

THESIS

STUNTING DEATH: AFFECT, ATTRACTION AND AUTHENTICITY IN RATED-R SUPERHERO CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

STUNTING DEATH: AFFECT, ATTRACTION AND AUTHENTICITY IN RATED-R SUPERHERO CINEMA

Stunt work is an ever-present and typically overlooked aspect of film production. The labor goes unseen by design; traditionally, Hollywood studio hierarchies regarded a good stunt performer as one who altogether eluded audience detection. The early star system's stunt performers did not see their names splashed across film industry magazines as happens today. Even contemporarily, studios and surrounding paratextual discourse systematically de-emphasize the stunt even in cases where certain stunt performers become, as Lauren Steimer put it, "hypervisible." The trick works perhaps too well, as Steimer remains one of few scholars to studies stunts. Several of these few have called for stunt work's theoretical and generic expansion. The impetus for doing so is a fundamentally ethical one. How can a society view and engage with entertainment while being unaware of those who willingly risk injury and death to imbue films with authentic action?

Stunt scholarship thus far has focused primarily on stunt worker's history—from their origins as human flies, bridge-jumpers and other daredevils to feckless circus clowns and all these characters' eventual absorption into Hollywood sets. Scholars also discuss ways in which stunt work complicates traditional understandings of film diegesis. I further articulate the stunt's relationship with diegetic narrative, tracing its functions through the cinema of attractions, avant-garde spectatorship, documentary space and other story-breaking constructs. In doing so, I hope to heed one particular scholarly call to evaluate this ubiquitous brand of labor within the brightly

colored, ultra-violent and action-driven world of R-Rated superhero films. Fox studios recently produced two *Deadpool* (2016, 2018) films and *Logan* (2017). Critics hailed them as groundbreaking achievements within a genre that has typically eschewed not only fourth-wall-breaking humor, but gratuitous blood and gore. Something in the characters of Wade Wilson and old man Logan reflects common perceptions of stunt people. They must surely leap back up after any injury, much like the rapidly healing antiheroes they play in these films. Industry dialectic encourages a kind of spectatorship that does not linger on the stunt body's ethereal appearance on-screen. In removing attention from the stunt, such coverage tacitly preserves audience immersion in narrative while distracting attentions from the pain and sacrifice comprising the stunt performer's career. Since these performers give filmgoers authentic-looking affective thrills, I argue for a closer look at what is not meant to be seen.

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CHAPTER 1: A BRIEF HISTORY OF STUNTING AND ITS AFFECT

Two police officers rush forward as a gunman screams into the night air. His lips move, about to say something, when he jerks backward and falls to the ground. One of the officers holds her side arm in jittering hands. She has just shot her first perpetrator. Before she can approach the body, something happens. Time and place shift. The same gunman stands in a bank vault now, locked in combat with an armored, black-clad adversary. The two trade rapid-fire punches, back and forth, until the armored man kicks the gunman's knee sideways. Falling to the ground, he barely has time to grit his teeth and wince. The armored man steps behind him and twists his head upward. The walls of the bank vault tear away.

The twice-dead man stands in the crosshairs of a sniper scope. There is a deafening crack, and he crumples into the desert sand. His body slides down a cliff side until it comes to a stop somewhere in Elizabethan England. He has time to spring to his feet before a flailing swashbuckler elbows him across the face. His eyes shutter and a trail of spittle flies from his lips. Yellow barrels explode one after another and the blast hurls the gunman through the air. A turban flies off his head, and a cowboy hat replaces it in the same moment. A punch lands square on his jaw, and he cartwheels over the wooden railing of a saloon. As if to show that this is not some purgatorial loop, a still photograph appears. It shows the gunman, grinning wide. He holds a fist in the air. The gunman is a stunt performer. The fist, of course, is on fire.¹

Many stunt performers' sizzle reels look like this. To view one is to drop through a kaleidoscope of car hits, combusting bodies, high falls and general carnage. Punches and kicks collide endlessly. The action comes to resemble a child holding as many dolls as possible in each hand and smacking them together. Individual segments, taken from many films spanning the stunt

person's career, appear as incomplete stories with abrupt endings. Yet, viewers do not watch solely to follow story shards. Sheer, violent spectacle captures the audience's attention. The pleasure of vicarious risk and the authentic flouting of death draws our eyes. The stunt itself captivates us.

