

## **Lines of Force, Lines of Flight: Action Movies in the 21st Century**

The contemporary action cinema has reached a level of intensity hitherto unimaginable, integrating all manner of imaging technologies in order to intensify our experience of it. Through the film's audiovisual barrage, our bodies are innervated, i.e. set into motion, thus opening up lines of force that traverse and articulate us in ways that are prior to conscious perception. While many of action films do habituate us to massive spectacles of destruction, these same films also allow us to recognize the structures of feeling that we live through. As such, there are both line of articulation and lines of flight opened up by action films. That is to say, there are sheets of control and peaks of escape that constantly oscillate.

Traditionally, much cultural critics has focused on issues of power and resistance when discussing cultural texts. Representations have taken center stage and a conflict between dominant and dissident meanings and significances have played out in the cultural theater. Yet I believe that this is not sufficient, that the flows of energies and forces are not contained within a staging of cultural conflict, but instead that there is a constant production of intensities that flow through us as lines of force.

While affect has a long and complicated pedigree, including several different and contradictory meanings, I follow Brian Massumi in understanding affect as presubjective intensity that traverses our bodies and minds.<sup>1</sup> Affect is the inescapable ground from which we emerge as subjects with emotions. Affect is therefore to be understood as “something that comes before the subject has arrived, or that subsists after the subject has departed, or that

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<sup>1</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*.

happens alongside the subject, affecting it but not being integrated within it.”<sup>2</sup> We should keep in mind that affect is not a matter of personal opinion, taste, or preference. Affect traverses everyone “independently of their individuation and the forms of their personality.”<sup>3</sup> Affect is the ground of our response, prior to any conscious judgment.

Action films produce intensity, not only as part of their aesthetics, but also as part of being a training ground for our senses. In this way action films express and give shape to a cultural structure of feeling. As Ben Anderson has shown, the “idea that discreet periods of time can be characterised in terms of a single, identifiable, nameable emotion leads to some important starting points for an account of affective conditions. It acts as a counterpoint to any tendency to see a body’s ‘force of existing’ as an exclusively individual phenomenon.”<sup>4</sup> Rather, for Anderson, we must pay attention to structures of feeling and/as affective atmospheres, because such a view of affect also allows us to understand that some people may be “out of sync” with a dominant structure of feeling.<sup>5</sup>

Structures of feeling thus help us understand how films can participate in what Raymond Williams argued were “palpable pressures” that set “effective limits on experience and action.”<sup>6</sup> Significantly, first of all, not only do structures of feeling set limits and exert pressures, they also expand options and induce vigor. As such, structures of feeling are not only oppressive but may just as easily be confident: the incipency of movement says nothing about where the movement will go. What matters, however, is that structures of feeling are collective, shared across members of a culture. In this way, affects connect us to the cultural environment, “where sensations and sensory organs, bodies and desires, social groups and mediating formations become connected in specific ways.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Shaviro, “Straight From the Cerebral Cortex”, 165.

<sup>3</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 107.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, *Encountering Affect*, 108.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, *Encountering Affect*, 108. This is an argument that Anderson takes from Sara Ahmed in her work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132.

<sup>7</sup> Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, 35.

Action films thus participate in and produce structures of feeling that on the one hand augment feelings of terror, yet at the same time sublimates these fears into an engaging and hyper-accelerated blur of intensity. By stepping into these feelings, we are given a reprieve from terror. While a range of affects and sensations are elicited throughout these films, there is always a return to safety and stability through physical empowerment: we are given new modes of embodiment to step into to make us feel more powerful. The films are not structures of containment, they have no particular interest in meaning, which is one reason their stories can be so formulaic. Everything converges instead on the intensities, the way structures of feeling are articulated. Any action film that does not engage you on a bodily level has failed.

