

## A balancing act(or): Jason Statham and the ensemble film

Commenting on the late Paul Walker's keenly-felt absence in *The Fate of the Furious* (2017), the eighth in the *Fast and the Furious* franchise, one reviewer suggested Walker may have been 'the mayonnaise of the *Fast* sandwich all along – not terribly compelling on his own, but a much-needed binder. These films live and die by the balance of the ensemble, and without [him] the equilibrium's been thrown off' (Yoshida 2017). Jason Statham joined the hugely profitable franchise in the previous film, *Furious 7* (2015) as the antagonist intent on destroying the tight-knit group. By *The Fate of the Furious* he was presented as one alternative to the missing Walker, with his character promoted into the heroic ensemble and allowed a redemption arc. Another review called the twist of Statham's inclusion 'F8's smartest move... [with] his snarky one liners and aptitude for hand-to-hand combat helping to break up the sometimes exhausting in-car sequences' (Mumford 2017). An important action star in his own right, Statham remains a somewhat unusual performer, something reflected in his widely-observed success in the high-octane franchise where he embellishes but does not overwhelm the established ensemble cast, helping to redress the imbalance left by Walker's death.

As David Greven notes when defining Hollywood's 'double-protagonist film', 'we think of the star in isolation, fighting his way through the complications of plot [and] narratively imposed anxieties' (2009: 23). Statham is, of course, an extraordinary *individual* star, but, from films like *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), *Snatch* (2000), *The Italian Job* (2003), the *Fast and the Furious* sequels, *The Expendables* series (2010-14) and many others, one of his strengths as a performer lies in his ability to cohere with larger casts across the ensemble film. Many of his leading roles are sustained by appealing repartee with compelling secondary players, including the *Crank* (2006-2009) and *Transporter* series (2002-2008); and even his comic turn in *Spy* (2015) relies on interplay and contrast with other actors in addition

to its own parodic excess. Interactions are as vital a part of the Statham aesthetic as choreographed combat. Through this, Statham is always a precisely balanced actor – literally and figuratively – working to support and enhance those around him. His performances do this without sacrificing his own distinct star identity; he is not the bland-but-functional mayonnaise, but binds the ensemble together with added bite. This chapter will explore Statham’s work in the ensemble film, paying attention to performance style, the interplay across group casting, and how this synthesizes into a star identity informed by, but deviating from, conventional action star types. In doing so, it also engages with studies of the interrelationship between genre-specific texts and the techniques of screen performance (c.f. Cornea 2010: 7).

### **Hierarchies and types in the male action film**

Partly due to his proliferation in ensemble films, unlike other action icons, Statham’s screen identity is often not the singularly extraordinary ‘best of the best’ or ‘lone wolf’ figure, but more akin to being ‘*one of the best of the best*’. Occasionally, it does not even appear to register strongly enough to warrant close attention, with other individuals drawing a fuller gaze. *Time*’s original review of *The Expendables* heralds ‘if you collected movie action figures, you’d find almost the complete set’ (Corliss 2010), but namedrops the absent Jean Claude Van Damme and Steven Seagal rather than acknowledge Statham. *Variety*’s review of his breakthrough film, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* – a film that opens with a show-stopping speech from the actor – notes only that ‘Of the central quarter, [Jason] Flemmyng makes the most impact’ (Elley 1998). As I will explore, this may be down to the complex space and deliberately cohesive function that Statham occupies in groups and star hierarchies more than underwhelming personality. Simple frameworks and axioms erase what Statham

brings rather than explain them and as such in existing discourse, such as analyses of the muscle-bound action star, Statham does not quite fit the mould being offered. Therefore, in an example like Ellexis Boyle and Sean Brayton's reading of *The Expendables* which relies on defining the cast through action types of 'former wrestlers, prizefighters, and professional athletes' (2012: 479), there is little sustained analysis of Statham as an individual. Instead at various moments he is conflated with what they deem the 'inauthentic celebrity presence' of Sylvester Stallone (despite not aligning with the central examination of Stallone's ageing body), with Jet Li as 'martial artist' (despite working beyond these genre and stylistic distinctions), and excluded from the other 'professional athletes' Terry Crews and Randy Couture (despite a career as a competitive diver) and from Mickey Rourke's 'character actor' (despite being cast in these types of roles, especially in his British films).