Before delving into the frenetic world of stunts, it is first necessary to, as Jennifer M. Bean does, define the stunt and the stunt's relationship to a film's in-universe narrative. This will help set the groundwork for understanding stunt work's historical relationship with narrative authenticity. It will also begin to demonstrate that articulating the stunt's authenticity, or its ability to portray believable action, is integral to film narrative. To begin, I ask what precisely is this construct, this stunt that so enraptures the audience with its bloody and bruised vignettes? The answer is far from straightforward. Bean points first to the *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which attests to the stunt's elusive nature. Like the stuntman who falls through ever more shattered environments the longer we watch his sizzle reel, so too does scrutiny cause the term "stunt" to explode into fragments.

The term "stunt" originated in the 1400s, where it was used to describe the bodies of little people, or dwarves; a state of arrested growth.² A second stunt definition arose in the late 19th century, alongside the industrial revolution. This time, what once signified limited potential was flipped, and came to mean a great risk or "act of exceptionalism."³ It was also an athletic act carried out in response to a challenge. It held an air of defiance.⁴ Among soldiers, a stunt is a move designed to gain strategic advantage or bolster one's reputation. In journalism, it is a craven stab at attention, a public relations gimmick.⁵ The Germanic roots of its adjective form denote both foolishness⁶ and a brief act with an abrupt conclusion.⁷ These definitions inform the

complexity of filmic stunts and the performers who have enacted them through the 19th century to the present.

To elaborate on stunt professionals' work, I examine how film scholarship defines their labor. Konigsburg points to the stunt double as "an individual who substitutes for an actor or actress to perform some difficult or dangerous action."⁸ Importantly, the double must be of similar "height, color and general appearance"⁹ as their actor, a set of three requirements that has shadowed the double since the early Hollywood star system came to be. This person must also be dressed in an identical manner. Studio "magic" helps round off any dissimilarities, to the extent that white stunt performers occasionally double African American actors through a modern application of blackface makeup.¹⁰ Further, male or female stunt doubles are interchangeably substituted and subsumed beneath their star's character. Stuntwomen double actors, and stuntmen double actresses (though in a profession dominated by white men in their 30's, the latter is more common). These gender and race swaps also occur among nondescript (ND) characters doing background or utility stunts, such as driving cars or walking in a crowded street. In cases like this, where long-shots reduce the stunt performer to nondescript physicality, white men are often disguised as women and minorities to create the illusion of a diverse crowd of pedestrians.¹¹

Stranger still, roles that should logically be filled by little people (again, called dwarves or LP actors in film industry magazines¹²) often go to actors and stunt doubles of average height. This leads to scenarios where a crouched actor plays a dwarven digital character, effectively stealing stunt job openings from real dwarves. After all, no one needs to take the hits for a digital actor immune to harm.¹³ It also leads to average-height stunt doubles filling in for dwarf actors.¹⁴ Scenarios like this are not limited to LP actors, however. Digital stunt actors have long

threatened to usurp traditional stunt work in the name of safety. While these factors are problematic in their own rite, they holistically show that the stunt performer's diegetic, on-screen race, gender and size are fluid. Their bodily parameters exceed three-dimensional reality. Their physical appearances morph, chameleon-like, shapeshifting and mutating to meet the demands of industry, audience and film narrative alike.

While stunt performers playing ND, background characters are an under-emphasized yet visible part of a film's diegetic narrative, stunt doubles are simultaneously within and without. Diegesis exists as "a term for all that which exists within the world of a film or play — characters, dialogue, sounds, music."¹⁵ It is a concept that encapsulates denotative aspects of the narrative. These are "all action and dialogue in their normal space and time, which rarely can be fully given in the film."¹⁶ A diegetic character resides within the *mise-en-scène*, or the film's narrative world, and diegetic elements include events that have occurred off-screen while still impacting the narrative. Non-diegetic elements are those existing outside the text. These divisions are clearest with regard to sound. In example, diegetic sound would encompass music on a radio that the characters hear and dance to. Non-diegetic sound would be the scores on the film's original soundtrack that only the audience, not the characters, can hear.¹⁷ Diegetic images are less clearly distinguished than sound, but nonetheless do not fully account for the special brand of covert visibility that is the stunt double's on-screen aura.

