

The films that I have chosen for this chapter fully participate in the heritage tradition, but also expand the boundaries and borders of the heritage category in order to achieve something different. Because each film is an action film, they will have certain narrative conventions; moreover, because each film is a heritage film, they will have still more narrative tendencies. The films of this chapter thus tend to mix these heritage traditions (adapted and period-specific) with newer forms of cinematic storytelling, as in
the action genre. In doing so, they use narrative to re-situate the mythology and history of French culture, and these films mark a reconfiguration of French identity for the contemporary spectator. In the analysis that follows, it will be shown that the kinds of stories these films tell (heritage and action), coupled with how they tell them (Ricoeur’s phenomenology), results in France reinterpreting its own history and its approach to the world.

**The early 2000s: Le Pacte des loups (Gans 2001) and Vidocq (Pitof 2001)**

Both *Vidocq* (Pitof 2001) and *Le Pacte des loups* (Gans 2001) are films that not only mesh the action aesthetic with both a heritage narrative and aesthetic, but each film also adds elements of the fantastic to its repertoire. These films therefore re-tell a heritage narrative from a fantasy and action viewpoint, and these updated versions re-present history to a contemporary French audience. The result is that this break from typical approaches to heritage films – as demonstrated in the action scenes as well as the continuity of the narrative – creates a new phenomenological understanding of the film from the viewpoint of a spectator. In turn, this creates a better comprehension of how spectators create their lives through storytelling and heroic deeds, and how human interactions are affected by these variations.

To begin with, let us look at the 2001 film *Vidocq*, directed by Pitof. Pitof is the stage name of Jean-Christophe Comar, a young French director with only a few films under his belt. Despite his relative youth, Pitof has a firm reputation as a special effects wizard in both Hollywood and France, having worked as the digital effects supervisor or
digital effects director for films in the *Alien* series, the *Astérix et Obélix* series, and working with both Jean-Pierre Jeunet (on the 1991 film *Delicatessen*) and Luc Besson. He also affirms this penchant in himself. Responding to a question in 2003 about the release of his first Hollywood film, *Catwoman* (2003), and the connection between cinema, literature, and comic books, Pitof did not hesitate to turn the conversation toward the digital revolution’s ability to re-present previously difficult stories:

> C'est un peu un mélange de tout. Il y a notamment une volonté "artistico-technico-divertissemento-tout ce qu'on veut", qui fait qu'on arrive enfin, avec la technologie digitale moderne, à faire vivre en chair et en os les super-héros. Jusqu'à présent, les séries télévisées et les dessins animés ont toujours été quelque peu kitsch, et ont maintenu les super-héros dans le cadre de la télévision. Aujourd'hui, nous avons les moyens technologiques de faire vivre ces super-héros de manière extrêmement réaliste, et de transposer au cinéma ce qu'on pouvait imaginer en lisant les BD.

> Je pense que cette vague ne va pas s'arrêter pour le moment, car nous ne sommes pas encore arrivés au bout de ce que les spectateurs veulent voir, et de ce qu'on peut montrer avec ces personnages et ces univers. Cette envie se retrouve des deux côtés : du côté production/studio/créateurs, et du côté du public. (Sardet)

It is no wonder that, after having served as the digital effects supervisor on films such as *Alien: Resurrection* (Jeunet 1997) or *Joan of Arc* (Besson 1999), Pitof naturally turned to
creating a purely digital film of his own. As the citation above illustrates, Pitof clearly sees the emergence of cost-heavy production – in his case for digital effects, but also in the case of costumes, location shooting, or even star power – as being demanded by both a public and the contemporary studio system. This trend allows for a re-envisioning of French cinematic production history, and also is a commentary on what culturally-specific narratives (which for Pitof means superheroes) French audiences may soon desire, and how production trends can now create these types of films. Thus a heritage narrative mixed with a high production action film budget strikes Pitof as a positive development in French cinema, and as a sort of democratization of audience desires which have an effect on production.

The film *Vidocq* follows the exploits of Étienne Boisset as he tracks clues surrounding the mysterious disappearance of the eponymous hero, Vidocq, at the hands of the Alchemist who wears a mirrored mask. Traveling throughout Paris and encountering an array of different spaces – the office of Vidocq’s old partner, a church, a brothel, and the digitally reconstructed streets of 19th-century Paris – Boisset retraces Vidocq’s steps in an effort to determine the identity of the Alchemist and find Vidocq. At the end, it is revealed that Vidocq was not dead at all; he had simply been hiding and waiting until the mirror-masked Alchemist revealed himself, and a final fight ends in the death of the Alchemist and the victory of Vidocq. The narrative thus follows a common detective fiction, where clues are slowly revealed to a spectator and the surprise reveal at the end is all the more astounding given the linear trajectory of the narrative.
Before diving deep into the film, it will be helpful to relay more information about Paul Ricoeur’s mimetic narrative and its application to human activity. Part of Ricoeur’s vast *Temps et Récit* is dedicated to determining exactly what is “la phénoménologie pure du temps” (125), or pure phenomenological time, because he proposes “la thèse que le temps ne peut être directement observé, que le temps est proprement invisible” (125). It will be helpful to quote at length Karl Simms, who has written extensively on Paul Ricoeur and phenomenology:

This [Husserlian] theory [of time] starts by pointing out the *aporias* (gaps) in the understanding of time resulting from the Aristotelian theory: if time is a series of ‘nows’, then whenever I say *now*, the time of that now has already gone: whenever I try to isolate the present, it is already in the past. The perception of time – or, more particularly, of the *present* time – always lags behind the present time, the ‘now’. [...] …on the one hand, we want to say that the present is always present, but on the other hand, as soon as we try to isolate it as present, it’s gone – it’s in the past. (81-82)

Whereas we have articulations of time, of the past, present, and future, Ricoeur and other phenomenologists instead prefer to see those utterances as simply trying to capture the elusive. We experience time, to be sure, and that experience is what makes it phenomenological, but Ricoeur also spent his life trying to define that particular experience of time.

In order to achieve an understanding of human time, as it is lived, Ricoeur relied on a basic assumption that time is given meaning, or *muthos* in Aristotelian terms, not
because of the mimetic act of representation, but *through* it. Again, Simms is enlightening: “This is why mimesis is intimately connected with *muthos* (emplotment), since emplotment orders not events, but actions, and conversely characters within narratives would have no motive to act if not for the causal connections that emplotment provides” (83-84). A simple mimetic event, an imitation of human action, means nothing if there is not a motivation behind it. Thus Ricoeur develops a three-fold mimesis of “pré-compréhension” (*Temps et Récit* 87), “configuration” (102) and “intersection” (109), in order to show that our interpretation of time might be linear, but our comprehension of time is circular. Moreover, this circularity of time is not just a one-off phenomenological moment, where the experience is lived and then ostensibly forgotten since, as the discussion on phenomenological time above illustrated, we are incapable of envisioning time. This type of vicious circle would be limiting if not for narrative, since narrative helps convert these experiential moments from an ever-repeating, flattened circle, into an extension of understanding, a “cercle bien portant” (*Temps et Récit* 17). Karl Simms does a wonderful job of clarifying Ricœur’s hermeneutic circle of phenomenological time, and through Ricœur “invites us to see this circle rather as a spiral: each time the circle is turned, the same point is passed *at a higher level*, and so the grand hermeneutical project of reaching human understanding through self-understanding attains ever greater heights” (80). Events happen linearly, but human understanding of these experiences happens spirally, where each new event allows for a recontemplation of previous events, and thus a restructuring of a narrative trajectory to human life.
And so Ricoeur dedicates a chapter to describing these three mimetic events that lead to a higher understanding of humanity. For instance, his first mimetic event is described as “la composition de l’intrigue [qui] est enracinée dans une pré-compréhension du monde de l’action : de ses structures intelligibles, de ses ressources symboliques et de son caractère temporel” (Tome 1, 87). Consequently, this prefiguration relies on previous experience to further development, meaning that an individual with more life experiences from which to draw on has an easier time understanding certain narrative occurrences. The second mimetic event is just “l’opération qui tire d’une simple succession une configuration” (Tome 1, 102). Importantly, this second stage entails an endpoint from which “the story and its meaning can be seen as a whole” (Simms 85), and emphasizes the need for either a closed system of fictional narrative – in other words, a story that has a definitive beginning and end – or an actual historical event.41 Ricoeur’s third mimetic event “marque l’intersection du monde du texte et du monde de l’auditeur ou du lecteur (Tome 1 109). As such, it portends a future moment where the lessons learned from previous narrative experiences can be put to use in the service of an individual. The importance of phenomenological time for Ricoeur is that these three mimetic events are in a constant state of fluctuation based on an individual’s experience, the content of the narrative, and how that experience and content combine to explain time for any human being.

41 Ricoeur spends a fair amount of time trying to distinguish between fictional texts and historical texts, positioning the latter as having different goals because of questions of truth and referentiality. In my opinion, Ricoeur insists on this distinction because he needs history to lead to some end goal per his religious proclivities.
Ricoeur’s phenomenology has not been applied to film the way one might presume it should be, although narratology and narrative theory in general has a thorough history with cinema. Considering that it provides an individualized (or spectator-specific) reading of a cinematic text – when most scholars search for patterns and tendencies in films and audiences – this limitation might partially be to blame. A spectator does not act in a vacuum, and his or her film choices are also part of a larger, societal context that also uses history to construct cultural narratives. Thus we can extrapolate Ricoeur’s individual phenomenology as functioning on a societal level, where historical narratives from France’s past are reconstructed and reinvigorated with cultural importance for a contemporary audience. As such, these films take on a new role in the society in which they are produced and filmed, and not just at the level of economics or capital accumulation, but at the crossroad of personal perception and group interpretation.

To return to Pitof’s film, the fact that Vidocq is a master detective and is responsible for solving mysteries is an important plot point, even though it seems like one of the weaker aspects of the film when compared to the digital effects and the costumes. The beginning part of the film follows the backstory of the character Vidocq’s detective prowess as he solves a curious mystery. The story is recounted by his friend, Nimier, in front of Boisset who has come to write his biography on Vidocq. This framing serves two purposes: the first is to establish the strength of Vidocq’s detective work in relation to the rest of the film, so that a spectator can understand why another detective (Boisset) would proceed to investigate Vidocq’s life. The second purpose is as part of Ricoeur’s mimetic “intersection,” connecting the world of a spectator to the world of the plot. In the
flashback, a clue is revealed that then leads Boisset – in the film’s present – to investigate a Chinese dancer. As he is asking questions, the film again uses a flashback to show Vidocq interviewing the same dancer, and this trend of the present narrative cycling back on the past narrative to reveal the future narrative, resembles the type of comprehension that Ricoeur delineated: “L’intersection, donc, du monde configuré …et du monde dans lequel l’action effective se déploie et déploie sa temporalité spécifique” (*Tome I* 109). As the hermeneutic circle spirals higher and higher due to the stacking of present and past that Pitof employs in his narrative, a spectator himself or herself must configure and reconfigure the linearity of the narrative, much like a spectator does on a daily basis for his or her own life.

Tellingly, the appropriation of the narrative in *Vidocq* by a spectator does not happen at a simple mimetic level, where the resemblance of the characters or the action mimics what a spectator has done. Instead, the hermeneutic circle reaches higher and higher to the level of metaphor, where a spectator then reconfigures and reinterprets the convoluted narrative in order to derive a semblance of sense at the end of the film. As Ricoeur states in his earlier text, *La Métaphore vive*: “[La] transition de la sémantique à l’herméneutique trouve sa justification la plus fondamentale dans la connexion en tout discours entre le sens, qui est son organisation interne, et la référence, qui est son pouvoir de se référer à une réalité en dehors du langage” (10). The sense of the narrative, its constant flashbacks that reveal pertinent information, distinctly references a spectator’s own tendency to reconstruct the past based on new experiences in the present. In a sense, this is in contrast to what a heritage film is supposed to accomplish. In his short article
titled “Dépoussiérer les mythes: désynchronisation et hybridation dans les fictions patrimoniales,” François-Xavier Molia argues that a specific group of four films, which includes *Vidocq* and *Le Pacte des loups*, do not attempt to reduce the distance between the present and the past, but rather “radicalisent cette volonté de modernisation au point de s’écarter sensiblement de la plupart des autres fictions patrimoniales” (94). In turn, this leads to a film which attempts to “séduire tous les publics,” but then also exposes these films to the “risque de désoriento les différents publics visés” (105). For my argument, the strength of the heritage film classification has less to do with the intent of these films than with their ability to incite a common narrative referent that potentially overshadows the more typical heritage markers seen in film. As such, Ricoeur’s narrative phenomenology is the first instance of heritage continuity, without needing to go into too much detail about a specific interpretation of the costumes, special effects, historical context, and star power of these films.

Heritage films already arguably participate in this sort of acrobatic game. Dayna Oscherwitz is illuminating when stating that “Through the invention of founding myths, epic histories, national traditions, and a collective memory of all of these, nations hide their essential modernity, presenting themselves as the logical consequences of actions and processes rooted in the distant past” (*Past* 3). But the heritage film is only one aspect of this equation; and whereas its loaded weight in the realm of cultural importance is heavy, the action film also has a role to play based on its simplicity. The ease with which these heroic narratives are constructed, and their ability to transition almost seamlessly from opening conflict to end resolution, makes the phenomenological experience even
more salient. Despite the syntactic variance of these action narratives – whether it be the all-valiant hero who saves the day, or the reluctant everyman who must step up to the challenge, or the rebellious anti-hero who must help others in spite of himself – the paradigmatic comprehensibility remains easy to decipher; and, therefore, extrapolation to cultural myths (or even individual spectator identification) is quicker and more complete.

Simplicity is a cogent reason as to why these narratives work on a phenomenological level. Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic project involved an idea of appropriation, or of an understanding of a text that is founded on a deeper understanding of the self. As he states in his *Du Texte à l’action*, “l’interprétation d’un texte s’achève dans l’interprétation de soi d’un sujet qui désormais se comprend mieux, se comprend autrement, ou même commence de se comprendre” (152). This is Ricoeur’s hermeneutic reflection, where the interpretation of oneself is actually mediated by the text, and only because perhaps a comprehensive reflection is difficult to find in real-life:

D’un côté, la compréhension de soi passe par le détour de la compréhension des signes de culture dans lesquels le soi se documente et se forme; de l’autre, la compréhension du texte n’est pas à elle-même sa fin, elle médiatise le rapport à soi d’un sujet qui ne trouve pas dans le court-circuit de la réflexion immédiate le sens de sa propre vie. (152)

The text, or in this case the film, serves as a medium through which a spectator can understand himself or herself better. In a world that is often complex and confusing, an action narrative provides an easy path to self-description; and regardless of the path a spectator chooses – which is not relegated to the black or white picture of good or evil –
his or her narrative identity is based on overcoming obstacles on the way to self-realization. Thus narrative in a film helps conceive of and organize a narrative identity for each spectator.

Vidocq was not the only film to emerge in the heyday of 2001 digital production. The year also saw the release of yet another French action-heritage hybrid in Christophe Gans’ *Le Pacte des loups*. At the time of its release, *Le Pacte des loups* was part of a growing trend in French cinema for blockbuster films, coinciding with the still popular *Amélie* (Jeunet 2001), *Belphégor* (Salomé 2001), or even *Yamakasi* (Zeitoun 2001).

Wanting to compete with the abundance of Hollywood while also wanting to maintain a connection to the historical roots of French cinema – notably the author/filmmaker’s position in the creation of a film – Christophe Gans’ film looked to participate in a genre while also being marked as a national product. Rather than focusing on the production aspects of this film, though, *Le pacte* is significant for its action-historical hybridization, capable of being classified as a heritage film that also contains updated action scenes, and also for its fantastic elements such as the beast itself. This juxtaposition of dated historical references with modern and contemporary re-imaginings and movements makes the French action-heritage film an interesting case study. This is the quintessential post-modern movie: a pastiche of the past with a panache of the present.

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42 In certain analyses of films, such as those in the psychoanalytic model, spectator identification necessarily coincides with the hero or the “good guy”. This type of identification is important, but irrelevant for Ricoeur.

43 For a more thorough treatment of the generic classification of the film, as well as its box-office success, see Charlie Michael’s “French National Cinema and the Martial Arts Blockbuster” (2005). In particular, his section on *Le Pacte des loups* is illuminating when it comes to the debate between Hollywood-style genre films and French auteur cinema.
*Le Pacte des loups* follows the adventures of Grégoire de Fronsac (Samuel Le Bihan) and his Native American companion Mani (Mark Dacascos) as they work to uncover the truth behind a handful of vicious attacks in the Gévaudan territory of France. The film moors itself in action narratives by presenting a hero who must struggle to overcome an enemy through physical combat, staging intricate fight scenes and gunfire scenes that require technical prowess (on behalf of the cinematographer) and special effects expertise. On top of the physical requirements, the film also is a bit of a hybridization with other film genres by using the fantastical element of the *bête de Gévaudan* and the superhuman strength of the vile villain Jean-François, played by Vincent Cassel. As the final fight scene indicates, only teamwork and camaraderie can overcome the fantastic, a typical trope in the action film genre.

While the action scenes are heightened by the use of dizzying special effects, the abundance of heritage film clichés is what makes this film notable. The costumes of the film are equivalent to any heritage film, with busty corsets and loose-fitting smocks for the characters to wear. Along those lines, the casting of Monica Bellucci as the sexually alluring temptress is more attuned to the visual sexism of contemporary society than the accuracy of historical representation; but then so is the casting of Vincent Cassel as an obviously contemporary star who can attract large audiences. And of course, like *Vidocq*, *Le Pacte* takes its cue from a popular legend which has persisted and even grown throughout the years. Moreover, its mixture of old and new, of the heritage film historical credential with the action aesthetic of contemporary motion pictures, is resoundingly apparent.
The mixture of *Le Pacte*’s historical tale with modern action scenes is clearly important, but the action scenes are filmed in such a way to draw attention to their style. The opening action scene establishes the action aesthetic of the film, and it is mighty. A team of bandits attacks a helpless man and his daughter, chasing them through the countryside and running them down in a valley. The heroes, Fronsac and Mani, arrive just in time. What follows, though, is a slowing down of cinematic time that brings action, movement, technique, sound, and music to the foreground. A downpour sets the mood, and western-standoff music sets the tone. A simple dismount is imbued with power as the camera focuses on the sloshing boots and follows the footsteps with thunderous, ominous rumblings. Grunts and cries sound out as the quick edits move from long shots that establish the predicament to close-ups of the deft staff-work of Mani. The change between slow-motion and real-time also lends variability to the scene. All of these features add to the sensational affect felt in a spectator.

The connection of *Le Pacte des loups* to heritage cinema has been extensively covered by Dayna Oscherwitz, Raphaëlle Moine and Pierre Beylot, and of course François-Xavier Molia.