The entrapment at work in these films is not limited ideological formations. Instead, the entrapment at work lies in the film's bring lures for feeling, for pulling in spectators to audiovisual intensities that inevitably function as sensory training grounds for projections of power to blur out terror. In this process, we find a switch from power to modulation. In a control society, you are free to believe anything you want, you can produce any meaning that you want, but you cannot feel anything you want. Even the frustrated feeling we have with things as they are, are not free feelings, they are responses to changes in the environment. Even attempting to articulate lines of force differently, participates in the modulation of contemporary action cinema. But modulation is precisely not an enclosure or a mold, it is a modulation, that is to say an inflection, a rhythmic intervention in our bodies.

Some action films do not participate in the genre's larger production of an ecology of terror, but can instead be said to produce a kind of counter-rhythm. While sonic dominance can elicit the mixed sensations of thrill and dread and so connect to a larger sense of anxious anticipation, the rhythms of sound design might also be used to disrupt and estrange us from the images. Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* utilizes a distinctive audiovisual design to similarly shake our preconceptions lose.

What *The Hurt Locker* manages to do is to interject and disrupt not only our bodily

rhythms but also the conventional, anticipated rhythms of the war film. This arrhythmia achieved in a number of ways, most evident in its narrative form that offers no redemption and no heroics from any of the characters. Instead, we find a minimalist, episodic structure that both presents but also undercuts the traditional pleasurable rhythms of war films, where spectacle joins moral justification and psychological depth to produce a justifiable war. Even classic anti-war films such as *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino 1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola 1979) delve into the psychologies of soldiers to survey the damage of war. *The Hurt Locker* produces an intimate connection with the soldiers but never engages in self-reflection, justification, or criticism. Instead, I believe, the film's rhythm is what determines its stance on war and the effect of war.

In stark contrast to the other films discussed in this chapter, and the conventional aesthetic form of most action-oriented war films, *The Hurt Locker* surprises the most with its insistence on quietude and drawn-out waiting. Other Iraq war films such as *Green Zone* (Paul Greengrass 2010) or *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg 2007), not to mention pure action films dressed up as war like *Battleship* (Peter Berg 2011), follow the hectic pacing of *Battle Los Angeles*. There is constant action and gunfire, and even calmer moments carry the plot forward. *The Hurt Locker* similarly alternates between calm moments and eruptions of intense chaos. However, the sound and the camerawork differs radically from the calmer moments to the action sequences. Unlike *Battle Los Angeles* which consistently employs the handheld camera-style, *The Hurt Locker* shifts between conventional continuity style scenes that provide clear situational orientation to extreme handheld camera-style, where the camera not only follows the character but runs at such a speed that the image becomes too jumbled to perceive.

### **Play early bomb example**

The booming of the explosion roars up, immediately followed by a decrease in amplitude of all environmental sounds as well as the score. What this effect does is to depend on the ear's acoustic reflex. Our ears instinctively contract its muscles to protect the cochlea from loud

noises. By reducing the sound immediately following the explosion, the sound design reproduces the same result, in effect tricking our ears into thinking that we have just heard a deafening boom.

Unlike more conventional action and war films, silence is used a lot throughout the film, also indicated by a predominant lack of score. While there is a score, it does not intrude on every scene but used far more sparingly. This restrained use of score produces a far more minimalist effect that also does not guide our emotional responses to the same degree. Without the score to guide or interpret the scenes for us, the film manages to infuse a sense of trepidation about every single shot. Banal dialog scenes take on a different accent without a musical guide, while tense scenes leave us straining to hear anything, since the score does not stress the tempo of the scene.

One of the most intimate scenes of the film comes when the unit is called out to a car bomb, where James has to go inside the car to locate the wires. The scene opens in much the same way that the other bomb dismantling scenes do; the unit is called in on suspicion of a bomb and a perimeter is cleared. James goes to investigate the car, while Sunburn and Eldridge keep watch. James tries to force open the trunk with a crowbar but in frustration ends up kicking the trunk open. The soundscape is quiet with only the direct sounds of James working and the score intones a tension-filled whine. As he stops dead in surprise, we hear the sound of a jet passing over which functions as offscreen sound yet emoting the surprise and suspense of the massive bomb inside the car. James' reckless side is shown as he carelessly flings off his bomb suit and crawls into the car.