Boyle and Brayton partly draw from Yvonne Tasker's (1993) taxonomy of action stars and modes of masculinity, notably the 'tough guy' and the 'wise guy', where emblematic tough guys tend to be strong, silent and usually solitary (Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Norris, Van Damme), with the wise guys constructed through voice and humour as much as physique (Willis and Russell). Tasker outlines the potential for fluidity between types, especially as careers extend, actors grow older and more experienced in screen performance. From the outset, though, Statham's work crosses boundaries between the two, and he does not occupy the conventional 'buddy' role or appear much in Greven's suggested genre of double-protagonist films. So, for instance, when Statham acts alongside Stallone in *The Expendables*, his performance and character function is not the same as Kurt Russell's wise guy contrast to Stallone in *Tango and Cash* (Tasker 1993: 88). But as an extensive performer across multiple-protagonist genre cinema, typeage should play an important role in Statham's stardom. Films like *The Expendables* have significant continuity with the platoon film, a genre partly defined by the checklist of 'the hero, the group of mixed ethnic types, the

objective they must accomplish, their weapons and uniforms' (Basinger 2003: 15). He is also associated with the heist film (*Snatch*, *The Italian Job*, *The Bank Job* (2008), and even the *Fast and Furious* films), a genre again well-defined through recognisable character roles of leader, mentor, and individually skilled team members (c.f. Lee 2014). Team leader, token Brit, wheelman, matey sidekick.... whichever 'bruvver or other' Statham plays, the variety in his casting means he remains unfettered by supporting status or character type; performance and stardom extend beyond conventions of basic ensemble types, and into a more refined character acting that shifts register as required by each individual film.

Christine Geraghty has observed the interplay of stars, types and performance styles in ensembles where she foregrounds the necessity of hierarchy. Using Al Pacino and Robert De Niro in *Heat*, she argues that 'ensemble playing position[s] the star as 'one of the boys' [and is] paralleled by a strong sense of performance as competition' (2000: 105) where character conflict is conveyed through acting one-upmanship. Within this framework, the individual star still reigns supreme (even when there are two of them). However, Statham's performances tend to be harmonious and balanced rather than competitive or conflicted, even if his characters are not, and here Ernest Mathijs' observations about acting in the ensemble film are valuable. He suggests that performance in ensemble casts stress collectivity and community rather than competition, even within overt divisions of acting labour among diverse types. Ensemble acting is constructed by performative devices drawing from formalism, body typeage, negotiating other performers' screen styles, and an awareness of popular culture identities and discourses off screen. Mathijs terms this process 'referential acting', where 'the meaning of an activity is only achieved by dint of its reference to another act' (2011: 91). The actor's task includes 'creating a sense of belonging through rituals of impersonation, role-play and mimicry, and by involving the audience in the play' (ibid: 96);

the formalism, typeage and referential nature aligns diverse characters within screen communities and welcomes the viewer into that coherent and balanced world.