44 But where each of their arguments end, mine begins. Because the narrative in heritage films is so important, it must also be seen as a site of heritage, or as a space where the heritage tradition is also playing out. Typically, though, these scholars tend to see the narrative as breaking from traditional heritage films because they mix the modern with the anachronistic. Speaking about the digital effects in *Le Pacte des loups*.

44 See Dayna Oscherwitz’s *Past Forward* (2010), Raphaëlle Moine’s *Les genres du cinéma* (2002), or Molia’s previously cited article for extensive treatment of *Le Pacte des loups*. 

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loups, Oscherwitz states that “Those effects that are visible … have to do with editing or enhancement that takes place post-production,” and as such they “disrupt the film’s verisimilitude at the level of the narrative, and specifically, they interrupt or undermine the unified linear sequencing associated with filmic realism and historical realism in particular” (Shaking 53). The slow-motion scene described above, then, interrupts the linear, historical narrative, in favor of an emphasis on action. For Oscherwitz, this is problematic:

The film first convinces a spectator that he or she is witnessing the past, and then reminds a spectator that filmic time is an illusion, susceptible to manipulation. This draws attention to the power of cinema to recreate and transmit the past while at the same time blocking any such transmission.

(53)

Molia, for his part, prefers to see these films as breaking with the tradition of the heritage film in similar ways, notably “l’abandon de la temporalité linéaire dans le montage” and “la distorsion temporelle, sensible à travers l’usage du ralenti, est également très fréquente” (96). This “non-respect ponctuel de l’esthétique réaliste” (95) creates a disconnect between history and the present.

However, I prefer to see this breaking of linear, narrative time – through the use of slow-motion action – as a moment of continuity with French tradition and the past. The pace of the scene is slowed down through the camera and the visual effects, but it is also slowed down at the level of the narrative, where time passes slowly and deliberately. This invites a spectator to configure the scene as it is happening, without recourse to
“pré-compréhension” or the intersection of this moment with the everyday life of a spectator. As Ricoeur again insists, “le caractère commun de l’expérience humaine, qui est marqué, articulé, clarifié par l’acte de raconter sous toutes ses formes, c’est son caractère temporel” (Texte 12). At the level of the experience of the film, a period of slow-motion camerawork does not just break from the linear continuity of the narrative, but also actively engages a spectator in the experience of the story by emphasizing the temporal encounter. Much like in the experience of a spectator’s own life, time can occasionally feel very slow or very fast, depending on multiple factors that are not always controllable. By marking this time through the narrative and the cinematography, Le Pacte des loups invites its spectator to experience the same sensation, and not just to see the film as a documentary on history or as a veritable retelling of a past event.

At the level of the narrative as well, the understanding of the heroism of Mani and Fronsac is conducted metaphorically. It may be simple to say, but any spectator watching Le Pacte des loups would not have a problem recognizing it as a fiction film rather than, say, a documentary. As a film, it is akin to an allegory for the cultural prevalence of good versus evil. A spectator does not interpret the scene literally as a Native American (Mani) standing in the rain and other men dancing around him. Instead, it is through a phenomenological understanding of metaphor that a spectator can interpret the scene. As Ricoeur says in La Métaphore vive when talking about oxymorons (although it could well be any other play on words, as Ricoeur uses it as just an example), “par son sens littéral, l’expression constitue un énigme dont le sens métaphorique offre la solution” (246). In other words, the literal understanding of the scene through the physical camera can only
be comprehended metaphorically, as it is the metaphor that “offers a solution” to the incongruent cinematography (character positioning, low-angle framing, lighting contrasts, and mise-en-scène, to name only a few) on the screen. This process is immediate for a spectator, helping it to arrive at an understanding through the comprehension of metaphor. As Karl Simms aptly summarizes Ricoeur’s theory: “Metaphors are only valuable because they force the listener or reader to interpret them” (73).

Consequently, what these two fantasy-driven, heritage films show us is that French action films and French heritage films can coalesce into a hybrid form that features elements of multiple genres (action, heritage, fantasy, drama, etc.). By conceiving of their national, literary heritage as a resource for action films, Pitof and Christophe Gans have challenged the tradition of heritage, and have used narrative variation to represent the complexity of human understanding of story. The simplicity of the narratives work on many different levels – at the point of self-understanding through narrative building, and also through the use of narrative metaphor as a representation of human life – and the ease with which this information is phenomenologically understood marks these films as culturally important even if not critically acclaimed. By privileging the mixture of the past and present, or by centering on the narrative that is experienced, both *Vidocq* and *Le Pacte des loups* have succeeded in expanding the variety of French cinema and the varied ways in which a spectator can read a film.
**Action-heritage and the leveling of history**

French action films maintain a dubious position in the realm of French cinema. It is mostly English-language reviewers and critics who appreciate the French action film for what it is: a genre-driven mode of cinematic storytelling that adds nuance through film techniques.\(^\text{45}\) It is not simply that the action moments in these films are realistic, or adhere to a typical definition of how real-life events should be presented through the filmic medium; but, rather, that the real events that occurred during these historical moments can be exploited in order for a contemporary audience to comprehend them. As Hilary Radner suggests in her article “The Historical Film and Contemporary French Cinema: Representing the Past in the Present,” these films participate in a dichotomous debate: either they contribute to an understanding of the present through the past, or these films contribute to an understanding of the past through the present (289-91). Throughout her illuminating article on how France has perceived these films, Radner consistently remarks on the politics behind making such works, whether it be through genre, historical gender divides, economic class commentary, or even a spectator’s own, historically-situated response. Because of this political stance, Radner ends up missing the forest for the trees. She is perspicacious in her reading, to be sure, but films participate in a grander intersection of politics, culture, history, and society, and therefore are more than just politically relevant. As such, the narrative of these films should be seen as a

\(^{45}\) For instance, Catherine Wheatley’s *Sight & Sound* review for Mesrine: “…the French have produced a genre film that is polished, persuasive and full of panache” (70).
reinforcement of a specifically French worldview that is applicable to the broader national populace, rather than fitting into a critical or scholarly-defined worldview.

The 2008 two-part *Mesrine* (*Mesrine: L’Instinct de mort* and *Mesrine: L’Ennemi public n° 1*) is an action-heritage hybrid that significantly blurs boundaries between history, reality, and fiction, and adds to the mythology of French action narratives. The film stars Vincent Cassel as the titular character, and it recounts the story of Jacques Mesrine, a notorious French criminal/gangster who evaded capture on multiple occasions – or even escaped (he is known for breaking out of prison at least twice). The film follows the exploits of Mesrine from his beginnings as a criminal immediately following his release from military duty in the Algerian War to his bloody demise on the streets of Paris in 1979. Traveling between Canada and France, from the underworld of crime to freely meandering the streets of Paris, Mesrine is presented as a mythical figure who is short-tempered, ruthless, and active. In one sense, the film vaults his persona to that of victimized anti-hero, falling prey to a gendarmerie that slowly became exhausted with having to follow Mesrine wherever he went. In another sense, however, the character fits the typical billing of a gangster found in gangster films, remorseless at times but protective of his own.

There are many similarities between action films and gangster films, but this is not the space to elucidate this argument. Simply put, *Mesrine* can be classified as an action-heritage film because of its aesthetic presentation, its cinematography, its sequential elements (at least two chase scenes, multiple gunfights and fisticuffs), and the historically-based story that it is recounting. Radner again touches briefly on this film,
stating that the “anti-heroic nature of these protagonists conformed, perhaps, to audiences’ own values while allowing them to *revel momentarily* in their anti-social antics” (305, emphasis added). Thus the characterization of Jacques Mesrine, the historical figure, as constructed by Richet’s film, adheres to the values of non-conformity often seen in French culture. Perhaps more revealing, however, is Radner’s own admission that there is a moment of revelry enjoyed by a spectator, an experience that she sees as connected to “anti-social antics,” but an experiential moment nonetheless. Radner continues her analysis by stating that “while these characters appear caught within the web of history, […] their fates are also shown to be the consequence […] of their own choices and actions” (305). For an action narrative, this is exactly the point (see the epigraph that opened the chapter). Radner develops her thesis as a critique of these French action-heritage films, noting:

> While history intervenes, the films make allusion to events rather than foregrounding their causal influence. For example, little attention is paid in *Carlos* to the larger political situation that produced the struggle in which he participates. These films borrow their discourse most obviously from the popular Hollywood gangster film, including their titles, and constitute the shadow figures that haunt the more typically celebratory biopic. (305)

I see *Mesrine* as participating in detailing a narrative worldview that sees struggle against an opposing force – regardless of what that force may be – as essential to a humanistic comprehension of the world. As such, the historically-based content of the film becomes
less important – although its heritage credentials do play a significant role – than the overarching narrative message of struggle and prevailing that remains pertinent for a contemporary audience.

To support this thesis, I turn once again to Paul Ricoeur and his *Temps et récit*, this time relying on his “intentionnalité historique” and what it means for a contemporary spectator. When speaking about the role of the historian, Ricoeur suggests that it is not an easy occupation because “il est mis dans une situation réelle ou potentielle de contestation et tente de prouver que telle explication vaut mieux que telle autre” (247). Another consistent problem is the “problème de l’objectivité” (248) and the accumulation of historic events that aim to complete the story from this objective, causal sense. Rather than seeing this as a problem, though, it can be seen as a democratization of storytelling, as allowing certain agents (in this case, the film director) to tell a story differently than perhaps the official account or the folkloric account. Richet himself seems somewhat aware of the privilege that is granted him, using the opening of the second *Mesrine* film to state his intentions: “Tout film comporte une part de fiction et aucun ne peut prétendre reconstituer à l’identique la complexité de la vie d’un homme, sur laquelle chacun conserve son propre regard” (*L’Ennemi*). Whether Richet succeeds in telling his story or relaying historical events is ultimately unclear, but he at least is aware of the storytelling aspect of his work.

After the movie opens, a spectator is invited back in time, through a flashback, to witness the key events that led to the life of crime for Jacques Mesrine. As a French soldier in Algeria, Mesrine is ordered to execute a woman but hesitates and fires on the
husband instead. A slight fast forward brings us into the home of Mesrine’s parents and of a family dinner where the father still struggles to impart his morality to his son. Halfway through the conversation, however, a youthful friend arrives in a convertible and honks the horn for Mesrine to depart. Leaving his parents in the middle of the meal, Mesrine embarks on a series of adventures (shot sequentially) that see him enter a nightclub filled with scantily-clad women, in the act of coitus with a woman he met at the bar, a late-night poker game among friends, an understated and understood request to join the exploits of his thieving friend, and finally the broad daylight robbery of an elderly couple, Mesrine’s first successful adventure. The torture that Mesrine feels in executing a woman – even though he does not complete the task and instead kills the other man – serves as a foundational moment for his character’s eventual decisions because of the narrative weight that Richet gives to it. As Ricoeur states when referring to the historian, who also acts like a narrator, “modifier en pensée, dans un sens déterminé, tel ou tel facteur préalablement isolé, c’est construire des cours alternatifs” (259). By placing the moment in Algeria at the head of the narrative progression – even though it is chronological – the narrative trajectory of Mesrine’s life is experienced as determined by that event. Richet could have chosen any of the many other events as the underpinning for Mesrine’s exploits. Yet Richet’s editing choice also demonstrates the power of historical narrative in a spectator’s own life, where he or she searches for an earlier experience that could be seen as determining the future. Seeing, in a certain sense, a justification for the actions of even the most hardened of criminals, Jacques Mesrine, a
spectator could easily find a rationale for the criminal actions of others, thereby opening the mind and allowing a more nuanced understanding of humanity.

The film’s focus on Mesrine’s past and the potential for its influence on his future also tends to flatten historical distinctions that may have been perpetuated by biased sources. Mesrine and his criminal friends are violent and aggressive, but they also have a sense of justice to their actions. Throughout the films, Mesrine serves as the righter of wrongs, committed to the greater good of his fellow man. His first mistress is attacked by an Arab gangster and severely beaten: Jacques rights the wrong by stripping the Arab, tying him up, torturing him, and burying him (barely) alive. All the while, Mesrine and Guido (Gérard Depardieu) preach their vision of gender equality by scolding the Arab for beating an innocent woman. As his later exploits force him to leave France for Montréal, Mesrine becomes a supporter of social justice, joining the Front Libération du Québec (FLQ) and robbing a rich person to fund the FLQ. Perhaps the ultimate depiction of ambiguous heroics, however, comes in the form of the police in the second film, *Mesrine: L’Ennemi public n° 1*. After forming a relationship with Mesrine – one built on the consistently thwarted attempts of the inspector to catch Mesrine – the police inspector eventually organizes the assassination of Jacques in the middle of a Parisian street, marking the police as complicit in crime and criminality.

In the second part of *Temps et récit*, Ricoeur takes up the distinction between the “récit de fiction” and the “récit historique,” ultimately concluding that the fictional retelling has a privileged position over that of history, since the former has “L’enrichissement du concept de mise en intrigue et, corrélativement, de temps narratif”
(92). It is the ability of fiction to “multiplie les distorsions qu’autorise le dédoublement
du temps entre temps mis à raconter et temps des choses racontées” (Tome 2 233).
Understood as such, fictional narrations are capable of playing with and distorting time
more than historical narratives because the fiction can extend and expand the importance
of certain moments in a character’s life; whereas history, because of its purported
restraints on truth, must attempt to render the same events as causative and historically
similar. Richet’s films spend an inordinate amount of time on the encounters of Mesrine
with fellow criminals who also have a soft spot for social justice, giving these characters
ample screen time as well as dialogue to justify their actions. These interactions mostly
take place in prison, and the film presents each subsequent imprisonment as motivation
for Mesrine and his friends to break out, as if the simple act of defiance was their only
motivation. From an historical standpoint, Mesrine’s prison escapes are extraordinary, yet
situated within a larger context of evasion and criminality. But from the film’s viewpoint,
these prison breaks and the amount of screen time dedicated to their portrayal provides
them a privileged position as formative for Jacques Mesrine’s character. Narrative,
fictional time is able to provide the impetus for action that history may render flat.

Ultimately, Mesrine is less a presentation of a troubled masculinity, although that
is quite apparent in multiple scenes with Mesrine and his numerous wives or
sociocultural dealings, than it is an indictment of any narrative form that depicts heroism
as purely good. Even when venturing as far as Québec, where Mesrine is eventually
arrested for his association with the FLQ, the film presents his time in prison as filled
with torture, psychological strain, and his body stripped of all possessions and clothing.
In the meantime, Mesrine stays true to his word. He envisions the news coverage of his escape from prison as “la gloire,” showcasing his nationalistic expectations for his exploits. Moreover, Mesrine made a promise while in the Québec prison to liberate a few friends. Such is the premise, then, for the intense action sequence that appears at the end of the first film. Both Mesrine and his friend, Jean-Paul Mercier (French-Canadian actor Roy Dupuis), are heavily armed for their attack on the prison, and with the help of a few inmates, they succeed in blowing a few things up and killing some correctional officers. At this moment, both Mesrine and the police are implicated in the frenetic motion of the camera and the ambiguity of the narrative – accepting that both the police and Mesrine are both right and wrong. In fact, the end intertitles reinforce the social implications of the film. A spectator discovers that Mesrine’s companion, Jean-Paul Mercier, was killed later in a botched bank robbery; but beyond that, the exploits of Mercier and Mesrine, as the intertitles tell us, led to an investigation of the torture practices at the Saint-Vincent de Paul (SCU) prison and the eventual closing of its doors. In other words, Mesrine and Mercier were somewhat heroes for their revelation of the practices by the police at the correctional facility. The film thus draws a clear connection between the criminal activities of Mesrine and his friend and the reform that resulted. Occasionally, breaking the rules, or the law, is necessary for achieving progress. Revealing the unfair treatment of prisoners, irrespective of how it may come about, trumps any indiscretions of Jacques Mesrine the film character.

This type of historical analysis seen through the lens of a film coincides once again with Ricoeur’s narrative approach to texts. In his chapter on “l’intentionnalité
historique” in *Temps et récit Tome 1*, Ricoeur suggests that narrative necessarily implies a causal connection between event and interpretation, and therefore the construction of a cultural history consists of creating this relation rather than just a listing of chronological events (251). “Si tout récit met en œuvre, en vertu même de l’opération de mise en intrigue, une connexion causale, cette construction est déjà une victoire sur la simple chronologie et rend possible la distinction entre l’histoire et la chronique” (251). Richet’s use of intertitles renders this quite explicit, but even without such help, the film’s narrative trajectory creates a causal relationship between what happens to Mesrine in the past and his socially-egalitarian prison rescue in the future. For a spectator, causality might be seen as stemming from a specific point in history, such as Mesrine’s dilemma during the Algerian War. However, Ricoeur would argue that this “imputation causale” is only valid insofar as all other factors are first given equal weight and then this one event is perceived as having an “adequate causality” rather than an “accidental causality” (259-60). For Ricoeur, this is the difficult and trying work of historians: cancelling out the many different instances of potential causality in order to arrive at the one event (or perhaps multiple events) which truly forms the foundational moment from where all other events make narrative and temporal sense. For Jean-François Richet’s film text in particular, it is not just one past event during the Algerian War that forms Mesrine’s political and cultural conscience, but rather many personal events in Mesrine’s life – his isolation in prison, his experience as a petty thief, his harassment at the hands of the police – which create Mesrine’s desire to rescue his fellow inmates. The chronology of the film, its montage, puts the experience of Algeria at the beginning and suggests that it
was a formative event; but the chronology of the film’s narrative, coinciding with Ricoeur’s assertion that history is more than just a chronology of events and instead a causality of factors, shines light on Mesrine’s decision.

The story of *Mesrine* could (rightfully so) be seen as a glorification of the individualistic, anti-hero narrative that arguably plagues many crime stories coming out of Hollywood, Hong Kong, and other European markets. That these stories might offer an approach to phenomenologically understanding life at the level of narrative simplicity – that is, struggle or conflict as necessary to overcoming problems – is often overlooked in favor of dismissing the genre at the level of the narrative content. Admittedly, Jacques Mesrine was a terrible person, and Jean-François Richet’s *Mesrine* does a bit of a disservice in attempting to revise his story and forgive Mesrine’s very bad actions. But films are not always responsible for the details. In other words, at the level of specificity of the story of Jacques Mesrine, Richet’s film is dubious; but at a general level (and again, the action genre is arguably only operating at this general level), the narrative tells a universalizing story by using a specific French persona.