Several scholars have passingly noted the diegetic-yet-non-diegetic quality behind stunt doubling, including Miranda Banks, Lauren Steimer, Jacob Smith and Lisa Bode. Yet none have explored it as more than an ancillary quality. I argue that, to understand this nigh-indescribable quality, scholars must graft new terms and theories to the stunt, in much the same way as the stunt performer's body seeks definition through attachment to a known character. Only then can

film scholars expand the current understanding of stunt work's morphological, thanatological, and authenticating qualities. A stunt performer is there to take the hits for a famous Hollywood actor and to supply believable, authentic-looking action, or so it seems. However, authenticity has changed hands throughout history, and the stunt performer has not always occupied its seat. In the present study, I examine the contributions of a hard-to-define line of work to a frequently shifting concept of narrative authenticity, charting their changing relationship with film's artifice and behind-the-scenes machinery.

Methods

In early cinema, following stunt work was the occupation of true connoisseurs. These fans gleaned information about their favorite stunt performers from accident reports in trade magazines;¹⁸ any news was bad news, and bad news was good for the eager fan. Learning about stunt professionals is rooted in injury and death, and this is still a primary way in which the wider public hears of them. Their deaths often make it into the popular press, breaking out of specialty trade magazines. Steimer points out that YouTube videos and behind-the-scenes DVD extras offer fans an unprecedented ability to accurately identify where stunt work was utilized in a film. These sources, while useful in eliminating guesswork regarding which long shots and conspicuously turned heads concealed a stunt performer, are typically celebratory. Studio releases depict some of the risks involved, but avoid showing a stunt performer's raw, battered visage after crashing through a window.¹⁹ Likewise, stunt performers are often (not always) hesitant to discuss their daily personal injuries in interviews.

The present project involves analysis of paratextual DVD extras, trade magazines, and popular press coverage of stunt work in two of Fox Studios' ultraviolent comic book superhero movies. I draw on these sources in relation to the action-heavy realm of R-rated superhero films,

which stunt scholarship has not yet addressed in a theoretically robust manner. First, I examine Deadpool as living stuntman, contrasting the character's comedic ability to regenerate with the tragic death of stunt performer Joi "SJ" Harris during *Deadpool 2's* (2018) production phase. Next, I discuss the digital replacement of stunt double's faces for the sake of narrative continuity, as well as the use of nondescript doubles in *Logan* (2017).

Stunt Scholarship

Before delving into the cutting-edge stunt work of contemporary films, it is best to start with a brief history of stunts and stunt scholarship. John Baxter wrote the first book on Hollywood stunt people in 1973, offering a historical perspective on prominent, early 1900s actors who performed their own stunts and the doubles who shadowed them. His work offers a meticulous account of Mack Sennett's Keystone Kops. The Kops were most often former circus clowns who viewed injuring themselves for comedic effect as a slightly better job than cleaning elephant cages.²⁰ The author reminds readers, "Professional stunt men are mainly a phenomenon of the twenties. The hazardous scenes of early film were seldom performed by men with any degree of training [. . .] they attempted dangerous work for quick profit, with no thought of doing so regularly or of adopting a professional's caution."²¹

Sennett's Keystone studio sought out such men, but according to Baxter, their type are different and separate from true stunt performers. The mark of the professional is not in the thoughtless and drunken pratfall or the nihilistic violence that Sennett embraced. It is in being a "thinking technician" and thereby eking out a margin of safety in a dangerous career.²² This cerebral, technically-oriented set began as so-called "property men." They built the motorcycles, furniture, and weapons used on set. Still, even the cautious stunt performers died at an alarming rate. From 1925 – 1930, 10,794 people were injured on California sets alone. Fifty-five died,

most of whom were stunt performers. Sixteen stunt people died in 1929, when war-themed films and their heightened destruction were becoming popular. “No expense is too great for the authentic thrill of death and disaster, conveyed to a safe, cozy audience,” Baxter declares.²³ The author focuses on Buster Keaton as a figure who represented the next phase of safety-savviness in comedic stunt evolution, going beyond the Kops’ unprofessional techniques. Keaton was originally an acrobat in his family’s vaudeville act, The Three Keatons, and had learned the subtleties of falling without enduring crippling injury. He criticized Sennett’s sadistic methods and observed that no one bothered teaching Keystone Kops how to fall without harming themselves.²⁴