This sense of *belonging* can be observed in Statham's acting in the ensemble film. His performances work as significant nexus across points of reference, representation, interpretation and co-ordination, around which other performers are balanced in the group's overall role-playing, character construction, and generic affect. In this landscape Statham adapts to the contexts of casting and group dynamics across different films, demonstrably embodying a 'referential acting' style. Unlike conventional players in the action ensemble film – a format which tends to rely on the constancy of casting/character hierarchies - who occupy more fixed casting statuses of (and acting styles associated with) 'star/lead', 'character actor/villain or sidekick', 'supporting actor/team member', Statham's performances negotiate the requirements of virtually all types of roles, characters, spaces, functions, and even modes of delivery. From group leader (*The Bank Job*) to second-tier player (*The Expendables* trilogy) or disposable member (*Ghosts of Mars*); from big talker (*Snatch*) to low-key stalker (*The Mechanic*) to cartoonish (*Crank and Spy*); from his own charismatic star vehicles (*Death Race* and *The Transporter* films) to underpinning other big-name stars (Stallone, Mark Wahlberg, Dwayne Johnson, Melissa McCarthy), there is a mutability observable that has enabled a wide-ranging film career and distinguishes him from his peers. His acting forgoes the excessive knowingness of forces of nature like Johnson, Schwarzenegger or Van Damme or the emotional action melodrama of Stallone and Willis. Alternatively, he does not use the underplayed minimalism of Daniel Craig or Matt Damon to reflect a heroes' search for meaningful identity. The preciseness of his physicality aligns him with Jackie Chan's light touch, but their comic personas vary immensely. Charismatic as he may be, Statham's acting is usually in a low-key register (although he is also comfortable in a higher register, as in *Crank*), highly contained, responsive in nature, and therefore easily

adaptable to different scenarios. As a star performer, Statham manages an effective reconciliation of seemingly incompatible elements: the lone wolf, the sympathetic sidekick, the unwavering hero, the playful character actor, the physical and the verbose, the comic and the dark, the spectacle and the supporting frame.

### **Cockpit conversations: negotiating stardom in *The Expendables* ensemble**

At the heart of the three *Expendables* movies lies a fascination with the spectacle and hierarchy of star-performance. Second-billed Statham appears in all as Lee Christmas, knife expert and right-hand man to Sylvester Stallone's Barney Ross. Each film increases the ensemble of star personalities, drawing on established action stars from the 1980s and 1990s (to name only a few, Bruce Willis, Jet Li, Chuck Norris, Wesley Snipes) with some additions from sports-action star crossovers (Terry Crews, Ronda Rousey) and younger Hollywood stars (Liam Hemsworth, Kellan Lutz). As the trilogy progresses, more space is devoted to the interactions between recognisable star icons, informed by playful intertextual references designed for a genre-aware audience: from reuniting the 'Planet Hollywood' trio of Stallone, Willis and Schwarzenegger, to Chuck Norris's lone wolf cameo in *The Expendables 2*, to *The Expendables 3*'s expansive casting which made space for Snipes, Harrison Ford and Mel Gibson, character actors Robert Davi and Kelsey Grammar, and an uproarious comic turn from Antonio Banderas. Typical of the general rules of the ensemble film, in every film each star is given their own performative set piece. For Statham, this includes a showcase for his hand-to-hand skills in a fight on a basketball court between him and an abusive boyfriend in *The Expendables*, and in *The Expendables 2*, knife/martial arts fight staged a remote Bulgarian village, where he dons a monk's cowl and delivers the line 'I now pronounce you... Man and Knife'.

But *Expendables 3* makes no space to showcase Statham's spectacular fighting prowess; instead it foregrounds him through an alternative sphere that extends upon his non-fighting scenes in the first two films. Throughout the trilogy, Statham's presence signals equilibrium and stability. This is partly created in dialogue with Stallone and is certainly revealed in the final sequence of *The Expendables* where the two celebrate the narrative's restoring of order by sitting side by side, drinking beer and bumping fists, staged symmetrically and filmed in a mid-shot [Figure 1]. This cohesive motif of character, narrative, performative action and formal style ends all three films, and in each there is affectionate banter between Ross and Christmas that Stallone and Statham perform with naturalistic charm and pacing, where the underplayed acting removes what could be interpreted as competitive bravado inherent in the script. This pleasing visual balance between the two stars is also found in the start of the fight scene in the village bar in *The Expendables 2* where they face off against a larger foe [Figure 2].