In turn, a French audience (and an international audience as well) can make better sense of its own narrative understanding of the world. This is, in many ways, the point of Paul Ricoeur’s narrative identity:
Nous avons une précompréhension intuitive de cet état de choses : les vies humaines ne deviennent-elles pas plus lisibles lorsqu’elles sont interprétées en fonction des histoires que les gens racontent à leur sujet? Et ces « histoires de vie » ne sont-elles pas à leur tour rendues plus intelligibles lorsque leur sont appliqués les modèles narratifs – les intrigues – empruntés à l’histoire ou à la fiction (drame ou roman)? (“L’Identité” 295)

Ricoeur proposes two ways of looking at this historical text: first, there is an “intuition” to understanding one’s life that is based on the creation of a narrative tale, one that may inevitably take advantage of exaggeration or understatement to recount the important moments, but ultimately one that uses story to describe and not necessarily to prescribe; second, by providing a narrative framework around historical moments that, taken alone, do not entail interpretation (Mesrine’s prison breaks or the police investigation), life itself becomes more “intelligible,” more capable of being understood, and therefore the character – or the human being – is better at making subsequent decisions.

So *Mesrine* the film is guilty of indoctrinating a glorification of gore and crime only if the audience is incapable of separating the art of storytelling from the details of the actual events. It would be impossible to claim that spectators who enjoy crime and action stories are completely aware that these tellings are purely fictional and only operate at the level of the narrative; but it would be equally impossible to claim that spectators who indulge in these types of stories are incapable of distinguishing between a general narrative understanding and the detailed violence on screen. Are superhero movies ridiculed for their misrepresentation of flying bodies? Are action movies
criticized for the inaccuracy of weapon safety? Does the gore in horror movies misrepresent the damaging effects of violence? In “Experiential Realism and Motion Pictures,” Jane Stadler argues that “questions of verisimilitude […] are inconsequential to films geared to be emotionally and physiologically gripping rather than intellectually credible” (450). Thus from a phenomenological viewpoint at the experiential level, the experience of watching the film itself can be separated from the film’s adherence to an accurate historical portrayal of the events.

Action-history and the state of the self

As a final analysis of the action-heritage film narrative in France, I want to focus on two films that depict state agencies as their historical foundations. Julien Leclercq’s 2011 L’Assaut and Mathieu Kassovitz’s L’Ordre et la morale from the same year. Both films use representatives from military departments – mostly the GIGN (which stands for the “Groupe d’Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale,” the French equivalent of an American police SWAT team), with a slightly negative outlook on the army for Kassovitz – as well as a hostage crisis as a background to telling the story. Both are also based on literature written to recount the harrowing details of each adventure: L’Assaut being based on a book written by two hostages on the plane and titled Le Vol Alger-Marseille (2006); and L’Ordre based on La Morale et l’action (1992), written by Philippe Legorjus, a captain of the GIGN at the time. Apart from these similarities, however, the films differ in their use of action cinematography to present the film: Leclercq uses the typical tropes of action filming, including quick cuts, shaky cam, close-up fight scenes
and gun battles, whereas *L’Ordre et la morale* is a more subtle telling of the human drama behind the event, saving the action for the final thirty minutes as a culmination of the story. That said, Kassovitz does still freely use war film tropes (heavy sound editing and dramatic music, slow-motion and close-ups during struggles).46

Of course, it would be simple to read these two films as participating in the contentious *films patrimoniaux* category and criticize them as such. Laurent Véray ridicules certain types of heritage films, as illustrated in his analysis of Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Un Long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004) and Christain Carion’s *Joyeux Noël* (2005), as committing at least two gross errors: depoliticization of the topic and oversimplification. Moreover, these films do not address the facts of history, even though their events are taken from valid sources and adapted with an eye for verity, but rather suffer from an “unique objectif … de répondre aux craintes et aux angoisses de la société contemporaine,” which results in a tendency to “aseptiser les choses et à faire dans le simplisme” (166). It is obvious that he finds these types of films cloying, but ticket sales and box office receipts – as he also mentions – tell a different story: despite the oversimplification, these films are still quite popular. Within France, there were around two million entries for *Joyeux Noël*, and four-and-a-half million entries for *Un Long dimanche*, which are quite large.

What Véray’s take on heritage films leaves aside, then, is what these heritage films are actually accomplishing (outside of ticket sales) for a contemporary audience,

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46 Perhaps it goes without saying, but these film techniques are becoming more and more prevalent in all films, not just war or action films, and so they are perhaps just cinematic tropes rather than belonging to any one or another genre.
and beyond just addressing contemporary fears of spectators. It may be that these oversimplified retellings are leaving something to be desired from an historical adaptation approach; but contemporary audiences demonstrate their desire for heritage films by continually seeing them. Thus, what is in heritage films that makes them desirable? It is not their adherence to history that gives them cultural cachet or historical importance, as Véray would want it. Instead, it is their consistent presentation of a narrative history, of a progression of events that have led to the present moment and helps explain contemporary sentiments (what Véray dismisses as a simple response to the worries of a contemporary populace), and specifically in the case of L’Assaut and L’Ordre et la morale, one that features a formidable agency run through teamwork and even violence to accomplish the goals that its fictional retelling has set out before them. Thus the GIGN in both films plays the role of a heroic ‘truth’ that cannot be explained through history alone. It is possible to choose “l’art comme méthode de refondation,” as Gérard Gobry explains in his brief article on the foundation of myth and mythology, where “Nous pouvons sans crainte qualifier les arts, de “divertissement”, au meilleur sens du terme. L’art comme détour, - comme dans la recherche scientifique – pour atteindre une vérité qui ne s’offre jamais dans sa nudité” (31). Neither the accuracy of the historical narrative nor the mimetic exactitude of the story matters as much when compared to the metaphorical power of the story to create a mythology of a whole population.

What these two films, L’Assaut and L’Ordre et la morale, invoke is an understanding of a French population through a definition of selfhood, in this case
designated by the narrative on screen and its relation to a spectator (individually and as a group). As Ricoeur argues again in his “L’identité narrative,” the identity of a self is an interpretation, mediated through a narrative (among other things), and serves as a mixing space of both fiction and history to create an historical fiction, such as is found quite frequently in the myth of the “grands hommes” in France (295).

Ricoeur goes on to argue that the act of identification through selfhood – as different from identification through mimesis which operates on a model of comparison that remains temporally constant – is based on ascribing actions to a person and thereby providing agency to this person, and then also attributing a moral judgment based on societal norms and mores. This definition of selfhood, as a person who has chosen his or her actions and is thus subjected to the judgments of others and society, whatever those judgments may be, is for Ricoeur the phenomenological identity that historical narratives can help create by either challenging or reinforcing these notions. As such, identity is not necessarily temporally constant, but instead is mutable based on action and agency and
the responsibility that comes with choice, as well as through the stories based in history that we tell ourselves.

For instance, let us take an important scene from Julien Leclercq’s *L’Assaut* and apply Ricoeur’s narrative phenomenology to the trajectory of the story. As briefly stated above, *L’Assaut* follows the exploits of Thierry (played by Vincent Elbaz), a high-ranking GIGN officer, and his team as they confront a terrorist hijacking of an Air France plane. During the Algerian civil war, a group of young Algerians from the “Groupe d’Islamique Armée” (GIA) stormed Air France flight 8969 while it was preparing for takeoff and held the plane hostage while demanding the release of prisoners. The Algerian government and the French government became involved, with the former commencing the negotiations while the latter mobilized its GIGN task force to eventually kill the hijackers once the plane landed in Marseille. The film thus recounts the story from a few different points of view: the experience of Thierry and the GIGN team, the bureaucratic machine and its choice to deploy violence in order to restore order, and the four Algerian men on the plane as well as their interactions with the passengers and crew.

The film’s style is similar to reality-inspired action films from Hollywood, with a muted color scheme (it almost seems as if the film is shot entirely in black and white), intense dialogue that serves as explanation for character actions, shaky-cam cinematography, and an intense shoot-out culminating in a French victory at the very end. At one moment, shortly after the storming of the plane by the GIGN in an attempt to rescue the hostages and subdue the hijackers, Thierry leads the attack and successfully shoots two of the Algerian men before being shot himself by the other Algerians. As the
bullets explode into his body, Thierry is thrown back into the aisles of the plane and 
collapses on the ground, and he enters a dream-like state meant to symbolize his slow 
death. This moment in the narrative marks the culmination of selfhood and identity as 
described by Ricoeur, where Thierry has made a choice to be the first GIGN officer to 
enter the plane and therefore must accept the consequences of his actions, in this case, 
being shot and nearly dying. His decision makes sense according to the narrative logic of 
the story and the scenes that came before; however, his decision also makes sense 
according to France’s history, of a heroic deed enacted by one person, and a spectator’s 
sense of choice with regards to his or her own life.

A spectator’s identity is not situated through the mimetic action on screen, where 
the visualization of human motion or human agency is manifested by the montage of 
images one after the other. Nor is it identical at the level of the actor, in other words, 
envisioning the human body on screen as similar in basic form to the same human body 
that a spectator has. Instead, phenomenological mimesis and narrative identity is 
achieved through the realization that narrative identity is both static and dynamic at the 
same time, much like the identity of a spectator is constantly in a state of flux and always 
becoming. Like Ricoeur says, “le récit construit le caractère durable d’un personnage, 
qu’on peut appeler son identité narrative, en construisant la sorte d’identité dynamique 
propre à l’intrigue qui fait l’identité du personnage” (301). This dynamic game of 
permanency and change is evident in fictional works, where the actions of a protagonist 
are preconceived by an author and are static, but where the act of the reader constructing
an identity for the protagonist is only ever achieved dynamically as the story is revealed to the specific reader.

And so the character of Thierry is being dynamically constructed by a spectator who watches the film and who makes sense of the decisions of Thierry based on what the character does, while at the same time realizing that the act of watching a film itself implies that this character is static and will always act this way. The moment where Thierry almost dies, however, is a moment where the permanence of Thierry’s narrative identity and the dynamic identity construction that a spectator is undertaking at the moment of reception are indeterminate. Thierry’s narrative identity is put into doubt by the narrative itself, since a spectator is not yet aware if the character will survive or not. Thus Thierry’s normal identity – based on the fixed nature of a film – is actually in flux because his death seems inevitable but is not yet achieved. When extrapolated for the dynamic life of a spectator, it can be realized through these films that self-knowledge is never immediately known (as we would presume if life were simply a continuation of prescribed narrative events) but instead is equally constructed based on the narrative events that any spectator emphasizes for his or her life, and therefore can be reconfigured based on simply choosing a new narrative. “C’est précisément le caractère de figure du personnage qui fait que le soi, narrativement interprété, se trouve être lui-même un soi figuré,” says Ricoeur as a summary of his narrative identity (304).

To add to this understanding, though, Ricoeur emphasizes as well that the dynamic of life decisions (illustrated in L’Assaut through the character of Thierry) is rendered more comprehensible when these narrative models are seen in both history and
fiction. This is the intriguing connection between the heritage film and the action films in this chapter, and how all of the films previously mentioned illustrate the myth of the “grand homme” in France as historically static yet also in a dynamic state of becoming based on newer audiences coming into contact with the story. As cases in point, many of the most important characters in French history undergo shifts in cultural understandings of their exploits despite their static histories that physically limit their ability to change further. Instead, it is a spectator’s interaction with this history which can lead to a new interpretation of culture and the character.

The idea of changing histories neatly coincides with new scholarship on counter-history, notably in Marcia Landy’s *Cinema and Counter-History* (2015) and Will Higbee’s *Post-Beur Cinema* (2013). As Landy states in her first chapter, a counter-history can be quickly summarized as “critical of ways of seeing and, hence, thinking about events” (4). Landy clarifies by stating that:

> Counter-history is an investigation of what escapes history in the name of the real. No amount of reiterating events and striving to reproduce and retain impressions of the real can counteract antiquarian images and their religious and teleological narratives, except through considerations of time. The injection of time exposes how the desire to animate and preserve the past “as it was” becomes impossible and counterproductive to acknowledge change as difference. (xviii)

The French action-heritage film takes the historic event and, rather than preserve it and present it as an unchanging story and as a further retrenchment of national morality, re-
positions the existential dilemma of individual choice onto the contemporary spectator, and through the character on screen.

Will Higbee’s text is similar in its presentation of an alternative history, one that runs counter to the purported standard practices of French history, and he classifies the French counter-heritage film as being “concerned specifically with offering an alternative or corrected version of the existing (national) historical narrative as it relates to colonialism, immigration or the Algerian war” (71). Both Leclercq’s L’Assaut and Kassovitz’s L’Ordre fall somewhere within this rubric, although both films still present the “traditional” French past of the GIGN, rather than the story being told from the viewpoint of the Algerians (in Leclercq’s film) or the New Caledonians (in Kassovitz’s film). Moreover, Higbee argues that counter-heritage films “challeng[e] dominant neo-colonial or ‘anti-repentant’ modes of re-presenting and memorialising the past found in earlier mainstream heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s” (71), since many of the films actively reconstruct history in order to validate alternative viewpoints – and invalidate mainstream conceptions. Arguably, neither L’Assaut nor L’Ordre significantly challenges the superiority of the GIGN officer’s ability to act and react, but both films do complicate the relatively simplistic viewpoint of French military authority, and the internal conflicts that inevitably arise when moral questions are addressed. In a certain sense, then, each film’s ability to participate in the counter-heritage formation that both Landy and Higbee propose is enacted through the French action film aesthetic, where an individual is given the authority to struggle against and from within an organization in order to overcome an injustice.
As a final example, then, we can return to Mathieu Kassovitz’s war film *L’Ordre et la morale* and see wherein lies the fluctuation of history and action as borne through the film. Like Leclercq’s film, *L’Ordre et la morale* follows the military escapades of the GIGN and its captain at the time, Philippe Legorjus (played by Kassovitz himself). Upon hearing of a hostage situation in New Caledonia, the GIGN is sent to restore peace, only to find that the French army is already occupying the territory and is making the situation worse. Using his deft negotiating skills, Legorjus is able to peacefully put down the rebellion with only minimal casualties, and the film presents him as a masterful negotiator even in times of crisis. As a simple comparison with *L’Assaut*, the GIGN officers are represented as more than just a force for assault, and instead are given the position of being morally superior to the army and the politicians surrounding the events. This is a re-envisioning of the GIGN from a different perspective than the official one, and as a glance back in time to try and understand exactly what happened.

From a spectator’s perspective, the opening scene is already marked as a re-envisioning of history. The framing is blurred on the edges and movement of the characters is awkward, giving way to the realization that we are watching the scene in reverse and through the experience of one of the main characters. This slow-motion reversal of time illustrates quite explicitly a narrative identity of a real-life historical person, the GIGN captain Philippe Legorjus, in the middle of being reconstructed for a spectator watching the film. The historical actions are locked in time and are equally locked in an official narrative, and so a comparison between the film’s story and the official story could only ever be at the level of mimesis, on how much they resemble each
other. But for Ricoeur, it is the level of the self, of not only Philippe Legorjus but also a spectator, which constructs a new identity for the historical moment as well as a spectator experiencing the film. The use of a slow-motion reversal by Kassovitz is telling in that it specifically invites a spectator to think of time and characters as multi-dynamic (not only moving forward for the narrative of the film, but actively moving backward as well), and in spite of the limited historical moment that sees both time and character – or personality – as fixed and permanent.

The final action assault of the hostage center by the GIGN and Philippe Legorjus, then, also emphasizes the narrative identity of the main protagonist, Legorjus, by centering the camera and its action around him and his point of view during the battle. Legorjus’ identity is typically rendered immutable by history, but the film portrays it as dynamic and dangerous (the zooming bullets, explosions, and loud cries for help make Legorjus’ success anything but secure) and in a state of still becoming. Since the film has reopened the potential for Legorjus to be reidentified according to different criteria, such as a concern for the lives of the hostages and the independence of the attackers, then history itself must be reopened and reinterpreted because of the viewing of the film. “En elle [la dialectique de l’ipse et de l’idem] réside la vertu purgative des expériences des pensée mises en scène par la littérature, non seulement sur le plan de la réflexion théorique, mais sur celle de l’existence,” states Ricoeur, demonstrating his lucid understanding of the moral value of this type of becoming through history and selfhood (303).
This chapter has attempted to draw a connection between the heritage film within the realm of French cinema and its dynamic interaction with the action blockbuster. For most action films, the narrative follows the notion of the mythology of the French “grand homme,” of the man or woman who overcomes tremendous odds and succeeds in reshaping French culture in his or her own image. Often, French action films in general present this heroic narrative of the morally upright citizen overcoming the odds to restore balance to society – following Hicks’ description of the Action-Adventure film – and the action-heritage film, for the most part, continues this trend. But whereas these examples have typically been limited to historically important people (Vercingétorix, Général Charles de Gaulle, Louis XIV or Jeanne d’Arc, to name just the most obvious choices), the contemporary film industry in France has begun to look elsewhere for stories of this fertile tradition in France, going so far as to include fictional or fantastic heroes (Vidocq – who did actually exist – and Grégoire de Fronsac), anti-hero criminals (Jacques Mesrine), or even just military heroes that do not have the highest rank of general (captains of the GIGN). These narratives allow a film going audience in France to not only pick and choose which histories they would like to vicariously live, but also give each spectator a chance to rethink his or her own life in relation to the narrative trajectory that they create for themselves. In this sense, each and every spectator is a “grand homme” who can use narrative to redefine selfhood and a presence in the world.

The aforementioned films and other action-heritage films (such as La French (Jimenez 2014), Forces spéciales (Rybojad 2011), Secret defense (Haïm 2008), and Gibraltar (Leclercq 2013), to name only a few) also present a democratization of
narratives that allow individual spectators to appreciate the film at the level of phenomenological experience instead of critical judgment. In referring to the Annales School’s efforts to redistribute history among social, cultural, and economic critiques, Ricoeur saw this project as perhaps detrimental to narrative:

La place naguère tenue par ces héros de l’action historique que Hegel appelait les grands hommes de l’histoire mondiale est désormais tenue par des forces sociales dont l’action ne saurait être imputée de manière distributive à des agents individuels. L’histoire nouvelle paraît être ainsi sans personnages. Sans personnages, elle ne saurait rester un récit. (Temps et récit 249)

But Ricoeur himself, throughout the process of writing his masterpiece, would come to understand that characters can be at the level of the individual, and at the point of each reader’s personal interaction with the text:

C’est ici que la théorie « esthétique » autorise une interprétation de la lecture sensiblement différente de celle de la rhétorique de persuasion ; l’auteur qui respecte le plus son lecteur n’est pas celui qui le gratifie au prix le plus bas ; c’est celui qui lui laisse le plus de champ pour déployer le jeu contrasté qu’on vient de dire. Il n’atteint son lecteur que si, d’une part, il partage avec lui un répertoire du familier, quant au genre littéraire, au thème, au contexte social, voire historique ;…. (Tome 3 247-49)

It may be difficult to allow this type of phenomenological analysis for two genres, heritage films and action films, which are typically considered to be only simple
gratifications of pleasure. But even if the content is questionable, the experience that each spectator has forms part of a larger narrative of human understanding, of self-determination through the act of creating a narrative arc, and of comprehension through the construction and visualization of stories that form the basis of humanity. The final chapter will thus address a tangential but crucial addition to historical heritage, the original film and its sequels, and their action aesthetics as they relate to phenomenology and spectator experience.
Chapter 3: Mikel Dufrenne and the phenomenology of corporeal movement

In particular, the sequel seems to me to be a primary mechanism of stabilisation – so important to film genres – as it consistently renegotiates generic meanings and values across periods of time. The prioritisation of a source text in the case of sequels to genre films tends to lie within genre itself, as the sequel re-states and affirms genre ‘fundamentals’ at the same time as it identifies ways in which we can find pleasure in yet another generic instance. Yet this relationship is reciprocal; genre naturalises sequelisation as part of its own circular logic. Conversely, by engaging audiences within the stabilising framework of a sequel, the sequel effectively markets, interprets, substantiates and re-identifies generic cues, texts and origins, thereby promising a much more participatory spectatorial experience. In an environment where studio control is limited, the combination of genre and sequelisation plays a key role in managing consumption.