The next milestone in stunt scholarship would arrive a full decade later, in George and Tim Sullivan’s 1983 work, *Stunt People*. The authors trace stunt work’s filmic and television beginnings, extracting a key historical observation that mirrors what Baxter observed: until the 1930s, stunt people were primarily an unskilled group. Early film relied on untrained daredevils, rather than on the technical expertise found among those with Keaton’s philosophy of professionalism and troubleshooting.²⁵ Sullivan and Sullivan’s book features a quick case study of Kitty O’Neil, the deaf stunt woman who earned her fame as actress Lynda Carter’s stunt double on the *Wonder Woman* TV show (1975 – 1979). A year after *Wonder Woman*’s finale, O’Neil went on to set the Guinness World Record for the highest fall performed by a woman when she plummeted 180-feet from a helicopter and landed in an air cushion.²⁶ Certainly, the prominence O’Neil achieved represents a departure from how women working below-the-line were traditionally treated. While not the main focus of this study, the O’Neil case holds relevance to contemporary stunt scholar Lisa Bode’s work on Scarlett Johansson / Black Widow’s stunt double, Heidi Moneymaker (as we shall return to in the proceeding paragraphs).

At this juncture, another time jump proves appropriate, as technically-minded professional stunt performers existed well before the advent of cinema. Jacob Smith's *The Thrill Makers* tells of another, pre-filmic stunt history. In the early 19th and 20th centuries, a stunt was a public spectacle involving human flies who scaled buildings, stunt pilots, animal tamers and bridge jumpers. The author heeds Rick Altman's call for a "performer oriented approach" to cinema,²⁷ upholding the early stunt as an authentic physical act rather than a media product. Stunt people were their own kind of attraction well before they became human shields to star actors. They elicited "visceral effects" in live audiences, particularly fear and wonder as spectators vicariously partook in stunt risks.²⁸ The Hollywood star system changed this. Defined as "an institutional hierarchy to regulate, segregate and control stars and extras,"²⁹ the star system absorbed artisanal stunt performances into Hollywood's second units. Being fiercely independent at heart, the stunt could not be fully split from its origins in mass spectacle: audiences could examine film industry paratexts, or search for stunt moments on screen, if so inclined.

While historical perspectives provide the groundwork for understanding stunt labor, looking towards film theory is also vital. Ann Chisholm is the first film scholar to write even peripherally about a theory of stunt work in film, albeit to contextualize her article on body doubles. The author importantly points out that, while a stunt double's main purpose is to prevent the star actor from being injured, California state law mentions "circumstances requiring special talents or abilities other than those of the artist [. . .] when the artist fails to meet certain requirements of the role."³⁰ The underpinnings of stunts as a believable form of action were established in this clause, and legally foreshadowed the stunt's future trajectory: a crooked path,

ever-veering between clever fake and authenticating, death-defying risk, ever eluding concrete definition.

Jennifer M. Bean's work is a nexus point for understanding the invisibility of the filmic stunt. The author focuses on early actresses from 1912-1922. She proclaims that the stunt's ideal, studio-designed purpose was to support narrative realism, and that the early star system functioned to uplift prominent actors as superheroic icons. Although early stars did not always do their own stunts, studios carefully concealed this.³¹ Part of their audience appeal hinged on flouting disaster and courting risk; they were "realness set in opposition to the *mechanical gesture* [emphasis mine] of the stage."³² Pearl White, known as "The Girl with 99 Lives" and "The Heroine of a Thousand Stunts," was one breakout example of the product early studios sold. She was a "real life, heroic figure freed from the laws of physics."³³ Conveniently, the stunt doubles who performed these actions for her were never acknowledged in studio discourse.