In the sequels, Stallone's concluding interactions with Statham contrast with preceding moments where he plays off the grander star identities of Willis, Schwarzenegger and Ford and draws more overtly on intertextual reference and ostentatious performance; for example, in *The Expendables 2*, where Stallone delivers the head of their 1990s action cinema competitor Van Damme to Willis and Schwarzenegger ('A little extreme. But nice') and the prototypical lone wolf Chuck Norris admits 'it's sometimes fun to run with the pack'. In these moments, Stallone acts with broad strokes that emphasise delivery of obviously scripted, highly-knowing jokes, with the other stars mirroring his overt intonation and gesture. Here, Geraghty's 'one-upmanship' of star performance is clear: they are performing against each other as distinct and fully-formed star identities as much as characters. However, such structuring of delivery and rhythm is mostly absent between Statham and Stallone (even when the script suggests competitive dialogue). As such, Statham increasingly functions as a

means of stabilising the films - and the larger-than-life Stallone - in a sense of realism and authenticity away from the array of intertextualities and generic identities of the postmodern ensemble.

This is especially observable in the sequences shared by the two in the cockpit of the *Expendables*' airplane. The tiny set consistently indicates status and hierarchy throughout the films; none of the older 'B-list' or below actors (Lungren, Couture, Crews, even Li)<sup>1</sup> are allowed access to a space defined as belonging equally to Statham and Stallone. It is a site that the 'A list stars' constantly negotiate access around, although none succeed in embodying it in the way Statham and Stallone command it. In Bruce Willis' first scene in *The Expendables*, in an aesthetic that mirrors their characters' strained relationship, he and Stallone meet in the plane just beyond the boundary of the cockpit. The scene frames each actor in close ups and cross-cuts between these separate filmic spaces, with the actors using aggressive, sharp and formalistic delivery of combative dialogue. In *The Expendables 3* Schwarzenegger and Banderas sit in the co-pilot's seat next to Stallone (Statham's usual position), but only temporarily: Banderas is ordered out before take-off at the reappearance of the original team and Schwarzenegger speaks no lines during his short sequence. In contrast, Stallone and Statham share the space more equally, with the sequences usually filmed in symmetrical mid-shots of both men (like the endings of the films) or through over-the-shoulder shots suggesting that both figures are interconnected, even when needling each other. This visual symmetry is challenged in sequences where they travel with women in cars (Giselle Itié in *The Expendables* and Yu Nan in *The Expendables 2*); sitting in the middle of the front seat, the women disrupt the established equilibrium. In general, the visual staging of the ensemble film articulates the cohesiveness of the group and distinct character relations. The *Expendables* trilogy is no exception, and it is notable how the spaces of Statham and Stallone are managed and how they compare to the formal treatment of the wider ensemble,



often being utilised at the expense of the more balanced full group shot, as demonstrated in each film's conclusion.

Movement limited by the confines of the cockpit, the two actors rely on voice, with back-and-forth exchange forming an intrinsic feature of their relationship. As Jeremy Strong notes, dialogue is often the realisation of the ensemble film whereby speech differentiates characters and represents individual contributions to the team (2013: 70, 74-76). As alternatives to Statham, Schwarzenegger is too silent – or elsewhere, too reliant on lines referencing his earlier films; Banderas's chatter too overwhelming; and Willis's speech too antagonistic in tone. Instead Statham and Stallone's softened, low-pitched voices constantly bind together into a harmonious rhythmic exchange. Their overlapping speech flows together smoothly and melodiously, rather than discordantly. Overlapping dialogue, as François Thomas observes, becomes a 'highly, permanently regulated aesthetic technique' with a variety of character functions – from articulating realism, power struggles or cohesion (2013: 131). Outside his interactions with Statham (and throughout his career) Stallone's delivery of banter can be overstated and reliant on punctuating his intonation with large gestures that de-naturalise his characters' supposedly easy-going teasing; here restricted setting limits gesture and Statham's more nuanced vocal control brings Stallone's register down from a *presentational* acting style into a *naturalistic* one, creating a balanced sound that articulates the authentic cohesion of the ensemble group.