- Carolyn Jess-Cooke, *Film Sequels*

Garbo appartient encore à ce moment du cinéma où la saisie du visage humain jetait les foules dans le plus grand trouble, où l’on se perdait littéralement dans une image humaine comme dans un philtre, où le visage constituait une sorte d’état absolu de la chair, que l’on ne pouvait ni atteindre ni abandonner.

- Roland Barthes, “Le visage de Garbo”

As the previous chapters have attempted to elucidate, the action film in France follows similar patterns which are found in cinema in general. Production practices, cinematography, and narrative all play an equal role in the construction of an action film, and either one of these elements can usurp or overshadow the others at any given time. The same can be said for this third and final category of an action film experience, the
corporeal movement of the scripted character, which comes to bear on a spectator’s understanding of the film. As the epigraph from Roland Barthes above makes clear, the very face of a character is capable of evoking something in a spectator, even if this something is difficult to define.

For the purposes of this chapter, though, a focus on character will not limit itself to just the face of a celebrity – in fact, that is too small of a focus for this type of analysis. Instead, an action film aesthetic must necessarily look at the body itself, as well as the specific movements that a body makes in an action film and the surrounding environment in which these positionings take place. An approach like this has already been undertaken by many prominent scholars, such as Yvonne Tasker, Stella Bruzzi, Phil Powrie and others, and their scholarship touches on many different cinematic genres, including action. However, most of this scholarship has been conducted around ideas of what the action film star, or the action film body, represents with regards to the underlying cultural impetus of either Hollywood cinema or French cinema, while occasionally addressing Hong Kong cinema and transnational celebrity.47

Quite frequently, these analyses focus on how cinematography and editing form a culturally-specific representation of masculinity and the body, employing the familiar feminist or ideological theoretical critique to reveal the complications and complicities of film and society. For instance, writing about the American director Kathryn Bigelow’s films – *Point Break* (1991) is the film that most scholars talk about, with a little bit of *The

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47 The two largest producers of action fare are Hollywood and Hong Kong, and the influence of these megaliths on French cinema is quite evident. For a treatment of the foreign action star, see Murray Smith’s chapter on Jackie Chan in *Engaging Characters*, or Lisa Purse’s chapter on European action cinema in *Contemporary Action Cinema*. 

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*Hurt Locker* (2008) thrown in – Barry Keith Grant concurs that they provide “all the expected pleasures of action films,” and then proceeds to label these pleasures as being only derived from “ideological assumptions about gender and violence” (173). He goes on to praise Kathryn Bigelow’s own approach as “critiquing the ideology that underpin[s] [action films],” (174) which would mean that action cinema is ideologically-aligned with violence from its onset. Yet while Grant’s analysis that “violence … is central to the genre” (174) is patently true, it does not follow that violence is the essence and essential spirit of the action film genre, nor that it is even necessary for an action film.48

Instead, I would argue that from a different, phenomenological viewpoint, there is potentially a moment of recognition or experience that arrives before any type of understanding of the signification of these characters for a spectator, and before those significations are teased out for a society or a culture. That is, there is a phenomenological experience that first attracts a viewer and is part of the pleasure of the cinematic experience, and this initial fascination must be understood on its own terms. Instead of seeing these films as only societally-constructed vehicles for “active masculinity,” as a “reaction against the passivity and impotence of the newborn,” and as representations of a “masculinity that is formed unconsciously in the very first years of life” and then “strengthened as the years go by before exploding literally in adolescence,” (54) – as Elisabeth Badinter argues in her *XY: On Masculine Identity*, and which thus puts active masculinity in a binary relationship with passive femininity – it is better to attempt

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48 Any number of Jackie Chan’s films, including but not limited to *The Legend of Drunken Master* (1994), *Rumble in the Bronx* (1996), or *Mr. Nice Guy* (1997), use intricate choreography to stage the fight scenes and rarely show the true effect of landing a punch. These films are thus less about violence than they are about filming a beautiful dance between martial arts experts.
to make sense of the enticement of these films for a broader audience that is interested in a sensational response to the action cinema. To argue that men are attracted to violent action films because of the representations of violence seems like a mischaracterization of a simplified masculinity. Moreover, the simple presence of men in action films does not render them masculine any more than the presence of women in films renders those films feminine. Instead, there is another, almost pre-cognitive and pre-inscribed attraction in the presentation of these films, and I argue that it is this experience of the spectacle and corporeal movement that drives the continued consumption of these films.

To better understand this type of phenomenological approach to film characters, this chapter will use a little-known work by French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne, who was writing at the same time as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. His two-part tome *Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique* (1953) attempted to define beauty and to position it as a phenomenological experience and thus a precursor to any type of critical judgment. Noting that determinations of beauty often are subjective and that these judgments “pèsent avant tout sur nos préférences,” Dufrenne argues that these criticisms “ne sont pas constitutives de l’expérience esthétique, elles ne lui ajoutent qu’un commentaire personnel” (*L’objet* 23). Importantly, Dufrenne asks that the work of art stand on its own and be taken on its own terms:
Ainsi, je suis devant l’objet esthétique aussitôt que je suis à lui: je suis indifférent au monde extérieur, que je ne perçois plus que marginalement et que je renonce à évoquer, pour éprouver la vérité de ce qui m’est présenté. Ce qui m’est présenté, c’est le sensible dans sa gloire, non point un sensible inorganisé et insignifiant, mais un sensible qui se dit en quelque sorte lui-même par la rigueur de son développement, et qui me dit encore autre chose à la fois par ce qu’il représente, dans la mesure où il est ordonné à une représentation, et par ce qu’il exprime en se disant lui-même. (L’objet 44)

By taking the work of art as an already-inscribed aesthetic object, and thereby concluding that its own standards are sufficient for determining its quality, Dufrenne effectively situates judgment at the level of experience and of sensation, rather than as an interpretation of signs and images or through signification of meaning.

This chapter will therefore attempt to develop Dufrenne’s phenomenological theory of aesthetics into a coherent analysis of the human form in French action films. Rather than seeing the immediate image as representative of a culture or a society, and thus as signifying a larger message about the person or people on display, this approach aims to engage a more fundamental level of cinematic experience, at the point where a spectator’s body recognizes and experiences the portrayed body, before interpretation. As such, it fits well within the phenomenological tradition of describing the sensation of an experience. In using the French action film as a focus, this chapter will challenge notions of art cinema as being intrinsically more aesthetically significant, and will expand the
types of experiences that a spectator can have in relation to more popular forms of entertainment. By using three sets of action film franchises – Banlieue 13 (Morel 2004 and Banlieue 13: Ultimatum (Alessandrin 2009); Largo Winch (Salle 2008) and Largo Winch II (Salle 2011); and Taxi (Pirès 1998), Taxi 2 (Krawczyk 2000), Taxi 3 (Krawczyk 2003), and Taxi 4 (Krawczyk 2007) – I will demonstrate that this specific, action film aesthetic experience is an important avenue of research and study for a better comprehension of the body in French action cinema.

The generic power of the sequel

Before delving into the details of the French action film franchise, it will be helpful to delineate some aspects of the aforementioned film series (Taxi, Banlieue 13, and Largo Winch) that coalesce with the action genre. Sequels, remakes, trilogies, and series have been treated worse than genre films – that is, as Carolyn Jess-Cooke argues, “largely disparaged throughout cinema’s history as a textual leech, a formulaic financial format, and the assassin of originality” (Second 4). These types of films are also ridiculed as “vampirish corporative exercise[s] in profit-making and narrative regurgitation,” and as “rip-off[s], a fundamentally inferior exercise, a kind of cinematic virus, or a cannibalistic re-hash designed to milk a previous production[s] for all [their] worth” (Film Sequels vi-1). Yet as Jess-Cooke cogently states in her introduction:
… views of the sequel as a wholly commercial venture ignore its important registers of continuation, nostalgia, memory, difference, originality, revision and repetition in a range of formal, cultural, industrial, technological and theoretical contexts. […] The film sequel’s frequent appropriation as an ‘experimental’ structure within the contexts above therefore demands more scrupulous critical attention than has been accorded to this form in the past. (2)

The sequel, the remake, and the series all aim to recapture whatever formula was successful for the original film, while also not straying too far from the original. Thus there is something intrinsic about the experience of these sequel, remake, or series films that continues to make them attractive for a spectator, and that goes beyond the profit-principle.

Importantly, Carolyn Jess-Cooke argues for the sequel to be seen as a space for spectator participation, “a site within which communal spectatorship and paratextual discourses may be circulated, and by which the experience of an “original” may be extended, revisited, and heightened” (Second 5). Her argument has important ramifications for the franchises mentioned above, as each one of them obviously plays with continuity, spectator involvement, and the immersive experience that is paramount to the action film aesthetic and experience. Furthermore, and in addition to to the previous chapter’s emphasis on narrative in the French action-heritage film, Taxi, Largo Winch, and Banlieue 13 almost purposefully construct a repetitive narrative in order to reassure a spectator and his or her expectations. Since “sequalisation is about transition,
or transmission, rather than any kind of ending,” as Jess-Cooke again states, “it suggests a continually expanding hyperdiegesis with which consumers or spectators can engage as many times in as many ways as possible” (*Film Sequels* 85). The narrative must necessarily be comprehensive and thoroughly understandable, yet simple to follow.

Additionally, each film franchise operates on not only an intertextual but also a paratextual level, as Jess-Cooke also notes with regards to *The Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-17) franchise in Hollywood cinema and the massive marketing campaign, corresponding theme-park attractions, and online fan participation for the film’s perpetual dissemination (*Second* 205-10). The aesthetics of parkour in *Banlieue 13* encapsulate the paratextual reciprocity between a real-life activity and its appearance on the silver screen; *Largo Winch*’s source material is derived from the *bande dessinée* of the same name, and uses international stars (Kristin Scott Thomas, and also Sharon Stone) as points of reference for perceptive audiences; and the *Taxi* franchise, as perhaps the best example of the beginnings of sequelization and franchising, has spawned an American remake in *Taxi* (Tim Story 2004) and the short-lived television series *Taxi Brooklyn* (*EuropaCorp* 2015). Rather than being just repetition, though, the sequel enhances the ability for a different spectatorial experience beyond story, an experience that is participatory by its nature and even allows a spectator to relive the thrill of the original in potential perpetuity.

Certainly, sequel production and reproduction is an economically-driven game, but it is often a response to audience desires and a spectator’s need for participation and connection. The production of even one sequel, just by itself and based solely on the
success of the first, original film, is a testament to the power of consumers to demand another. And the fact that some of France’s best action films are these very franchises (Taxi, Largo Winch, and Banlieue) demonstrates that fans are participating in untold ways toward the continued production of these films. Thus a certain form of spectatorial interaction is inherent to the films (their initial popularity and its reproduction), and this interaction must be the first point of entry into an analysis of the film’s aesthetic and the film’s form.

**Representations of the body**

It should come as little surprise that many approaches to the human body on screen and in action films have passed through the annals of scholarship, such as Yvonne Tasker’s *Spectacular Bodies*, Lisa Purse’s *Contemporary Action Cinema*, Stella Bruzzi’s *Men’s Cinema*, or even Raphaëlle Moine’s *Les Femmes d’action au cinéma*. For this chapter, rather than focusing on all of the iterations of the body in action films that have been on offer, I will instead focus on the body as it specifically pertains to the French action cinema and its aesthetic presentation. As such, a focus on two important trends will help clarify exactly where my specific analysis differs.

Commonly, action films have been perceived as participating in a cultural definition of masculinity, whether that be nation-specific, oriented by race, or even determined by gender. For instance, Yvonne Tasker’s *Spectacular Bodies* concentrates on the muscular physicality of the male action film star, not limited to only white men, and how this presentation of the corporeal form reveals some underlying binaries at work in
these action films, such as: heavy involvement in the artistry of cinematic production – through editing, dizzying camerawork, special effects wizardry, and superstar stunt work – while also being labeled as simplistic genre or popular films, and therefore lacking artistry and critical commentary; the prevalence of white men action stars (such as Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone) as the driving force for these films while slowly developing and acknowledging (and capitalizing on the idea) that women and minorities can be equally-muscled and equally-marketable; or the narrative tendencies of an overblown and villainous chaos being thwarted by a controlled and often calmer hero (1-10). Tasker also notes the increased politicization of these films within the critical press, the importance of production budgets to even make these types of films, the outsized influence of Hong Kong action cinema on the Hollywood model, and even the “sensuous experience … such as the breathtaking nature of visual spectacle, or the feelings of exhilaration at the expansive landscapes” that dominates the form of these films (6). In most cases, masculinity appeals to force, aggression, violence, and control in order to overcome something, typically an enemy but occasionally a natural disaster, that is more forceful, more aggressive, more violent, and uncontrollable. Hence a perception of masculinity that sees it as rational in the face of irrationality.

But Tasker does not dwell on only the political implications of Hollywood action cinema, preferring instead to also read the spectacular image and wonder about its effect on a spectator (154). This in turn leads her to propose a psychoanalytic and ideological schema that attempts to “discuss some of the specificities involved in the ways in which the action cinema, centred over the body as it is, orchestrates ideologies and
identifications,” and to conclude that the bodies themselves perform this “fact of struggle” (166). The fantasy of overcoming obstacles may be a feature of action film narratives – and with the concomitant male body to match the struggle – but it does not address the question as to whether or not this is the only reasoning or justification that can be given for the continued and increased popularity of the genre. Perhaps there is another reason that this spectacle attracts a spectator, without needing recourse to a reinforcing ideology based on domination, control, and the male body.

One of the least convincing aspects of Tasker’s approach has to do with the culturally and historically specific analysis that she undertakes. While she is careful to address only the action films of the 1980s in Hollywood and some variations of the form in the 1990s, she still tends to disassociate these action film trends from their reception by audiences. In other words, she historically contextualizes the appearance of a specific form of the genre in the 1980s as coinciding with the presence of Ronald Reagan in the White House, the imperialist fantasies of American foreign diplomacy, and the threat of the Cold War and its ideological constructions in society (7-9); but she then extrapolates this specific time period, and the specific Hollywood industry, as being the defining moment for action cinema and as a foundational definition of the genre. Fortunately, the action cinema has now expanded throughout the world, and whereas Tasker’s critique is historically important and accurate, the generic moniker of action is different than it was thirty years ago and no longer just an ideologically-driven cinema. The contemporary status of action cinema cannot be tied to a specific nation, a specific gender, or even a specific politics; instead, it is wide-reaching and continuing to expand in unpredictable
ways. Moreover, a large part of Tasker’s analysis focused on the very specific visual aspects of American action cinema, and she is convincing when she connects the cinematography to the action body on screen and the potential for an underlying ideology to drive the production of these films (153-66).

A similar approach to action cinema has been taken up by Stella Bruzzi in her intelligent *Men’s Cinema: Masculinity and Mise en Scène in Hollywood*. Much like Tasker before her, Bruzzi analyzes and articulates the functioning of the camera, as apart from the body but also intimately connected to it, as conducive to masculinity. Articulating a critique of traditional film analyses and the identification obsession of masculinity in cinema, Bruzzi still uses psychoanalytic theories of gender difference (Judith Butler, Robin Wood, and the ever-present Sigmund Freud) to first establish what masculinities are, before turning to the camerawork that fits these definitions by both playing along and occasionally transgressing the boundaries as needed. Bruzzi does a brilliant job of listing some of the cinematographic tropes typically used in masculine genres, such as sweeping shots of the hero, or crane shots that move from above to eye level, or even just the synchronizing of a soundtrack and sound effects with the hero’s movements (80-86). She does not argue that these features belong exclusively to men’s cinema, but she does heavily suggest that they started as features of masculine films, and their repeated use – to the point of becoming tropes – in other genres has caused a continuation of masculinity and a “conglomeration of specific style elements, motifs and tropes around masculinity” (167).
For all of Bruzzi’s great analyses, though, there are still some contentious aspects to her claims. It should be noted that Bruzzi is very quick to qualify all of her statements so that they do not come off as overly authoritative, but this technique only works so well. Late in the book, she tries to argue that the Steadicam, simply because it has been used repeatedly in action sequences, is now an inherent feature of men’s cinema (167). This is nearly impossible to prove or disprove; instead, I propose that the increased use of Steadicam had to do with the advancement in technology, the increased inexpensiveness of employing it, and then finally a desire on behalf of directors to have a more coherent image when filming action moments. Even then, however, Steadicam is a choice. In Paul Greengrass’ Bourne series, Steadicam is purposely not used in order to create an effect of movement and chaos. By assuming that because these films typically feature men, and the cinematography focuses around the male characters, Bruzzi concludes that these films can therefore be designated as part of a masculine-dominated “men’s cinema”.

Considering the variety that is encountered in the cinema in general, from documentaries to the most overblown of action movies, and the preponderance of men and women in many different roles, it is unlikely that the same type of analysis holds true if we allow for another approach.

A final common area of focus is less related to masculinity and representations of men than it is on the focus on the body in cinema. If Bruzzi and Tasker’s critical analysis of the corporeal form in American action cinema is accepted, then perhaps these films in a French context should be read through the lens of the cinéma du corps, a term that Tim Palmer uses in his provocative Brutal Intimacy. For Palmer, this type of cinema’s “basic
agenda is an on-screen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate terms,” and consists of “arthouse dramas and thrillers with deliberately discomfiting features” that present “an increasingly explicit dissection of the body through its sexual capacities” (57-58). He likens this trend to a desire, on the part of French filmmakers, “to generate profound, often challenging, sensory experiences,” and to “inspire bewilderment – raw, unmediated reaction” (58-59). But the body is not only vulnerable and exposed when presented in sexual situations; it is also bruised, battered, beaten, and brandished in many different types of cinema genres, from horror all the way to action. The desire of the cinéma du corps to thus challenge and repudiate spectator identifications and experiences is also manifest in some of the better action films that have recently appeared, albeit in a less explicit – but no less evident – way. These action films also treat the body as a site of metaphorical transgression, as they often must use their physical form to overcome myriad obstacles. And spectator experiences in action cinema, based mostly on an idea of entertainment, are still spectacularly presented and corporeally-centered, in spite of their tendency to fortify commonly accepted ideologies. The corps in French action films may not be the same situationally-determined body as in the cinéma du corps, but the focus of the genre on breaking with or expanding on cinematographic standards is readily apparent from even its early manifestations in the 1950s and 1960s.