James' parts are filmed inside the car in close-ups and medium close-ups as he attempts to find the wires for the bomb. This is contrasted by the exterior shots that are far more jittery and swoosh pans to look at the onlooking Iraqis. The effect is one of uncomfortable claustrophobia inside the car, where at any moment James could die in an explosion, while outside we feel too vulnerable being out in the open. Two different kinds of threat are navigated in the scene, alternating to produce maximum stress. James cuts up the

car seats, making tearing and cutting noises in an otherwise quiet soundscape. Even outside we only hear direct sound of characters talking. There is no score and there are no ambient sounds to produce a broader environment. This lack of ambient sounds collapses everything onto the characters, making us feel cut off from the environment we are in. This isolation is doubled by James throwing away his headset to be able to concentrate fully on the task at hand, even as all the civilians have been evacuated and he no longer needs to keep working.

We are made afraid of sounds, not simply made afraid by sounds. Any sound, especially loud noises, shock us because it could be a bomb. Silence, then, becomes the greatest effect of *The Hurt Locker* because it makes any following sound more of a threat and shock. The silence inevitably draws us in and we strain to see and hear what James is doing and how Sanborn and Eldridge cope with the onlooking Iraqis. Trepidation mounts through silence rather than extremity of soundscape. Although Chion generally argues that silence separates us from the action, that does not hold true in this case.<sup>8</sup> Every space has its own silence, as Chion argues, but there are no ambient tones added to the background of the car scene. This produces another null extension which draws us further into the scene, wanting more information yet worried that we will hear an explosion.

It is this spare use of sound that creates a sense of intimacy with the unit. We experience their vulnerability by projecting ourselves into the environment, feeling as if we are right there. But entering this environment generally means entering through a space of noises, static and hisses. We perceive the ragged breath of James, the crackling of radios, the scrape of metal as sounds that are close to us; they are intimate sounds, sounds we would often not pay attention to in everyday situations and that are rarely prominent in a film's sound design. Integrating the score and the sound design into each other allows for a collapse of the cinematic space, which further pulls us in. There is no safe zone in which we can position ourselves, particularly because the sound design is set up as a full sound envelope,

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<sup>8</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. 57.

meaning that the sound comes from all angles on a proper sound system. Combine that with the immense subsonic bass of the explosions that are reinforced because of the predominance of silence in the film, and we get a very different soundscape than most action movies

This is a function of what Goodman calls “bass materialism” that ends up estranging us from the situation that the unit is in. Bass materialism, as Goodman defines it, is the “rearrangement of the senses” where hearing takes on more prominence in a “flatter, more equal sensory ratio.”<sup>9</sup> That is to say, our visual over-dependence is reduced in favor of more full-bodied sensory impressions. All the micro-sounds that we rarely pay attention to are amplified to fill up the soundscape, which is what makes the sonic impressions of the film so different from other films. We have no choice but to experience the film more intimately than most war films or action films, which even includes a weird intimacy with the bombs. We are placed so close to the bombs and their wires that we do feel a kind of connection to them, even as this connection is antagonistic. It makes sense, therefore, that James keeps all the switches that could have killed him under his bed. Similarly, this intimacy with the bombs also undercuts the traditional control and mastery we feel through the protagonist, yet the bass materialism of the soundscape undercuts that mastery in the way threats constantly come via sound rather than vision. Clicks, whirrs and rattles are what make us tense up and no amount of visual mastery can protect us from that.