In these cockpit conversations, Statham's performance help ground the films amidst the excess of self-reflexive stardom by acting as a fulcrum around the greater spectacle. Both the *rhythm* of speech and concepts of *authenticity* are foregrounded in his interactions with Wesley Snipes (Doc) in the latter's extended introduction in *The Expendables 3*. Snipes's on and off screen histories have been referenced in exchange with Dolph Lundgren and Randy Couture at the plane's rear, with a nod to being incarcerated for 'tax evasion' and Snipes'

typically overstated and forceful acting overwhelming the other personalities. Moving to doorway that splits cockpit and cabin, Doc goads Christmas over the authenticity of his name, the tattoo signifying his *Expendables* credentials, and his skills with a knife; all of which the viewer knows to be well-proven. Stallone's Ross encourages Doc to 'thank the boys' for rescuing him, and turning back, Snipes stomps, stutters and overplays the 'thanks'; Stallone and Statham's dialogue jokingly comments on its lack of sincerity and that Doc is 'finding his rhythm'. Snipes' delivery embraces the script's competitive posturing ('I'm the knife before Christmas') dominating the soundscape and visuals and creating a suitably bombastic performative spectacle. Structurally though, its hyperbolic disruption is tempered by the 'everyday-ness' of Statham's performance. As Snipes speaks, Statham tuts, raises his eyebrows and rolls his eyes, bringing the energy back to something manageable. From here, the overlapping fraternal interplay between Statham and Stallone overtakes Snipes's dominance, bringing order to the film's opening sequence. Statham's calm underplaying works with and around the excessiveness of the other cast members and star types. Each action star, by dint of reflexivity, is an emblem of the trilogy's authentic genre identity, but in a different way Statham too represents a dramatic and textual space of authenticity and 'normality'. Through him, new players are introduced and then contained, allowing the film to negotiate its array of icons in a meaningful way, and despite not being showcased in a physical fight, the film still makes use of his particular skills. As contained in and embodied by Statham's performance in the *Expendables* trilogy, the ensemble, not the individual prevails.

### **Monologues and managing chaos: opening the ensemble film**

Although not one of action cinema's wise guys per se, Statham remains one of the genre's most prolific talkers, and along with the martial arts kick, one of his signature star motifs is a wry monologue. *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *Snatch* and *Furious 7* all open with the sound of Statham's voice, and other films including *London* (2005), *Revolver* (2005) and *Spy* showcase these skills. As a screen performer, Statham demonstrates an acute awareness of how film uses the sonic qualities of the voice; how preciseness of intonation, delivery, pitch and the materiality afforded by close microphone recording can function as characterisation and overall filmic effect. Close-miking suits Statham as it allows for important elements of his voice that disappear when the microphone is further away to be picked up; particularly the way it is concurrently high and low pitched, with qualities that are light and scratchy *and* deep and soft. That mixture of brightness and resonance; a growl that can escape a droning tone (unlike say, Vin Diesel) creates the 'sound of Statham' crucial to his star image. Whilst the *Expendables* trilogy uses Statham as a means of promoting collective identity, monologues represent (along with stardom) another paradox of the ensemble film, whereby the individual momentarily takes precedence over the group, only to be reconciled back within it once the speech is over.

Statham's monologues fall into two categories: speeches delivered within the diegesis contextualised by the responses of surrounding characters, like *Lock, Stock* and *Furious 7*; and voice-over narration heard only by the audience, as in *Snatch*. Whilst the former gives the impression of being delivered 'live' on set and the latter being reliant on studio recording and close miking, contemporary filmmaking tends to use additional dialogue recording (ADR) in both, improving the overall quality of the recorded sound, although each type retains a different textual quality appropriate to the setting of the delivery. So, the opening of *Lock, Stock* where Statham works through his market-stall shtick, has an immediacy and energy to it, with a thin, reedy quality to the timbre of his voice, a result of being more

distanced from the microphone (given the relatively low budget of the film, it is possible that ADR was not used for this sequence). The thinness of Statham's voice also comes from his slightly different accent in this, his first film, where a Derbyshire accent (where Statham was raised) can be heard in the pronunciation of certain words, something absent from later films as his London accent becomes prominent. By the time of *Snatch*, the qualities of the timbre have become more guttural, rich and deep, along with the more sustained cockney inflection. Through close proximity to the microphone, his voice's lower tone, and the script which reflects on character background, Statham's introductory narration works counter to the earlier film, striving to create intimacy with the audience and distance from the action.