Thus approaches to the presentation of the body in action cinema, or the extremity of the body in French cinema, have tended to focus on the physical specimen of the action star and its correlation to culturally-specific ideology (Tasker), the preponderance of cinematographic tropes which purportedly reinforce the idea of masculinity in the film
medium (Bruzzi), and the overall importance of the body *in flagrante delicto* and the sensational experience that a spectator can have when watching these types of films. If we combine the three most important elements of each analysis – a physical specimen, cinematography, and a sensationally felt spectator experience – then we arguably have a combination of filmic elements that are visible in the French action film and that are experienced by a spectator. In order to make sense of this combination, we must return to the phenomenology of Mikel Dufrenne.

**Mikel Dufrenne’s aesthetic phenomenology**

“Dufrenne attempted to restore a measure of the Greek meaning of *aisthēsis*,” translator Edward S. Casey states in his foreword, “by providing a basis for aesthetic experience in the open availability of feeling and perception” (xvi). The aesthetic quality of any given thing has less to do with an adherence to high culture refinement than it has to do with the simple act of perception. For Dufrenne, a work of art is not necessarily in and of itself an aesthetic object; that is, until it is perceived. Again, Casey proposes that “The work of art is the perduring structural foundation for the aesthetic object. It has a constant being which is not dependent on being experienced, while the aesthetic object exists only as appearance, that is, only as experienced by a spectator” (xxiii). For Dufrenne and his translator, this would mean that the movie apparatus itself is the “structural foundation” upon which the art of cinema is based, but each specific film must be observed in order for it to become an aesthetic object. Thus critiques of quality or
queries about film ideology are secondary concerns to the phenomenon of the film experience.⁴⁹

For Dufrenne, then, an aesthetic experience can be achieved when the object itself – in this case, a film – is taken as an already-established whole, as an object to be perceived. A film therefore responds to itself, to its own value scheme that establishes the parameters and delimits what can and cannot be judged as part of the aesthetic. Speaking of designations of beauty and the persistent debates about what is and what is not beautiful, Dufrenne suggests that “[La notion de beauté] désigne maintenant non pas un type déterminé d’objets, mais la façon dont chaque objet répond à son type propre et pour ainsi dire accomplit sa vocation, en même temps qu’il obtient la plénitude de son être” (L’objet esthétique 20). He then continues by stating that “le beau désigne la vérité de l’objet lorsque cette vérité est immédiatement sensible et reconnue, lorsque l’objet annonce impérieusement la perfection ontique dont il jouit: le beau est le vrai sensible à l’œil, il sanctionne avant la réflexion ce qui est heureux” (20). Beauty and aesthetics are thus not completely related to cultural or societal definitions of beauty, where one piece of art is critically considered more beautiful than another. Instead, that which is not beautiful is simply thus because “il ne réussit pas à être ce qu’il prétend être, parce qu’il ne réalise pas son essence” (21).

And what exactly is the essence of a French action film? Considering the work that has been done on the action film by other scholars, as well as throughout this

⁴⁹ Obviously, this is not to say that criticism of films, and especially action films, are not valid when either a semiotic, psychoanalytic, or ideological framework are utilized. Instead, it is to emphasize that this type of criticism comes after the initial experience. For his part, Dufrenne does propose a way of judging the aesthetic effect of art, which does not preclude films that are quite bad or just plain boring.
dissertation, there seems to be many differing definitions for the action cinema. However, at the level of the character and of the character’s body as it appears on screen, there is a trend of physical action and movement, of bodies quickly and innovatively moving through space, which encompasses all moments of action in films as well as the genre itself. This phenomenological experience is important for a spectator because it mimics his or her own capacity to move in and throughout the world, in response to either everyday occurrences or the exaggerations of the action epic. The aesthetic success of any action film can therefore be based on a spectatorial response to the bodies as they are represented on screen, which can fall into three distinct categories based on Dufrenne’s writings on the aesthetic object.

The first category will be classified as aesthetic continuity, and it will be based on the idea that an action film works best when presenting its very generic classification – that is, action – through the very obvious yet real movement and positioning of bodies on screen. From the framing of the body in action fight scenes to the positioning of bodies in relation to objects or other characters, French action films employ specific cinematographic tendencies that allow these films to immediately be perceived as aesthetic objects and phenomenological experiences because of a spectatorial relation to the human form. When speaking of the aesthetic object and its public, Dufrenne states that “l’objet esthétique permet au public de se constituer comme groupe parce qu’il se propose comme une objectivité supérieure qui rallie les individus et les contraint à oublier leurs différences individuelles” (L’objet esthétique 104). In other words, the commonplace of bodies in motion – at times more physically fit than a spectator in the
audience – creates a connection to a spectator’s own perception of his or her physical movement, even though it typically does not resemble the everyday movements of most spectators. Moreover, Dufrenne goes on to say that “[Le groupe] ne se définit pas en fonction d’une activité à poursuivre, mais d’une perception à éprouver en commun,” further reinforcing the idea that the phenomenological experience is not due to a relation between a spectator’s body and the body on screen – and thus the physical resemblance or physical prowess that both could potentially perform – but rather a simple perceptive act of physical, human movement that encapsulates the human form – the everyday human action of movement – for most spectators.50 In a certain sense, all films propose this type of connection; yet action films propose it in extremis, pushing the body to the limits of its physical existence, thus making these films a more interesting study.

The second category derives from Mikel Dufrenne’s La notion d’a priori, where he takes aim at Immanuel Kant’s view of the a priori. Continuing his conception of the subject and the object as being a duality which must come together to produce a feeling, Dufrenne's complicated text proposes that certain notions of humanity are previously known but are still experienced through the senses. That is, the experience of “fun,” or excitement,” or “fear,” or even “space” and “time,” are a priori part of the constituted subject, although only acknowledged as such when perceived in the aesthetic object and through interaction with the exterior world. Thus a character’s body, as perceived on screen, evokes an a priori knowledge of this character’s relational position to other

50 There is obviously a further avenue of research needed into disability studies and the types of reactions that differently-abled individuals experience when watching action films. Once again, though, the scope of this dissertation is not large enough to cover this approach.
characters. In an action film, the body that is marked as good is clearly contrasted with
the body that is marked as bad, almost without the need for a narrative exposition of the
conflict. Along those same lines, there is a nuance at the level of the sidekick or the love
interest, the accomplice or even the main bad guy’s henchmen, which is evident once
perceived. A character’s body will act in contrast to but also in relation with other bodies
on screen and in the film, and through this interaction an understanding of the a priori
that is within the object will become manifest. Thus a spectator experiences the action
film through the lens of aesthetic correspondences, where any hero or heroine is only
comprehensible as such based on a correspondence and a correlation with the enemy or
the partners. Specifically, this is perceived by a spectator in the form of contrasting sizes
of the characters, or physical features that are apparent on some bodies but not on others,
or even costumes and colors associated with specific characters in the film. In turn, the
film is phenomenologically perceived and intelligible not just through a recourse to
external, definitive qualities of heroism or valor, but through its internal mechanisms
which reveal intention through the body.

I base my third and final category on a notion taken from Dufrenne’s 1991 book
L’œil et l’oreille, a fascinating reading on the importance of the senses for perceptive
understanding. In a rather humorous introduction, Dufrenne claims that his goal “n’est
donc pas seulement de réhabiliter l’oreille, mais de réfléchir à la pluralité des sens” and
how they work in tandem for the aesthetic perceptive act (12). What makes the sensations
associated with these two organs, seeing and hearing, different is that they are “des sens à
distance” (21) and that they can be experienced as distance, as opposed to the others
(touch, smell, and taste) that require a relative proximity in order to be sensed. Importantly for film, hearing and seeing must work in tandem in order to create the sensational experience of the movies. Thus films create an aesthetic congruence, where these two senses of hearing and seeing are used together and simultaneously to create an experiential effect in a spectator that goes beyond a simple idea of addition or that takes these sense experiences as wholly separate. And again like aesthetic correspondences before, this aesthetic congruence is best understood in the action film fight scene or chase scene, where both senses are pushed to their limits of vision and sound and incite a thrilling phenomenological experience for a spectator.

Taken together, these three aesthetic variations – continuity, correspondence, and congruence – work to create a phenomenological experience for a spectator that is less related to an interpretation of the film than to a simple enjoyment of the expression on screen. “C’est un caractère remarquable de l’objet esthétique,” concludes Dufrenne in his first tome, “d’offrir une pluralité de sens, qui ne se juxtaposent pas, mais se superposent…. Cette pluralité atteste sa profondeur” (L’objet esthétique 398). The aesthetic object becomes richly developed and full of meaning at the experiential level, before even delving into the layer of signification or meaning. In fact, it has mostly been controversial and contentious to regard the action film representation as having anything other than a simplified ideology, an overtly sexist, racist, and even nationalist politics, and even a facile narrative that, while easy to follow, closes the debate on ambiguity or

51 This was not always the case, as the first films were images only, the silent movies. But contemporary films rarely limit themselves to one or the other, and even ones that do – Michel Hazanivicius’ 2011 The Artist, for example – use music to tell the story.
variance in meaning. But taken simply as an aesthetic object to be enjoyed as a phenomenological experience, it offers pleasures that the film medium itself has perfected throughout the last century of its existence.

**Action continuity and the stunt**

Certain critics of action films and their effect on larger societal and cultural ideologies have chosen to see the genre as offering a respite from the sedentary lifestyle of contemporary consumer culture, where audience members can dispense of a few dollars to live out fantasies which are otherwise impossible and are no longer available due to – and thanks to – progressive policies. In a nutshell, this is the argument made by Mark Gallagher in his *Action Figures*, detailing the ways in which mostly American, but sometimes global, masculinities have permeated Hollywood filmmaking culture as a response to the loss of power and patriarchal control (1-19). Only late in the book, when Gallagher approaches the films of Jackie Chan as being challenges to the hegemony of Hollywood action fare, does he begin to focus on the athletic and “burlesque body” of Chan and its contrast with the typical action body of “inactivity and passivity” (161). Gallagher reads the “continuous motion” of Chan’s body and physical feats as expressing both activity and vulnerability, as expressing a more nuanced version of masculinity that has been missing in the Western world, one based on movement and which inevitably demarcates instability of identity through the active motion of the character (171-73). But Gallagher has a keen eye when it comes to scale, where the size of the body is often contrasted with the largeness of the space in which it acts (177). Thus movement in and
through the diegetic space is ostensibly just as important as who is moving through this space, and why.

For every Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger and static masculinity, there are plenty of counterexamples of action stars who use their chiseled and athletic bodies for stunts and activity, thereby complicating Gallagher’s reliance on Hollywood films from the 1980s and 1990s. If he must search for activity elsewhere, in the body of foreign-born Jackie Chan, it is simply because he does not want to address the physicality of a Tom Cruise, or a Keanu Reeves, or even Stallone’s own mobility in the Rocky franchise. But looking elsewhere for representations of physical masculinity is a smart move, and Jackie Chan signaled only the beginning of a fascination with Hong Kong action stars (Jet Li, Donnie Yen) or international action stars (Jason Statham, Hugh Jackman). In the French context, this search for an action aesthetic culminated in the parkour-inspired films Banlieue 13 (Morel 2004) and Banlieue 13: Ultimatum (Alessandrin 2009), where French traceurs and martial arts experts chose to put their physical bodies on display for a homegrown and international audience.

Rather than treating the Banlieue franchise as separate entities with culturally and historically-specific stories, I will instead clump them together as action films that follow action film narrative tropes. Many scholars have been fascinated with these parkour films, usually analyzing them along the lines of two distinct yet related theories: the first being that these films reinvent and redefine the idea of space with respect to the Parisian

52 See the previous chapter for a treatment of action narratives. Or, any number of books on action films, such as Gallagher’s Action Figures, or Action/Adventure Cinema edited by Yvonne Tasker, Geoff King’s Spectacular Narratives, and the previously mentioned Shadows of Doubt by Barry Keith Grant, to name only a few.
peripheries, the *banlieue* that gives the films their titles, such as Nathan Guss’s “Parkour and the Multitude,” or Neil Archer’s “Virtual Poaching and Altered Space”; and the second being a comment on the French film industry’s limitations and definitions (or re-definations, again) of what a French film could or should be, and the critical position taken on genre films. These include such wide-ranging and fascinating articles as David Pettersen’s “American Genre Film in the French Banlieue: Luc Besson and Parkour,” or Isabelle Vanderschelden’s “Luc Besson’s ambition: Europacorp as a European major for the 21st century,” which both offer original interpretations on the production of action films or blockbuster films in France. In both cases, access to the parkour athletics on display appeals to its movement through a clearly delineated space, whether that be the physical space of the suburbs or the industrial space of industrial and national production. What is clearly missing, however, is how these films use athletic movement to create an aesthetic space, a visual panoply of high-flying and free-falling bodies on display for consumptive pleasure.

This first, basic level of appeal should not be ignored, although it often is. “The use of parkour in the films – which, as the main source of action, constitutes their ultimate selling point, as underscored by the images of leaping bodies in the films’ advertising – is also double edged” exclaims Neil Archer, lamenting the misrepresentation of the *banlieue* and the oversimplification of the narrative, while also realizing that parkour is spectacular. A claim that exploitation of parkour and the *banlieue* was the intent of the film’s advertisers, marketers, producers, and the director, is polemical without actually treating the action on screen.
It would also presume, incorrectly I believe, that both a spectator and the production forces are motivated by some nefarious plan that sees money as the ultimate goal. However, an audience’s ability to read a film’s contested and unreal representation (whether characterological or spatial) through a political lens does not mean that this same audience is not completing the task through another avenue; and moreover, most spectators’ lack of critical acuity or scholarly acumen to fully read a film does not preclude them from simply enjoying a film, especially considering the visual literacy of contemporary audiences. There must be a reason that a spectator is drawn to the film, and this could be for the simple pleasure of the aesthetic experience. Mikel Dufrenne attempts to situate the aesthetic attraction of the living body, separated from its potential representational meaning, by addressing the aesthetic object of a dancer and the performance in a ballet. Dufrenne distinguishes balletic dance from other forms of corporeal movement:
C’est dans cette signification au-delà de toute représentation que triomphe la danse, langage absolu qui ne dit rien que lui-même. C’est par là que la danse se distingue de la pantomime, théâtre sans parole, et aussi de l’acrobatie, à laquelle il est faux de réduire la danse pure. Car si la danse pure ne signifie qu’elle-même, du moins se signifie-t-elle et subordonne-t-elle le danseur à cette fin ; alors que l’acrobate n’endosse devant le public de responsabilité qu’à l’égard de son propre corps dont il exhibe les merveilles. Le danseur voue son corps à la danse. Ses mouvements procèdent du tronc comme s’il obéissait à quelque impulsion secrète au plus profond de lui. L’acrobate au contraire, emploie son corps à des actions précises réglées souvent par quelque objet, corde, barre, anneaux : il doit réussir des prouesses, atteindre un but et non dire quelque chose ; en lui le corps est corps et non langage. (*L’objet esthétique* 117)

Evidently, Dufrenne was not the biggest fan of acrobatic troupes at the time of writing his treatise, and despite his claims earlier in the text, he aims to create a distinction between movements for just athletic or exercise purposes and movement as signification of expression. However, he does concede that acrobatics may sometimes be used for other purposes: “Lorsque des figures purement acrobatiques sont par hasard et avec précaution intégrées à un ballet, …, elles y prennent une valeur expressive, disant par exemple la joie ou l’insouciance ou “le dérèglement de tous les sens”, et se soumettent ainsi à la signification qui anime le ballet” (117). Regardless of Dufrenne’s ostensible qualifying of bodily movement aesthetics, I argue that the action film in particular intends to be seen as
similar to ballet, as focusing on a display of the human form in its most active state, and as resulting in an expressive movement that is marvelously entertaining.

It thus becomes important for my analysis that the way these parkour films are filmed, where the body is heavily emphasized and centralized as a key component of the filmic milieu, must necessarily play into an understanding of the aesthetic object and the phenomenological experience of a spectator toward these films. If the action film aesthetic is based on the centralization of the body, then the filming must necessarily place these bodies in the center of the action and of the screen whenever possible. As an example, both *Banlieue 13* and its sequel *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum* begin slowly enough with an introduction (or re-introduction) of the film’s characters, but then this opening establishing sequence is followed by a martial arts scene heavily influenced by the Hong Kong, comedic style. In both films, the character of the police officer, Damien (Cyril Raffaelli), is trapped in a situation where he has infiltrated an underground drug gang and must fight his way out alone, without the help of his fellow police officers who remain on the outside, restricted from getting in. The framing of his body is the aesthetic payday, especially during the fight scenes, where the camera will occasionally employ slow-motion in order to emphasize the specific physical stunt being performed, such as a roundhouse kick on an enemy, a somersault onto a poker table while body slamming a bad guy, or an extreme dexterity as he tries to protect a famous Van Gogh painting from being destroyed.\(^5\)

\(^5\) As anyone who has seen any action film starring Jackie Chan, this trope is clearly borrowed from the Hong Kong cinema aesthetic. Jackie Chan remains the master, using ladders, cushions, wheelchairs, scaffolding, and even alcohol, to comically emphasize his character’s movements.
When Damien’s body is the most active on screen, the camera focuses and frames him and his movement. More often than not, cuts are used to piece together the scene and to maintain his centralized position. But there are also moments where the centralization of the hero is not part of the aesthetic project. That is, anytime that an enemy character is defeated, whether by a gunshot or a knife stabbing, a landed punch or an intricate attack, the movement of that character becomes the central focus of the camera. Thus frequently, after the hero has landed a blow, the camera frame will centralize on the person who was attacked and follow his stunt work until it is obvious that he no longer will participate in the fight. By emphasizing the superior body skills of both the protagonist and the surrounding antagonists, the film demonstrates that movement and motion, skill and dexterity, are human body attributes which can be aesthetically pleasing and expressively experienced.