*The Hurt Locker* deliberately plays with the elicitation of adrenaline and trepidation, the intimate rhythms of draggingly slow non-events interspersed with extremes of tension producing a distinctive feel to the film. There is a constant vibration of stress throughout every scene, an ominous undercurrent even in the scenes with Beckham or when the unit lets off steam that colors our perception of the film. We build intimacy through the bodily proximity to the characters, the way they breathe and mumble to each other, or yell and worry. Close-ups of them sweating and waiting also bring us closer to them, and it is this

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<sup>9</sup> Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, loc. 451.

closeness that makes the action sequences so tense. Our immersion into their world functions not only on a visual level but on a visceral level, a level that we cannot escape from. What the film masters, though, is how it manages to both engage us with the rush of adrenaline in its tension-filled scenes but at the same time critiques this rush of excitement.

This adrenaline rhythm places us in a peculiar position as spectators. On the one hand, we clearly recognize James' dangerous behavior and the risk he poses for the unit as a whole. On the other hand, his actions are also what produces the most intense engagement with the film. We are drawn into the force of the film and find it hard to leave, despite the doubts we surely experience in terms of James' actions and the war as a whole. This is so because it emulates the notion that war is a drug and the habit is hard to kick. The film's elicitation of sensations of stress, adrenaline rush and trepidation produces a beguiling rhythm that is difficult to resist. Yet in so doing, I allow my self to be articulated in a very distinctive way: accept the conditions of war and you will even find some enjoyment in it.

That articulation is exactly the predicament that Chris Hedges constantly debates in his *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* from which the film's opening quote is taken. Although no one likes war conceptually, war has a way of becoming its own justification because war gives "purpose, meaning, a reason for living."<sup>10</sup> Hedges fully admits to having been caught up in this feeling, but also points out that when we inject the drug of war, "we feel what those we strive to destroy feel".<sup>11</sup> While I'm sure that many people engaged in war would disagree with this sentiment, for the purpose of *The Hurt Locker* the point stands because it allows us to understand why we might enjoy the film but still feel uncomfortable with this enjoyment. We recognize the algebra of need that James is under because we feel the same bodily surge. The film allows the complexity of war's sensations to come to the forefront, to give us a sense of what it feels like being caught up in the tension, trepidation and excitement that a war zone is. Clearly the film is in no way the same as being in a war,

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<sup>10</sup> Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Idib.*, p. 5.

nor should it be, but by rhythmically engaging us, pulling us into the complexity of war it opens up a much broader understanding of military engagement. That, in itself, is its strategy of estrangement, the way that we are presented with sensations of war. If, as the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky argued, art is about making the stone feel stony, *The Hurt Locker* succeeds in making the war feel like battle.<sup>12</sup>

*The Hurt Locker* takes its name from military slang originating during the Vietnam War, indicating anything as broad as experiencing a period of physical or emotional pain, to be in painful condition, or more explicitly to be inside the killing blast radius of a bomb. As far as the film's story goes, all these meanings apply. Focusing on an Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit (EOD) in Iraq, the film opens on the death of the unit leader Matthew Thompson (Guy Pearce) during a bomb dismantling gone wrong. William James (Jeremy Renner) takes over, a far more reckless soldier who disobeys protocol. During five loosely connected incidents, we follow the unit go about its harrowing job of dismantling bombs. James establishes a rapport with an Iraqi boy, nicknamed Beckham (Christopher Sayegh). When James finds Beckham in a warehouse turned into a body bomb, he ends up trying to find those responsible. Unsuccessful, James goes about his work, only to encounter Beckham later. James does not acknowledge that he recognizes Beckham, although the reason is unclear. As the unit's rotation ends, they all return back home but James chooses to back again, confessing that there is only one thing he loves: dismantling bombs in Iraq. This return to rotation fulfills the Chris Hedges quote that opens the film: that war is a drug. That is to say, James is incapable of escaping the intense rhythms of war and so returns. This seems to me to be the ultimate tragedy of the film, although it is not presented directly as such. But we see how out of sync James feels at home and how he must leave that behind to experience life fully.

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<sup>12</sup> Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, p. 6.