*Snatch* places Statham centre stage within the ensemble much more than *Lock, Stock*, despite his attention-grabbing opening. In *Lock, Stock*, director Guy Ritchie uses the actor's ability to deliver quick-fire patter, his comfort with vernacular language, and ease of physical and verbal interplay to authenticate the film's tone through basic believability of character identity and interaction. This function served, Statham's presence becomes less significant as the film progresses. By *Snatch*, his skills are more acutely weaved across the whole film, and his opening monologue sets the scene through the act of storytelling. *Snatch's* use of Statham's voice over is typical of wider analyses of this technique that aligns the motif of storytelling with character authority as temporal and spatial distance between image and voice creates a sense of composure and control (Garwood 2015: 105). This time, Statham's speech works to anchor the film's narrative around his character, Turkish, as he outlines his background to the viewer. As such, individual identity is foregrounded (Turkish and his partner Tommy) and narrative threads are set up (the talk of diamonds, which sets up the next sequence, a bombastic jewel heist in Antwerp), rather than using it to just sonically embody atmosphere. Statham's delivery is calm and soothing. It does not over-enunciate, so the effect brings the audience into an intimate, not overly reflexive space. The microphone picks up his

voice's simultaneous lower, growling vibrations as well as its sharper, higher register, so it becomes a richly textured sound. These qualities are mirrored in Statham's physicality on screen, in softly lit close-ups, his movements are limited to signifiers of interior monologue and realistic directional gesture that matches the topics and timings of the voice-over: for example, when he describes Tommy, Statham looks towards him. (By contrast Stephen Graham plays Tommy with quick, fidgety, unfocused gestures). It is a moment of resonance, not dissonance, and once more, Statham (and Turkish) occupies a position of stability that extends across the narrative, visual and aural planes, working to organise the chaotic pleasures of the ensemble film that quickly follow. Statham's performance throughout the film follows the same self-contained managed style introduced here, foregoing excessive elements for low-key delivery and a physicality that emphasises stillness, usually standing with straight posture and his hands in his coat pockets. The excess of the story, the film style, and the performances of the diverse cast revolve around the nexus of Statham's 'straight man' performance, which aligns with the overall function of his character. Unlike *Lock, Stock*, he works not as performative spectacle, but as the ensemble's evenly-balanced core.

That the monologue helps define Statham's star persona is illustrated by *Furious 7*'s decision to mark his arrival into the franchise with this very motif in its opening scene. It also marks continuity with previous film as his character, Deckard Shaw, speaks over the prone body of his brother Owen Shaw (Luke Evans), the villain from *Fast and Furious 6*, and swears to 'settle your one last score'. This sequence begins a complex negotiation around Statham and plays with stardom, expectation and genre, not least because there is a longer-term franchise game being played that aims to re-orientate Statham's character from this film's loner antagonist into *The Fate of the Furious*'s [anti] hero team player.<sup>2</sup>

In *Furious 7*'s opening, the duality of Deckard's status is set up formally and performatively. Statham's monologue straddles textural planes; it is a 'live' speech, but uses devices of

interior monologue. The first lines are shot in a close-up of Statham facing away from the camera, looking out of a window across London. Formal convention suggests this to be a private moment of innermost reflection. His delivery is exceptionally close-miked and the low aural qualities are commonly associated with the non-diegetic voice over. The script has an existential angle - 'They say if you want to glimpse the future, just look behind you. I used to think that was bollocks. But now I realise, you can't outrun the past' - supported by Statham's wistful, underplayed intonation, briefly interrupted by a harsh stressing of 'bollocks' before the aggression is subsumed into the softness. On the last words, he turns and moves to his brother's bed, tracked by the camera and opening out the cinematic space. Now revealed to be a one-sided conversation, his voice remains close-miked and maintains the sense of intimacy and deep reflection, at odds with the visuals. Generically, everything connotes the landscape of film noir, with a self-destructive figure unable to fight the heavy hand of fate, only to comment upon it. In thinking about genre and performance, Richard De Cordova suggests 'The voice over in film noir works to problematize the body by introducing a variety of disjunctions between the bodily image and the voice' (1995: 134). In its introduction of Statham, *Furious 7* uses the monologue to promote certain genre expectations around film noir rather than action cinema (which generically, is more likely to foreground the body as opening 'statement'). This results in dissonance not coherence; that what we see is not consistent with the absolute truth of the character.