It is unfortunate that Dufrenne did not confront film in the same way as he confronted dance, for his views correspond nicely with the aesthetic of the action film. Speaking of the aesthetic object and its relation to the living being, he clarifies:

Mais le ballet lui-même, tant qu’il n’existe que dans l’imagination du choré compositeur qui ne peut lui conférer la même existence qu’à l’œuvre théâtrale confère le papier sur lequel elle est écrite, n’est pas encore objet esthétique. Davantage, les vertus de la danse sont les vertus du danseur : point de grâce si le danseur n’est gracieux, de noblesse s’il n’est noble, d’emportement s’il n’est emporté…. (L’objet esthétique 114)
There are two points to unpack in this short citation: first, Dufrenne is suggesting a distinct difference between the ballet as conceived in a story and, in his case, in the sense that the choreographer conceives the movement through standardized dance techniques; and second, the dancer is the centralized focus of the piece and confers aesthetic success or failure. The latter point works when addressing the performative ballet and how it is meant to be perceived by a spectator. But this same visual quest and aesthetic experience can refer to another aesthetic object, and through a different criterion.

Whereas ballet and dance in general are large, staged performances that demand an attentive, focalized audience for an extended duration, film follows a similar logic save that its object is on a screen and projected through machinery. Its aesthetic principles answer to a different logic, a different cinema language, if you will, that presents its aesthetic object through edits and framing, colors and sounds, imagery and landscape, movement and stasis. These principles taken alone cannot be qualified as aesthetic objects, at least not one that could also be classified as a film. But when assembled together, they can work in tandem to create an aesthetically pleasing experience. This is the idea of aesthetic continuity that proposes a continual working together of cinematography to frame and prioritize the movement of the action body.

In the second Banlieue film, the bodies of the heroes are consistently prioritized through quick editing, zooming, and fast camera pans and tilts around the moving bodies. At one point in the movie, Damien and Leïto must infiltrate police headquarters and steal

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54 This loaded term is not meant to be used lightly, but it only obliquely references its baggage of film semiotics and the tradition of Christian Metz. To understand that Dufrenne was a strong influence on Metz’s approach to film, though, see Dominique Chateau and Martin Lefebvre’s excellent “Christian Metz et la phénoménologie,” 1895 vol. 70, 2013, pp. 82-120.
a valuable piece of evidence, but they get caught in their entry and must split up to reach their goal. As Leïto scales the exterior wall to thieve the evidence, Damien must remain and fight a group of highly trained police officers. As the officers quickly surround Damien, the cinematography relies on a series of quick edits, splicing opposing, 180-degree camera positions at the same moment in the choreographed stunt to give the sensation of the hero being attacked by all sides. The camera also remains at eye level to the characters, and so the sensation of readiness is reinforced by the edits. As the fight scene continues, the camera starts to move more, even towering to a bird’s eye view of Damien and a police officer in an intricate hand-to-hand combat, zooming in when the hands become tied up, and rapidly zooming out when they are released. Perpetual movement is the goal of Damien, and it becomes the goal of the camera too as it swings around the fight in order to capture as much of the choreographed movement as possible.

If Damien is the balletic dancer and the focus of the camera and a spectator, then cinematography is an equally-choreographed dance designed around the action body in movement.

Thus Dufrenne’s second point of a graceful elegance to a ballet dancer, one that when absent does not achieve itself as an aesthetic object, can be expanded to include a team of dancers, such as the film editor’s project in piecing together the many camera shots, the cinematographer’s initial capture of the image, the director’s vision of the scene, and finally the actor’s fluid movements. All of these graceful elements, when done gracefully and seemingly effortlessly, create the larger aesthetic picture of the body in an artistic dance with other bodies. “Le spectateur perçoit la danse comme se réalisant à
travers le danseur, ayant du danseur pour apparaître un besoin absolument impérieux, mais ne s’identifiant pas à lui,” claims Dufrenne on his way to further defining the aesthetic object (115). The ballet needs its dancers to give life to one aspect of the whole production, but it also acts alongside other producers. For Dufrenne again, ballet is an apposite object of study: “Cet exemple montre au mieux ce que perçoit le spectateur: une certaine atmosphère à laquelle coopèrent le sujet, la musique et la chorégraphie, et qui est comme l’âme du ballet; c’est cela que visent les danseurs, et c’est cela l’objet esthétique tel qu’ils le réalisent” (116). Working together to create a film, the balletic spectacle of the action fight sequence in the Banlieue films is perceived as an aesthetic object because of its centralized framing of the bodies in motion, its emphasis on the movement of all bodies rather than just a heroic centralizing character, and its deployment of action stunts and comedic props to visualize its heroic struggle.

The fight scene thus becomes an important sight of the aesthetic pinnacle of an action film, but it is not the only one. Action films typically deploy chase scenes to the same effect by employing physical objects of transportation (buses, cars, planes, boats) or even just running. But it should not be taken for granted that any chase scene is worthy of being an aesthetic object, although that is more than likely the intention. Certain chase scenes are more powerful than others, and also have a higher cultural importance than others. This returns us to the emphasis of these films on parkour and its specific athletic style. As many others have traced, parkour is a particularly French form of exercise and
sport that works on many different levels beyond physical fitness. Because of its status, its presence in the *Banlieue* films gives them an importance within the whole film project, and therefore can be studied as a standout.

Addressing the presence of parkour and its cultural significance, Neil Archer’s article “Virtual Poaching and Altered Space” treats the intersection of the *banlieue* film and what he titles a parkour film – mostly online videos, but some feature-length documentaries – that theorizes a spectator as visually participating in the parkour action on screen. He wonders whether “we as viewers can engage with the ‘finished product’ of visualised parkour, in a way that retains the core experience of parkour as practice,” and thus sets up the conclusion that film editing creates the visual space, much like a *traceur* creates his or her space during parkour (95). From a spectator’s point of view, however, Archer allows that pleasure can be derived from simply watching this movement, since the filming of the chase emphasizes a “non-productive pleasure,” a “pure moment of suspension and transformation” (103). Transported away from the narrative and even the parkour for a moment, a spectator is capable of enjoying the movement of the bodies on screen as they seemingly float from one surface to another and move away from and between the spaces on display.

And whereas this schema is cinematically-specific and even generically-precise, Dufrenne consistently attempts to go beyond those medium-based confines in search of the purest definition of the aesthetic experience. When addressing temporal and spatial

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55 Again see David Pettersen’s great article on French parkour and these same *Banlieue* films, as cited above.
aspects of the work of art, Dufrenne realizes that these ideas must work in concert, and that “Cette solidarité [entre le temps et l’espace] s’exprime en effet au mieux dans la notion de mouvement…” (L’objet esthétique 312). Moreover, he pushes a spectator, or in his case, the subject, to realize that “cette connexion s’établit à l’intérieur d’un sujet, c’est-à-dire que le mouvement ne peut être appréhendé dans le monde que parce qu’il est d’abord l’acte d’un sujet qui déploie en se posant la possibilité d’un monde” (312-13). A spectator’s ability to conceptualize space and movement through it, which is related to time, is what makes the aesthetic experience of watching these parkour movements that much more exciting, that much more invigorating, that much more dynamic. The bodies on screen are not just filmed: they cascade from high to low as they leap from building to building; they are positioned through editing at the top of the frame, only to be cut and appear at the bottom of the frame in the next shot; and they push from one side of the frame to the next while the camera simultaneously moves at a slower pace. All of this movement is taken together by a spectator and naturally creates an experience of movement that is representative of human movement, but also expressed through the subject of the action film and a spectator who is attracted to the genre.

In all, the fight scenes and the chase scenes that permeate the action film and propagate the action aesthetic are not just exhilarating respites from character development or narrative exegesis, but instead are the foundation of aesthetic continuity for the action film object. The relationship that is developed between the body on screen and the physical body of a spectator is of paramount importance for the creation of an aesthetic object and the phenomenological experience. Visualizing the movement on
screen in its extreme form while also appreciating the medium-specificity of film and the limitations of it allows for an enjoyment of visual spectacle that is not necessarily attached to a specific reading of the film, or an analysis of the spatial or temporal elements on display. A human being’s natural ability to navigate and negotiate space and time can be seen in its extreme form in the action film. The essence of aesthetic continuity is not in the repetition of tropes between films, but rather in the continuity between the physical existence of a spectator and the visualized experience in film, as exemplified by the various cinematic elements coming together to create a beautiful and vibrant finished product. The resemblance does not have to be a perfect one-to-one ratio, but instead is a phenomenon that posits simple possibility as the ultimate connection. Seeing is indeed believing.

**Aesthetic correspondences on the bodies of the characters in *Largo Winch***

More often than not, any study of characters in films follows an at once predictable yet continually engaging logic. Scholars and critics approach a film with a basic understanding of the film experience in mind; that is, films are judged based on their ability to attract a spectator through identification with a character and its narrative arc. This attraction in turn either limits or opens the film to reception, since an oversimplified character is quickly forgotten, whereas complicated characters are latched onto and remembered because they better resemble veritable human emotions. There have been attempts to clarify what spectator identification actually is, such as Murray Smith’s *Engaging Characters*, which attempts to use psychoanalysis, structuralism, and
post-structuralism to redefine the identification process. To me, Smith correctly assesses the first step of identification as being recognition. For Smith, this initial act “describes a spectator’s construction of character: the perception of a set of textual elements, in film typically cohering around the image of a body, as an individuated and continuous human agent” (82). Whereas Smith only spends about two pages describing this process, it is my opinion that he inadvertently recognized the crux of the cinematic experience that initiates the rest of the process.

Smith’s concept of recognition is particularly apt for the cinema and the experience of a spectator, since Smith allows for recognition to “not deny the possibility of development and change, since it based on the concept of continuity” (82). For the corporeal form of a spectator, continuity is mutable and is an everyday occurrence where pressures and positions and gestures and movements are constantly in flux. Smith still tends to see the act of recognition as belonging to the narrative, stating that “we would not find ourselves attracted to (and so could not become allied with) an inert bundle of traits,” and further noting that “we perceive and conceive of characters as integral, discrete textual constructs” (82, emphasis added). Smith’s insistence on the act of recognition through textual clues seems more connected to literature, or any medium where the human body is not constantly visible to a viewing spectator; or as he states the basis for his identification concept, recognition begins at the “level of narrative structure which relates to character” (82). My argument prefers to see the corporeal form of the character itself as the beginning moment of recognition, before any type of “alignment” or “allegiance” is made between a spectator and the character’s narrative actions (83-84).
It is the clearly marked and demarcated body of the character and the body’s movement through the filmed space that initiates the act of recognition on behalf of a spectator. “Recognition has received less attention than any other level of engagement in studies concerned with character and/or identification, probably because it is regarded as ‘obvious’,” Smith argues. “Certainly, in most films, it is rapid and phenomenologically ‘automatic’,” he concludes (82-83). Indeed, the phenomenological recognition of the corporeal form of the character by a spectator is almost too rapid to be discussed, yet too obvious to be ignored.

Before arriving at this conclusion, however, it seems prudent to understand exactly what could be meant by Smith’s invocation of “the image of a body” (82). To engage this type of discussion, then, I will return to Mikel Dufrenne’s texts, and specifically his follow-up to the Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique, La notion d’a priori, where he challenges and tries to clarify Immanuel Kant’s vision of a priori knowledge as being “toujours antérieur à l’expérience” (4). Dufrenne begins by asking the questions “Pour que l’expérience soit référence, ne faut-il pas qu’elle soit source? Ne doit-on pas aller jusqu’à dire que l’a priori, principe de l’expérience, a aussi son principe dans l’expérience en ce qu’il est donné en elle?” (6). As such, Dufrenne repositions experience as being, at the least, equal to the process of thought, if not even acting prior to it in many capacities. In other words, the experience of watching a film can be re-envisioned as first of all a moment of interaction, separate from a spectator’s previous experiences yet also intuitive and logical because of and due to previous experiences. The body, and particularly perception, thus play into this understanding as well.
Like in his previous work and similar to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Dufrenne places a large amount of importance on the body in interpreting the world around us. As he states:

Rappelons-nous d’abord que le corps n’est pas seulement cet ensemble, d’ailleurs non sommable, de déterminations objectives que la science explore, ou d’organes que l’action met au service de ses fins; il est aussi ces fins elles-mêmes. En tant qu’il vit et que je le vis, il est pouvoir, non seulement de faire, mais de vouloir et aussi de penser : volonté et pensée ne sont pas avec lui dans un rapport d’extériorité. (186-87)

If, in a certain sense, the body embodies its own existence, then it can be deduced that certain functions of the body are interpretable before any ideological or conceptive ideas are formed. That is, the body allows for its own experience with the world.

With the knowledge that the body founds part of the Kantian notion of the a priori, Dufrenne proceeds to contemplate what that might mean for the individual body as well as humanity. “La causalité par exemple, c’est d’abord une certaine disposition de mon corps à ordonner ses entreprises en suivant le fil du temps,” Dufrenne begins, eager to get to his point and hinting at it only obliquely. “La substance, une certaine disposition de mon corps à faire crédit à l’objet, à s’attacher à lui, à éprouver sa durée,” he finishes, fully placing the body as a participant in his larger schema (188). With regards to the body, Dufrenne clarifies that even with such power, the body still only serves to “s’oriente dans un milieu, il ne dévoile pas un monde,” forgiving the corporeal being of a tremendous responsibility (196). But he finishes by placing the two commonly opposed
threads, the mind and the body, in a constant cross-reference one with the other, both distinguishing itself from the other while also defining itself through the other: “En découvrant l’unité de la conscience et du corps, nous vérifions d’abord que ce qui est, c’est le sujet et non la conscience” (197). This subject, the individual, is thus in a perpetual relationship with itself and the others in the world, who it is both apart from but also part of. Quoting Dufrenne at length will help to clarify his point:

Mais il faut encore revenir ici même sur l’*a priori* existentiel et l’être du sujet. En découvrant l’unité de la conscience et du corps, nous vérifions d’abord que ce qui est, c’est le sujet et non la conscience. Qu’on doive comprendre le sujet à partir de la conscience n’y change rien. La conscience comme pour-soi est bien le digne de la subjectivité, elle ne constitue pas le sujet, ou si l’on préfère elle ne constitue en lui que sa subjectivité. Car elle n’est pas non plus un attribut, une différence spécifique, c’est-à-dire un avoir ; elle est plutôt une manière d’être, et précisément de ne pas être ; mais cela suppose un être : dans le sujet, le pour-soi présuppose l’en-soi, et cet en-soi est le sujet même en tant que nature perpétuellement contestée par la conscience. Cette nature que nous assignons au sujet est le corps. Mais ce corps est une même chose avec la conscience qui n’est pas nature ? Précisément, le paradoxe de cette unité retentit dans le sujet, qui est à la fois nature et non-nature, et aussi bien singularité et universalité. (197)
The essential paradox notwithstanding, Dufrenne suggests an egalitarianism between the mind and the body that allows for the latter to have an equal amount of innate and intrinsic control as it interacts with the world.

With subjectivity defined thus, Dufrenne further proposes that this subject is capable of distinguishing itself from the group while also realizing that it is fully integrated and integral to the group. “L’homme n’est pas seulement le promoteur de l’humain, il est doublement accordé à l’homme: il est son semblable, et il porte en lui les moyens de le connaître. C’est à partir de là qu’il faudrait éclairer le fait de l’inter-subjectivité, qui n’est pas seulement affrontement, mais reconnaissance” (202). This recognition allows for a human being to situate him or herself in the world and among others through corporeal distinction; and like the ideas of Murray Smith, this corporeal form of physiognomic recognition can be extended into film. Recognition is not just the act of seeing a character or characters on screen and situating them in relation to a spectator’s own body, as if these images were reality. Instead, it is the ability to make correspondences between both objects and persons, to find that which is similar or that which is different, and use that as a device to interpret and read the film world and potentially the real world. Much like a human interacts with other human bodies and objects in a real experience, the film space also allows for similar interactions.

The film world, then, both expands out into the real world and is enclosed upon itself, thereby answering to its own rules. In that sense, correspondences in the film world – in any given film’s filmic logic and encapsulated, created world – refer not only or completely to outside influences, but relate to each other in a constant state of fluctuation.
and variance. Not to sound overly simplistic, but for instance, a character’s facial reaction is most obviously responding to a stimulus within the film world, not something derived from a spectator. Moreover, the filmic space forces the characters and each character’s body to interact in cinematically specific ways, usually as given by the director but perpetually hidden from a spectator. And whereas this is obvious, the idea that, in an action film in particular, a specific character can be known as either “good” or “bad,” as helping or hurting the progress of the hero/heroine, or as serving some specific role in the plot, is not completely secured if only based on narrative notions of heroism and villainy. An aesthetic congruence is necessary, a relationship between the characters on screen, and a clear way of telling them apart, as readily apparent on the bodies that are displayed.

This leads us, finally, to our analysis of the film franchise *Largo Winch*, which is based on a *bande dessinée* or comic book of the same name. The story of the film follows the lead character Largo, who is the adopted son of the extremely powerful and extraordinarily wealthy Nerio Winch, a businessman with some shady dealings on the side. These improprieties get the father into trouble, and Largo is called in to rescue him and the family business. Employing the tropes of the action cinema, Largo begins in a remote location where he must rescue a woman and fight his way to freedom, complete with a brief but exciting chase scene, an unnecessarily extended sex scene, and then a

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56 The influence of comic books and graphic novels on action films is an area that is ripe for further research, and could encompass multiple different cultures and countries and languages. Unfortunately, this is not the intent of this dissertation. The Belgian comic in question, *Largo Winch*, is one of the more popular comics in France and has been adapted into a television series as well as the two films that I discuss.
continuation of escapades which culminate in his saving the family company from a hostile takeover.

In a sense, the film is fulfilling the generic role assigned to it, proposing its solution to the presentation of culture. “Tout comme le mythe qui existe, dans une culture donnée, sous forme de versions différentes, faites de répétitions, de variations et d’innovations autour d’une même structure, d’un même rapport entre personnages, d’une même spatialité,” states Raphaëlle Moine in her thorough Les Genres du cinéma, “les films de genre relèvent d’une activité combinatoire, produit d’un imaginaire collectif qui met en ordre le monde et ses éléments” (73-74). But this collective ordering of the world is also present for a society at the corporeal level, and its inherent ambiguities (some ideas at the level of the collective imaginary are more logical, more well-received by the public, and simply better than others) are relieved by the corporeal markings of the characters.

Seeing the character of Largo Winch on screen, as played by Tomer Sisley, and as surrounded by other characters, is therefore an act of participating in a phenomenological experience which understands the correspondences being created in addition to the narrative and the sociocultural background that the film employs. Arguably, an actor might be more or less capable of portraying certain emotions and actions in film, and that can influence the believability of the diegetic world on a basic level. Moreover, narrative or sociocultural background are not mutually exclusive from the film experience, and in fact are best used when they reinforce the experience or vice versa. Thus it is not a discussion of one or the other, but rather how all of this works together while also
maintaining individual-acting autonomy and use. Still, the correspondences of characters and how these aesthetic correspondences determine character positioning happens before the narrative or cultural implications of the presentation.

Referring again to correspondences, Dufrenne argues that “il serait absurde de penser que nous avons a priori une idée de chaque homme comme nous avons une idée de l’homme en général,” invoking a fundamental truth about the generality and specificity of humanity (La notion 209). Yet human beings intrinsically understand each other and are capable of reading other human beings because “les qualités affectives que révèle l’expression ont immédiatement un sens pour nous” (209). Dufrenne continues:

Ces qualités ne sont pas la projection de notre émotion sur l’objet, elles sont plutôt ce qui déclenche notre émotion, si émotion il y a, elles sont un sens que l’objet nous propose. Pas seulement l’homme … ; mais avant tout l’homme, qui est naturellement expressif, et même si ce qu’il exprime est l’inexpressivité. […] Mais c’est parce que ce sens en même temps est constamment offert que nous pouvons, d’après lui, identifier autrui : son identité pour nous est l’identité d’une expression qui nous annonce son a priori existentiel, sans que nous puissions au premier abord expliciter et maîtrise cette connaissance enveloppée dans un sentiment. (209-10)

The natural expressivity of the human form appears in the film as well, and like in real life, each character’s a priori is projected and phenomenologically understood by a spectator’s generic assumptions and reference to naturalized corporeal movements.
Films are a perfect example of this intrinsic correspondence and the natural, phenomenological understanding of character; and action films necessarily use this innate comprehension to their benefit in order to set up the stereotypical yet widely understood dichotomy of good versus evil. The opening scene in the first *Largo Winch* is as good an example as any for this experience. Opening with a blurry image of muted colors and the sounds of muffled screaming, it is immediately apparent that one human figure is inflicting pain on one or more people, and whereas a spectator does not register who these people are or what may be happening until later in the film, we are already primed for some kind of conflict. The positioning of the bodies on screen, one large and fast aggressor domineering over two or more cowering bodies, conveys a correspondence between the bodies on screen and a perceptive correspondence within the mind of a spectator. The audience thus is choosing sides through a recognition of force, even if an individual spectator has never experienced such domination in his or her personal life.

A few scenes later, when the character of Largo is first introduced, he is shown descending from a boat before any of the other passengers and then approaching a tattoo artist who inquires about Largo’s justification for receiving the body art. Throughout the sequence, and before a spectator knows who this character even is (since the identity of Largo has remained a secret through the first eight minutes of the film), there is a sense of power and control that emanates from his character, and also of mystery and intrigue, thanks to a lighting technique that hides his face in shadow. At first, Largo is filmed from afar and as part of a group, but sets himself apart by walking away from the group and wearing a bright, blue shirt; the camera then follows him from behind in a plan
américain, again emphasizing his stature without revealing his face. In both cases, the eye of a spectator is drawn to him, but only because his body is seen as separated from the others. Previous characters were shown head on, and so their identities were not hidden – but with Largo, the mystery builds intrigue through the generic trope. The film creates an affinity between a spectator and the heroic character without ever needing to state the identity of the character or the intentions of the character, and by not yet giving the character a narrative justification for spectator attraction. Yet the congruence between a noticed separation and distance created between the mysterious character and the nondescript others on screen, with a spectator’s own awareness of its corporeal distance from others at all times, creates a deeper affinity that is sensationaly felt.

Throughout the first film as well, the face of Largo, when it appears, is presented in favorable and flattering lighting, and the actor gives him a slight smirk – even when inappropriate. The other characters that surround him, however, have some sort of physical defect, costume variation, or language tick that sets them apart from Largo and the standard that he has set. Unsurprisingly, the titular character is given the ability to define the other characters according to his logic, rather than a more democratic comparison. And whereas other characters wear suits and ties as is appropriate business attire, Largo sports a t-shirt or goes shirtless, inviting the comparison and noticeable difference between him and others. Even his filmic rival, an English bodyguard named Marcus, maintains his sport jacket when he and Largo are battling for the fate of the film. And Largo’s helpers and handlers either have face scars or goofy haircuts that cover the forehead and restrict a full view of the face. Finally, even his adopted family uses their
native language (Croatian, even though the majority of the film is in either English or French) to distinguish them from the English-speaking business mavens. Of course, the film also renders language variation necessary through the narrative and Largo’s continual travels from one part of the globe to the next, but this difference also serves the purpose of again placing Largo apart from the rest of the characters, yet only identifiable as a singularity because of his proximity and interaction with others.

The second film in the series, *Largo Winch II* (2011) works in a similar fashion, although it does allow for a more diverse cast given the locations where it was filmed. Despite this narrative reasoning, the body of Largo and now those of his cohorts – his butler Gauthier, his new friend Simon, and the antagonist played by Sharon Stone – are found in similar framing mechanisms and lighting schemes and predictable yet enjoyable action chase and fight moments. In one particularly stunning scene, Largo dives from an airplane to rescue his friend while another, gun-toting enemy dives after him and fights Largo in mid-air. In this scene as in many others, Largo’s body is consistently placed in peril until a last minute gimmick saves him: in a fight in a hotel room, quick thinking allows him to escape imminent death; in a car chase scene, choosing to drive in reverse is just the solution that he needed; and in the skydiving scene, prematurely deploying the bad guy’s parachute and then forcing him to entangle himself in it leads to Largo rescuing his friend and landing safely back on the earth. In each scene, Largo’s body in peril must first be pushed to its absolute limit before recuperating and making a miraculous comeback. The body is resilient, like a struggle that pushes it to the brink, only to see it bounce back. Overall, Largo’s body is placed in danger just as the enemy’s
body is, or as his friend’s body is, but whereas the latter are forced into unfavorable situations, Largo seems to choose them and even invite the risk. The actions of his body thus correspond with the actions and reactions of the other characters, including and on top of the narrative trajectory that also determines what each character can or cannot do.

As the aesthetic correspondences showed, the image of the body in these *Largo* films allows for a clearer understanding of both the film and a society at large. Within the films, variations in bodies through costume, makeup, and demeanor, creates an immediate comprehension for a spectator. Those bodies which are marked as different or as apart from the others should be noticed and studied, and within those limits of framing, the heroic body frequently stands out. On top of that, the struggle of the heroic body to overcome obstacles and enemies is a symbolic representation of a society’s self-perception. In understanding that the individual and society are one and the same and inseparable, and that the form of the body formulates part of that identity, Dufrenne set the framework for a phenomenological understanding of a spectator’s aesthetic attraction to a film:

Il semble ainsi que je suis ma société comme je suis mon corps. Que je le veuille ou non ; et certes ceci n’est pas une clause de style, car ma liberté est ici en jeu et se manifeste dans l’attitude que j’adopte et dans l’action que j’exerce à l’égard de ce corps et de cette société. Mais que ma liberté soit en situation, cela signifie que je ne puis l’exercer sans m’identifier à ce corps et à cette société. (*La notion* 212)
The films in the *Largo* series play with cultural tropes and the action aesthetic in order to create an expertly filmed experience that is meant to be shared with society. If the films teach anything, it is that a phenomenological understanding of the world through the body can be a lonely and yet empowering existence. The generic character tropes are profoundly phenomenological in the sense that an individual in a society can at once feel isolated and alone, while still maintaining a connection to certain others and parts of society. The films’ insistent presentation of the character of Largo as an isolated individual who is centrally-framed and physically in tension corresponds to a spectator’s own, self-imposed centralized framing of existence and tense corporeal relationship with the world.

**Aesthetic congruences and the senses of cinema**

For this last section on the aesthetic attraction of the French action cinema, I will turn to another work by Mikel Dufrenne, *L’œil et l’oreille*, written in 1991 but as of now untranslated. The idea of an aesthetic congruence goes along with the previously mentioned aesthetic ideas, continuity and correspondences, and furthers the discussion by positing a connection between not only a spectator’s visual acuity and what is seen on the screen, but also the aural capacity of a spectator and his or her ability to process the information through another sense. Unsurprisingly, in film as in life, the eye is given primacy over all of the other senses, even though the tandem work of every single sense must come together in order to better understand the world. Mikel Dufrenne jokingly references this eye-centrism in his introduction to *L’œil et l’oreille*, using humor to displace vision but also to accept that this is a natural tendency. But when referencing the
ear and listening, he acknowledges that “l’oreille a moins de prestige que l’œil,” but only “parce qu’elle opère avec plus de discrétion” (11). The subtlety of the ear and listening may not get the credit that it deserves, but its role is just as important as the eye in founding the world for humans.

For the French action film, then, it would be only fitting that part of the entertainment of the spectacle lie not only with the visual image that is presented on the screen, but also with the concomitant noise of the spectacle to reinforce the grandeur of the moment. A chase scene is made stronger when the sound of a revving car engine, or the pitter-patter of running footsteps, is overlapped with the image of the same idea. There is congruence between the senses, between what is seen and what is heard, and also between what is heard and what is seen, that gives the specific scene in question more power and more force when presented to a spectator. As such, the phenomenological film experience becomes more powerful thanks to this coinciding, sensational, and congruent activity. As now understood, both hearing and seeing is believing.

Sound in cinema is a large topic that cannot be fully addressed in this forum, but a few important aspects of the aural field are necessary for a better phenomenological understanding of the French action cinema. Michel Chion is a renowned scholar who has written extensively on audio-visual congruencies in cinema, and he clarifies the importance of sound in film in his fascinating *The Voice in Cinema*:
A film’s aural elements are not received as an autonomous unit. They are immediately analyzed and distributed in a spectator’s perceptual apparatus according to the relation each bears to what a spectator sees at the time.

(First and foremost: according to whether you see in the image the source attributed to the sound – for example, if words are heard, whether or not you see the person who is speaking.) It’s from this instantaneous perceptual triage that certain audio elements (essentially those referred to as synchronous, i.e., whose apparent source is visible onscreen) can be immediately “swallowed up” in the image’s false depth, or relegated to the periphery of the visual field, but on alert to appear if there’s a sound whose cause is temporarily put offscreen. (3)

Thus there is a connection between the visual image and the aural field, one that works best when mutually reinforcing – but which is often overlooked or “neglected unjustly for being redundant” (4). But without the aural field, “the image is no longer the same,” (4) and so the congruency between image and sound works best when working in tandem. The image in cinema cannot be privileged over the voice (or any sound, for that matter) because of “the reality of audiovisual combination – that one perception influences the other and transforms it” (Audio-Vision xxvi). Both the ear and the eye are necessary for the experience of sound cinema.

Mikel Dufrenne’s approach to the senses, and to the eye and the ear in particular, also tries to reconcile this idea of one sense being privileged over the others. But more than that, he also attempts to distinguish these organs scientifically, rather than
affectively or emotionally: “Mais il importe quand même, pour comprendre la nature et la fonction des sens, de bien discerner d’abord sensorialité et affectivité, même si le mot sensibilité invite à les confondre” (L’œil 19). The very first function of these organs is to register a tactile response, most obviously noted in the sensation of touch, but also achieved through sight and hearing as Dufrenne proposes. Dufrenne also suggests, and correctly in my opinion, that the sense of touch registers first the sensational feeling before any kind of affected interpretation comes into play. This seems uncontroversial for touch, and for the other senses, such as sight and hearing, an initial affected response is also likely. Dufrenne addresses this dilemma with his classification of the senses perceived at a distance, as stated at the beginning of the chapter. But what makes seeing and hearing different is that they are tactile senses that operate at a distance, away from the object that is being perceived, and thus are special in their own right. But what further makes this inquiry important is the question that drives Dufrenne: “De la presence à la représentation: la question est de savoir comment s’opère le passage” (22). Moreover, Dufrenne goes so far as to suggest that the mind (esprit) is created by the sensations of the eye and the ear: “Au principe de l’esprit il y a les sens” (27). But rather than seeing this as a dualistic or tendentious relationship, he sees it as reciprocal and reinforcing.

The senses working together to create a more phenomenological experience and understanding of perception seems uncontroversial; and extrapolating this positioning to a film should be rather normal. An interesting case of films that might problematize, in a small sense, this idea would be those which require some sort of intellectual understanding in order to make sense of the visual image. For instance, dramatic films
make less sense if a spectator does not comprehend the narrative dilemma being used for
dramatic effect; also, science fiction films that fail to fully explain their scientific
premises leave a spectator confused as to reasoning, and less likely to enjoy the film.⁵⁷
Along these lines, then, are comedy films, where a basic understanding of cultural humor
and the context of the joke is necessary for a spectator to laugh. Some humor films, like
those of Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin, use slapstick humor and gags in order to
engage the audience, and this gives the visual image precedence over any explanation –
though usually there is not one – of the humor behind the joke. Arguably, a purely
comedy film demands an understanding on the part of a spectator as to how comedy
works, in what situations, and why some particular line or moment is actually funny.

And so a group of films that fit into this model, where comedy is an important
feature of the film, but perhaps not the most important feature, is the *Taxi* films that
began in 1998 and saw their latest release with *Taxi 4* (Krawczyk 2007). These films
could be classified in many different genres, such as a buddy film, a crime or police film,
an action film, or a comedy film. As such, it becomes important to pull out some of the
attraction that is related to sensory stimuli versus those that require prior knowledge. And
considering the treatment of action cinema throughout this dissertation, I will not address
the hybridity of the film genre nor its comedy elements, and especially since hybridity
was dealt with in chapter two. Instead, I will focus on the scenes where the sensory

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⁵⁷ Many examples can be found, such as the so-bad-it’s-good series of *Sharknado* (Ferrante 2013) films that
blend disaster epics and incorrect science as a premise for sharks in tornadoes. Taken as a comedy, these
films work; but they are never taken as serious science fiction and drama.
mechanisms of the eye and the ear are most prominent, such as the many scenes that emphasize the automobile and its movement through the streets of Marseille.

As a general introduction to these films, *Taxi* follows the inept and clumsy police officer Émilien and his interaction with the noticeably smoother and slightly criminal Daniel. The latter owns a very special taxi cab (a French Peugeot 406) that can convert into a high-speed vehicle when necessary, and since Émilien is incapable of passing his driver’s exam – despite many failed and funny attempts – it comes to Daniel to transport the police officer around, eventually getting caught up in the police operation and helping in order to clear his name of criminal wrongdoing. The films quite heavily emphasize the vehicles and the frantic driving through the streets of Marseille, using low-angle tracking shots, in-vehicle point-of-view shots, crane or helicopter shots, and following shots to demonstrate the presence of the car. More so than just the varied camera angles and shots, though, is the heavy use of sound effects to reinforce the experience of the moments of driving, and to create a phenomenological experience that feels more real because of the multiple senses that are put into play.

Coinciding with Dufrenne’s point that “les sens cohabitent dans le corps, ils communiquent entre eux, ils coopèrent à l’exploration du monde, ils peuvent nouer entre eux d’étonnantes relations” (28), it should not be difficult to accept and even to defend a very basic idea that, when senses work together, a different sensation is created that goes beyond their simple physiognomy, and thus results in an altogether different conglomerate. At the beginning of *Taxi 2*, then, when the title credits begin to roll and introduce the director and production company, there is a faint noise of a revving car

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engine in the background, as if the titles themselves are shifting gears and becoming faster. Of course, once the proper film image comes on screen, a spectator finds him or herself in a rally car and participating in a racing event, thereby rendering comprehensible the noises that were previously heard. But by priming the ear first, rather than vision, for the eventual action in the film, *Taxi 2* situates a spectator as immersed in the diegetic world and enjoying the aural spectacle of the film, before analyzing it visually.

Dufrenne argues for a distinction between “sentir” and “percevoir,” which while related, are for him constructed of two different meanings and different analyses. The idea that perceiving and feeling are identical stems from a misunderstanding of certain analytic philosophers toward trying to make sense of the two words. Sensation goes beyond just the physiognomic level, and eventually enters into the realm of feeling. “Ce qui est senti n’est pas une qualité vue,” Dufrenne begins, “c’est un visage du monde, une certaine atmosphère qui s’exprime et se donne non pas à lire, encore moins à déchiffrer, mais à éprouver immédiatement comme lorsqu’on sent de l’orage dans l’air ou encore de la joie ou de la tristesse” (32). If there were a reason to fault Dufrenne’s analysis, it would be in his insistence on using terms such as “joie” or “tristesse” and giving them a priority in the world of feeling that purposely sees them as ambiguous, or as abstract.

Most spectators could accept his analysis, however, and I would add that sensations of thrill, excitement, and fun should also be added to the realm of the abstract where, as humans, we know the sensation when we feel it but have difficulty describing –
or even just knowing – exactly why it happens. But an aesthetic appreciation of the concomitant sensations is not a rejection of an analysis of the film; instead, it is simply an appreciation of a spectator being more attuned to the moment because of the multiple sensations involved, and therefore having a stronger phenomenological experience that comes before any critical analysis. For instance, when speaking about an animal’s ability to comprehend his or her owner without a linguistic ability, Dufrenne is particularly convincing. He acknowledges that the animal’s comprehension goes beyond what we normally think about animals, but that does not mean an animal appreciates aesthetics. Thus he can conclude that “Néanmoins la première,” which in this case is referring to the experience that a human may have on a casual stroll in nature, “qui est esthétique ne répudie pas ce savoir,” where “savoir” means the level of temporal and spatial understanding that comes with an understanding of the world as built on scientific and physical principles (34). In other words, one does not preclude the other, but it more than likely does precede it.

Yet Dufrenne is also aware that an analysis such as this could lead to a disproportionate response on the part of a spectator or of the human being in general. Rather than letting this tendency slide into chaos, Dufrenne clarifies his terms with regard to the sonorous world that surrounds us:

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58 For a more thorough reading of these types of sensations, see my first chapter on Luc Besson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. These philosophical heavyweights (Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty) tend to agree on certain truths about humanity.
Knowing what kind of sounds we may encounter, then, is part of the appeal of the action film for a spectator. Seeing the image of a moving body on screen and then hearing the “whoosh” of wind as it passes before the ears is simply a reinforcement of the visible field and of the potential sound that would coincide with it. But this combination is still a directionally-based sense, one that requires a visible movement in order for the aural component to make sense.

In the Taxi films, sound surrounds a spectator in specific scenes that often involve the vehicles and transportation, and the sound is overwhelmingly physical. In the opening sequence of Taxi 3, the first image is that of a calm landscape of the port of Marseille, where seagulls mew and boats toot their horns, and that is suddenly interrupted by the shattering of glass as a dirt bike crashes through a window and careens onto a rooftop. The driver quickly recovers and runs toward the edge of the building where he (the identity is hidden because of a motorcycle helmet, but it is later revealed to be Sylvester Stallone) uses a fire hose to rappel down to the ground. Shortly after landing, five or six other characters wearing rollerblades cascade out of the same, shattered window, and begin to chase the culprit through the streets of Marseille. For approximately two minutes and thirty seconds, the only sounds are those of wheels spinning and rolling on the
cement ground, on the cobblestone streets, on the metal railings, and on top of parked vehicles. As dialogue enters the aural field and as the narrative commences, Sylvester Stallone’s character gets into the famed taxi of Daniel, and together they begin their trajectory toward the airport.