As the scene progresses, generic tropes of action cinema come to the fore, setting up Statham as action star-spectacle (and Deckard as villain). Physicality and energy take precedence and the 'internal' sphere is ruptured through the reveal of medical staff hiding in the corner of the frame. Exiting the space, Deckard barks loudly at them over his shoulder 'Take care of my brother. If anything happens to him, I'll come back looking for you'. The beat of the rap music on the soundtrack and the Steadicam that tracks Statham's swaggering movement

dominate. The noirish immobility is obliterated by momentum and scale: he moves through the wreck of the hospital, punctuates action with pithy lines ('Hold this', pushing a grenade into a SWAT team member), and – as his credit comes up on screen and he faces down an explosion only by putting sunglasses on – acts every inch the authentic action star [Figure 3]. However, the noirish dissonance has already taken seed, complicating not his action-star-status, but his action-villain status. Before the viewer sees Statham-the-villain, we first see the reluctant fighter; character before spectacle, and motivation before action. More commonly the villain is announced by psychologically-unencumbered spectacular violence, only to later reveal motivation, speaking directly to the hero rather than interior contemplation. In opening with a monologue from Statham and playing with genre boundaries, the film gives unprivileged access and understanding to the character, which foreshadows and ultimately justifies his later, unlikely, cohesion into the 'good guys' in *The Fate of the Furious*.

### **Conclusion: reconciling the 'I' in 'Team'.**

Paul McDonald (2012) suggests that the basic contradiction of film star acting is the tension between 'story and show', with film performance situated between the two. To this tension between character and star can be added the demands of genre specificity. The ensemble film creates a further paradox around the place and function of spectacular individual identity within a team-playing aesthetic and narrative. Jason Statham's star acting in ensemble films engages with these central paradoxes, and in these genre films, his work (along with other formal devices and extratextual readings) helps reconcile the individual's function within a group of stars, actors and characters. Significantly, this is achieved without losing his own distinct star identity; he is always showcased in some capacity whether the performance

emphasises stunt work, speech or character-driven narrative motivation. Through his referential acting, the ‘Statham show’ serves, not overwhelms, the story and the group dynamic; grounding star hierarchies and excessive performances, enabling intimate connections between the audience and the core screen group, and setting up the believability of ‘bad guy’ absolution. These rely upon an exchange between the spectacular and the unspectacular, and Statham’s ensemble value is to be both ‘present’ and ‘absent’ without losing sense of self, becoming blandly banal, or excessively disruptive to the cohesion required in the genre. Even his show-stopping (or show-beginning) monologues address the paradox of drawing out the individual beyond the group, although they work differently across distinctive films. Statham’s ‘balancing act’ has an economic upside to it; ensemble films are increasingly valuable in the global marketplace, especially franchise films that rely on repetition, expansion and textual reflexivity where large casts accommodate international stars. *The Fate of the Furious* broke international box-office records on its first weekend, eventually making over \$1 billion in global returns. Statham’s flexibility of employment, referential acting, and skills at negotiating star hierarchies in the diverse action ensemble film are useful attributes to have in the contemporary film industry.

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<sup>1</sup> As Boyle and Brayton explore, there is a racial aspect to the group/star hierarchies, with white men privileged as central characters (2012: 476)

<sup>2</sup> Reports as early as 2011 outlined Statham being in 'preliminary talks to appear in *Fast and Furious 6* and 'one or two sequels'. <http://collider.com/jason-statham-fast-and-furious-6-7/> (Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018)