As the chase scene continues, the sounds of the rollerblade wheels, the bike wheels, and the taxi car’s engine, become more pronounced through repetition and intensity. Michel Chion is again relevant for this discussion. In *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Chion argues that “Visual and auditory perception are of much more disparate natures than one might think,” but concedes that the “two perceptions mutually influence each other in the audiovisual contract” (9). The aural field provides an “added value” to the film, which for Chion is “the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression “naturally” comes from what is seen” (5). In this opening scene of *Taxi 3*, the sounds invoke a heightened pace to the action that the image, while reinforcing, occasionally deviates from (such as when one of the rollerbladers crashes into a plexiglass sheet and falls to the ground). “Rapid auditory punctuation” is used in order to arouse the sensation of the ear, which for Chion is “more temporally adept” than the eye, which is “more spatially adept” (11). The speed of the chase scene is thus strengthened because of the congruence between the rapid image and the punctuated aural field, where both are absolutely necessary in order to convey the sensation of pace, tempo, rhythm, celerity, and speed.
However, Dufrenne proposes a further reading of the aural field that can be useful for an analysis of film. He attempts to draw a distinction between the art-inspired field of sound and the everyday field of sound, stating that “dans l’écoute ordinaire, je suis surtout attentive à la spatialité du champ et à la localisation de la source, dans l’écoute de la musique, je me laisse volontiers immerger extatiquement dans le son” (86). In other words, a specific type of aural expectation is invoked when listening to music or encountering something that is meant to be consumed through listening. A film, by all standards, meets this requirement, and therefore is just as capable of creating an “ecstatic immersion” in the sound of cinema. Moreover, the action film itself is well-situated to make the visual image and the aural sound match in an exaggerated fashion. Thus, when a character is hit across the face with a baseball bat, and the baseball bat proceeds to break into two separate pieces, the audience hears both the breaking of the bat, the collision of the hard wood with the soft face, the grunt and the heave of the human, the passing of air as the bat travels through the space, and many other sounds that together reinforce the experience of the event rather than just the visual aspect of it. Hence, spectators tend to jump and cringe at these types of moments in film because they feel so real. Or, in a specific example from the opening of *Taxi 4*, a famous soccer player, Djibril Cissé, has just been delivered by the infamous taxi to the stadium of Marseille for a match. As the game commences, a soccer ball is kicked toward the camera followed by a cut and then a soccer ball receding from the camera into a group of children playing on the streets of Marseille. The scenes cut between different groups of players as the soccer ball bounces around, but the sound of juggling remains constant throughout. This creates
a congruence between scenes that is not necessarily tied to the narrative but rather is tied to the aural field of the film.

It is not only action films that make the efficacy of sense-conglomeration evident, but also the comedy film. The *Taxi* franchise thus becomes a perfect example of a hybrid genre that uses sound and visual tropes to convey the story and arouse the senses of spectators. Considering the prevalence of the car in the *Taxi* films, it is not only the speeding moments that count, but also the encountering of traffic or some sort of blocking of the route where sound and image can coincide. When braking, the driver Daniel is always prepared; but the passengers and the patrons of his taxi cab are consistently caught off guard. Aurally, a spectator hears the brakes squeal, then sees the characters lunge forward, followed by a large thumping sound, and finally an image of the characters now caressing their heads. The ubiquity of this image alone makes it slightly less funny each time a spectator sees it, but it also continually creates a connection between a spectator’s expectations and that which is seen and heard in the film. As an experience, these films then use this congruence in order to convey this comedic and also action-filled moment in the scene. This in turn creates a sensation that truly immerses a spectator into a film and gives him or her the ability to vicariously live the adventure of the action, or specifically here, of the vehicular comedy that we all know and have sensed before.

Resonance is an important concept for Dufrenne, one that is nearly as important as the visual. He is worth quoting at length to see the full extent of his argument:
Mais en même temps, parce que [le sonore] ne s’anéantit pas en m’envahissant, il m’investit et m’enveloppe, au point que parfois je ne puis plus en discerner la source : je résonne en lui comme il résonne en moi, je vibre ; s’il est violent, multiple, incohérent, je résiste mal à son assaut, je me perds, je me détraque ; si au contraire je sens en lui quelque mesure et quelque rythme – s’il est par quelque côté musical –, il exalte le battement de la vie en moi, il me met le corps en fête, et quelque chose danse en moi. (91-92)

More than anything, sound is seen as working in tandem with the visual image to create an overblown but altogether comprehensible sensation in a spectator. As the perceptions work together, seeing and hearing form a sensation that manifests in a spectator and pushes him or her to the edge of the seat, fearful of what may come next but excited for the opportunity to see it first-hand.

There are, however, critics of this type of sensationalism in action films or Hollywood blockbuster films in general. One such critic, Matthias Stork, has made a compelling and convincing video essay titled “Chaos cinema,” where he laments the discombobulated and chaotic camera movement of such action film auteurs as Michael Bay or Paul Greengrass, ridiculing them for relying too much on “sensory overload…excess, exaggeration, and overindulgence” (*Chaos cinema*). The one saving grace of these films is the soundtrack, the only feature that Stork argues helps the film by

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becoming more “creative, dense and exact” (*Chaos cinema*). Of course, Stork is watching these films from a principled and somewhat dogmatic viewpoint, following the footsteps of David Bordwell and his book *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. Whereas Stork is hypercritical and dismissive of anything that the action cinema throws his way, Bordwell is of course more nuanced and even-handed in his criticism. He does not see the action cinema as breaking with the tradition of classical continuous editing, since spatially the scenes still remain coherent (as in, the editing is not quick-cutting from a highway chase scene to physical combat in outer space), but he does note a preponderance of “tracks and pans” that are “interrupted by cuts,” which prevents “a sense of steady progression toward a revelation” (123). Moreover, he allows that filmmakers have chosen these rapid techniques because it provides energy to a scene, keeps a spectator’s interest in the image, and imparts an excitement that otherwise might be absent (123). Ultimately, Bordwell believes that the narration is what keeps these films together, seeing such action tropes as “visual hiccups, glitches glossed over by an otherwise coherent narration” (138); and whereas his argument is cogent, it still privileges the narrative as the foundation of film.

Cohesion can however lie outside of the narrative because these action chase moments or action fight sequences can be seen as extended pauses from the progression of the narrative, usually reinforcing the general exposition of the story, but not necessarily needing to. As Tico Romao contends in his article “Guns and Gas: Investigating the 1970s car chase film,” narrative helps to connect a spectator to the life of the hero, and a suspenseful car chase is only successful if the outcome is in doubt

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(142-43). But he later becomes critical of less successful car chase films in the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that a lack of suspense in car chase sequences – due to more emphasis on comedy or just on the racing of vehicles itself – stripped these films of their “narrative imagination,” and instead emphasized “unremitting spectacle” (148). Yet these moments of intense, sensational experience draw a spectator into the action of the film and make him or her feel like a participant in the movie through the spectacle rather than through the narrative or the character’s positioning in the narrative. It is not necessary for everything to cohere together in order for a spectator to make sense of what is happening. If the sound cues are off, then the visual image can take over; or if the visual image is full of quick cuts and varied angles, then the sound can keep the coherence. In either case, though, spectacle in and of itself is coherent because the senses are capable of deciphering the action as well as the story. The senses are working together and are comprehensible because a spectator’s body is capable of bringing it together and making sense of the supposed “chaos,” no matter how chaotic it may be.

This sensational sense-making is only too obvious in the final chase scene of *Taxi 2*, where Daniel, Emilien, and company are hurtling through the streets of Paris and the Trocadero station near the Eiffel Tower. When Daniel’s taxi is on screen, the aural field is filled with tire squeals and engine revving, but also a musical soundtrack that is upbeat and exciting, thereby establishing an association between the visual superiority of the hero and the physical dexterity – through sound – of his car. Furthermore, as the police are instigated into action by Daniel’s provocation, their inept driving is punctuated with sounds of cars crashing, extreme braking, and the cries of passengers and drivers. The
sound field and the visual image create a congruency that a spectator reads as a culmination of the hero’s skill and driving prowess, whereas the bumbling police and the foreign enemies are given static images (a police car pile-up that is extreme in its excess) and maximum aural capacity (in the form of vehicular crashing) as they fail in their pursuit. Rather than being a surplus of the image and the aural landscape that creates confusion, the film instead creates a dichotomy between the action heroes and the thwarted enemies, and further demonstrates the working together of visual and auditory fields for the presentation of character.

For Dufrenne, this ability to make sense of the manic image comes in the form of the human imagination, which can fill in the blanks or even invent what is needed to create a sense of what is experienced. “Sa fonction est de compléter le donné avec ce virtuel et de corriger l’infirmité d’une perception limitée à un registre sensoriel,” Dufrenne argues, showing once again that the human mind and the human experience is not so simplistic as some may suggest (L’œil 123). Dufrenne is also quick to note that imagination is not the same as fantasy or dreams, but rather an ability on behalf of human beings to coagulate disparate sensations into a comprehensible whole (123). For him, “l’imagination est moins pouvoir d’associer que pouvoir de s’ouvrir et communiquer, de laisser le senti retentir dans le sentant” (124), demonstrating again that the human mind does not always need adherence to a narrative in order to structure its understanding of an action moment. Spectacular car chases can be made more suspenseful if the end result is doubtful for the hero and his friends; but a spectator him or herself can freely use imagination and simply let the excitement of the spectacle take him or her for a ride.
The *Taxi* franchise uses its aesthetic congruency between the image of the enhanced Peugeot 407 and the sounds of its engine, tires, steering, and braking to foreground the striking moments of car chases that attract viewers to the action cinema. Street driving is exciting not only because of the suspense built into the narrative outcome, but also because of the simultaneity of aural and visual cues that prime a spectator for an heroic adventure. The fact that there are four different films in a franchise and plans for a fifth film attests to the desire of spectators to experience this aesthetic intersection, as well as the general marketability of these films. It also attests to the power of the eye and the ear as two senses that react to impact and can be stimulated through the medium of film.

**Aesthetic conclusions**

This chapter has attempted to evaluate the connection between the characters and objects in French action films with the visual and aural abilities of a spectator. By using the phenomenological theory of Mikel Dufrenne, I have demonstrated that the aesthetics of the action cinema respond to spectator expectations more so than industry standards. In doing so, it could be seen that this conclusion contradicts what was argued in the previous chapter with regards to narrative as worldview and the importance of narrative for the action cinema. But narrative is only one aspect of the action cinema, and spectacle is just as important in the overall structuring of these films. Moreover, the experience of a spectator during these films goes beyond narrative structures, and instead responds to senses and sensations that phenomenologically form the basis of human interaction with
the world. In the *Banlieue 13, Largo Winch*, and *Taxi* franchises in French cinema, action aesthetics can account for an encounter with these films as aesthetic objects that set their own standards and answer to a different logic of experience. Fittingly, Dufrenne concurs:

> L’œuvre véritable est celle qui a réponse à tous les pourquoi, sans que cette réponse d’ailleurs s’adresse jamais à l’entendement: c’est dans le sensible et par un acquiescement de notre corps que nous devons éprouver la plénitude et la nécessité de la “bonne forme”; et le plus souvent nous ne songeons pas à l’interroger ; nous sommes pris, et ne résistons pas à cette impression d’aisance et de sûreté ; si la réflexion exerce un contrôle sur cette impression, c’est quand nous nous sommes déjà familiarisés avec l’œuvre. Ainsi l’objet esthétique est vrai parce que rien en lui ne sonne faux, parce qu’il satisfait pleinement la perception, répondant à chaque instant ou en chacune de ses parties à l’attente qu’il éveille dans notre sensibilité. Car c’est à la perception que l’œuvre révèle sa cohérence, c’est le sensible même qui s’ordonne sous notre regard avec une rigueur qui ne doit rien à la logique. Mais il ne se peut que nous ne soyons que pur regard animé et comblé par l’objet ; il faut qu’un autre intérêt s’éveille en nous, et que la rigueur de l’objet ne soit pas seulement sensible, mais que la rigueur du sensible soit le signe d’une autre rigueur. (616)

This other sensation is that of the human form, of its interactions and experiences with the world on a daily basis, which forms the fundamental principles of the film experience.
and to which the French action film, replete with its sensational stunts and spectacular moments, endeavors to accomplish.

The phenomenological aesthetic theory of Mikel Dufrenne manifests in the French action cinema through three different but connected phenomena: the continuity of the action hero as framed and corporeally-situated by the cinematography; the correspondences between the action figure’s body and the bodies of the others on screen, where the former is given the privileged position through association and comparison to the others; and the congruencies between the aural perception of the action chase and the visual image that appears simultaneously. In all, a spectator is capable of phenomenologically reading these clues – continuities, correspondences, and congruencies – and determining the sensational experience before any cognitive comprehension of the narrative arc or the cultural implications of specific objects, actors, and locations. But that is not to say that neither narrative, nor the cultural specificity of the film’s production, nor even the images themselves, are superfluous to the action aesthetic. If anything, the best French action films are the ones that employ all of these sensations in order to create a truly immersive experience in the action spectacle.
Conclusion

The arguments found within this dissertation have been formulated and created with the developed thought of a few significant phenomenologists in France, and an engagement with their research has been undertaken in order to give a more thorough understanding of French cinema and its contemporary trends. The French action film is a growing phenomenon that is becoming more and more popular with time, coinciding with the growth in popularity for superhero films in the United States and the continued popularity of kung-fu action cinema derived from Hong Kong. Ultimately, these films address a specific characteristic of human existence that is not limited to only a French context, although the nuances described above are quintessentially French.

The result of these new films is not a sign of the French cinema system resorting to replication and repetition of the Hollywood or foreign-born genre, but instead demonstrates the dynamic quality of the cinema system in France. More than just being a film system designed to promote the psychological and moral foundations of the French state, whatever those may be at any point in time, these films mix and match elements from a global cinema system in order to create something new and innovative for spectators. The overall result of this, then, is incalculable. To return to Jean-Luc Marion and his phenomenology, these films give something that cannot be fully quantified:
In all science – therefore in metaphysics – it is a question of proving. To prove consists in grounding appearances in order to know with certainty, leading them back to the ground in order to lead them to certainty. But in phenomenology – that is to say, at least in what it intends, in the attempt to think in a nonmetaphysical mode – it is a question of showing. To show implies letting appearances appear in such a way that they accomplish their own apparition, so as to be received exactly as they give themselves.

(*Being Given* 7)

What phenomenology provides is less a proof of the existence of certain phenomena, which would be the scientific approach to phenomenology, than a proof of its worth and its importance through the act of showing, of demonstrating a specific phenomenon, and then describing it in such a way as to reveal its fundamental importance for humanity.

In a sense, the French action film, which is coincidental with Hollywood action cinema, is meant to address another misunderstood and understated notion of cinema: fun. In a fascinating article titled “Serious Pleasures: Cinematic Pleasure and the Notion of Fun,” the authors argue for a resistance to the seriousness of watching film for political or ideological purposes, and for a distinction between “pleasure,” which is seen as rational, and “fun,” which while not being irrational, is more jocular in nature (10). “Fun, in other words, is not based on hierarchy, on power; it is never entirely serious,” summarize the authors. “Fun, in other words, makes fun of that which takes itself too seriously, of that which cannot laugh at itself. In its essence, then, fun is parodic, ironic” (10). This distinction between fun and pleasure is not meant to be exclusive, but instead
is supposed to upset the status quo of film criticism and theory, and allow those types of films that are so frequently produced and too often ridiculed – that is, mass culture films – to be analyzed and critiqued according to the same principles that are applied to other films. At the end, Wyatt and Rutsky bluntly state the point “that in excluding fun, in excluding mass culture, academic discourse has only succeeded in excluding itself” (17). Along those lines, instead of seeing these French action films as part of mass culture and outside of the realm of scholarship, this dissertation has been an attempt to return them to their rightful place within mass culture, and yet still find important ideas to develop around these films and their reception.

In doing so, the argument has relied on a phenomenological understanding of cinema that, like Marion stated above, is more interested in showing and demonstrating a specific humanity, rather than explaining it to a passive audience. As opposed to serious art and film, the French action cinema invites an engaged and thrill-seeking audience to look past the ridiculous special effects, the non sequitur sequences of a Luc Besson film, the repetitive narrative of sequels and series, or the simple and simplified representations of French society, and instead to focus on what pleasure can be derived from the fun of the cinematic experience. This experiential fun is not limited to the action film, but it does manifest more frequently in the genre because, like Wyatt and Rutsky also argue, it does not intend to take itself seriously. And in being less earnest in its deliberate philosophy, the French action cinema remarkably finds its life-affirming focus in the experience itself, rather than in the interpretation of the film.
Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of revealing the invisible is more evident in forms of art (or life) that do not follow easily prescribed, and identifiable, patterns. For instance, much of Marion’s philosophy relies on art – typically painting or sculpture – to convey its message of the invisible being revealed through the visible. In a helpful summary of Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry’s phenomenological texts, Christina M. Gschwandtner notes that “art bridges the gap between the realms of the invisible and the visible,” and follows this by stating that “Abstract painting, precisely by not portraying anything “visible” in a straightforward sense, can convey the emotion and affectivity that are characteristic of interior life” (306). Abstract painting accomplishes this because it is rarely clear what the subject of these paintings are, and therefore the presentation of these artworks rely on audience, or spectator, interpretation and revelation.

The French action film follows the same pattern, yet it uses a basic cinematic premise – in other words, narrative film and the excitement of the spectacle – which tends to mask the underlying, fundamental indices – vision, storytelling, and movement – that are at work in these texts. Gschwandtner shows that for these phenomenologists, “The great work of art gives us a glimpse of the invisible realm by presenting us with its dazzling vision of the unseen,” which is inarguably correct (308). But mass culture art also provides a similar sensation: it provides a window through which one can see that which is so invisible, so overwhelming, and so underappreciated, that it is typically taken for granted in everyday actions. These films are so overabundant in their presentation of spectacular vision, of storytelling for the purposes of understanding the world, and of fantastic movement, that they draw a spectator’s attention to these elements and render
the sensation palpable. A spectator feels the primacy of vision and its role in creating the world, and the wonder that can be felt when sight reveals itself; a spectator also comprehends the desire for a narrative that resolves itself, and where good typically triumphs over the evils of the world; and finally, a spectator sees the exaggerated movements and stunts of characters and objects on screen, and is forced to reflect on his or her own ability to move and reposition him- or herself in the world. This is the phenomenology of the French action film, and this is what will hopefully continue to be developed in French cinema as it expands into the future: a phenomenological experience that once again summons basic human features in an exaggerated, action-packed format designed for maximum pleasure.
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