Bean references the cinematic turn away from the cinema of attractions and toward narrative form and portrayals of "realism."³⁴ The rise of continuous storylines ultimately hid film's "mechanical base," so visible in the unbelievable spectacles of the attraction-era. Narrative rounded off the star's stunt spectacle, transforming it into a distraction from mechanics and absorbing the viewer into a convincing fabrication of reality. Mere spectacle and montage had the opposite effect. In Bean's example, if a director crashed two trains together on screen, the audience would wonder how much the accident cost to orchestrate. In a more contemporary context, the audience might wonder to what extent CGI assisted a stunt spectacle. Pearl White, the star who did her own stunts, solidified the spectacle under a recognizable face and so kept the audience too mesmerized to ruminate on the technical aspects of what they had seen. Bean rhetorically asks how a "real life aesthetic" materializes in a product that has been flattened

through projection, cut up through editing and rendered absent through recording. The authentic spectacle is “dehumanized by the technology it tries to conceal.”³⁵

Banks and Steimer’s more modern case study of stuntwoman Zoe Bell brings the stunt performer’s fractured, on-screen presence to the forefront. The character Xena, the authors suggest, was not a product of Lucy Lawless’s performance, but of Lawless and her six stunt doubles, each of whom “was hired to create the illusion that one character [. . .] performs every action in the series.”³⁶ In this view, physically strenuous flashes of spectacle create a protagonists’ heroism more so than emotive moments supplied by an actor. The authors shift the diegetic character’s image from the actor to the stunt performer. They also echo Chisholm and Smith’s idea that a stunt person “hides between two cuts.”³⁷ The stunt is passingly dubbed a diegetic construct in that it is present in the narrative world, yet its visibility is disguised as the star actor and character. The authors also focus on differences between the stuntwoman and stuntman’s experiences. A stuntwoman is more prone to injury, as she will likely wear a duplicate of the actress’s form-fitting garb. This means no room for padding while performing a stair fall, for instance. She is also expected to be as thin as her actress, while being strong enough to pull off stunts that her actress cannot perform.³⁸ Steimer’s solo work builds on this case study and coins the term “stunting star.”³⁹ This is a contradictory stunt performer who achieves notoriety “in their own rite.”⁴⁰ The author divides the hyper-visible spectacle of stunt performance from the intentional invisibility cloaking stunt labor, pointing to this contradiction as a stunt performer’s defining feature.⁴¹ Harkening to Chisholm’s observations that one of stunt labor’s chief functions is cost-cutting, Steimer notes that modern studios often hire stunt performers from countries where union representation does not exist or does not require stunt adjustments (increased pay based on perceived risk).⁴² Ironically, this cost-cutting has shaped

the evolution of stunts in Hollywood, as importing stunt actors led to the copying of artisanal wuxia techniques from Hong Kong (such as the incorporation of wire work, ratchets and mini-trampolines). CGI's advent in the 1990s allowed a star on assistive wires to be more seamlessly edited together with a technically skilled stunt person.⁴³ Stunts and CGI erasure drive hyper-visible action sequences. Technological innovations fuse stunt performer to actor (through CGI face replacement, in example) and create niche groups of stunt fans (through DVD extras). Technology's uneasy relationship with stunt labor decreases stunt presence in narrative while regulating it to the domain of connoisseurship and paratext.

Steimer is not the only scholar to intimate that stunt performers are their own type of star. Smith's article on stunts and masculinity discusses the brief resurgence of stunt people as stars in low-budget, vigilant hero films such as *Deathwish* (1974) with Charles Bronson.⁴⁴ Indeed, the early 1970s also represented the first time stunt performers received film credit for their roles.⁴⁵ Smith also begins with the early star system, pointing to the increased importance of unified images and narrative that necessitated hidden stunt labor. If the audience were to see or become too aware of a stunt performer, the narrative would splinter apart. The stunt performer is therefore "sutured" beneath the star and their character. While Steimer echoes these sentiments, the two theorists diverge in one main regard. Steimer claims that stunts were key to the early attraction spectacle. Smith posits that they were separate and self-contained. Citing Eisenstein's treatment of comedic gags as separate, vaudeville-esque interjections into the main attraction, Smith echoes Chisholm's view of stunts as something subsumed beneath narrative and separate from attraction.

Banks's interviews again reveal Smith's "suturing" process between stunt performer and actor. However, unlike Smith, Banks frames suturing more positively. It is like a relay race, with

actor and stunt performer passing the character mantle back and forth at strategic points. It is, of course, important for the stunt performer to mimic the actor's gait and mannerisms (which are not necessarily the actor's own, but rather the actor's interpretation of their character's personality). The concept of "seamlessness" also demands a transition back from stunt intercession to acting, and the stunt performer's role is sometimes to coach the actor on how to portray a character who has been through a physically taxing sequence. The stunt double may describe how hard their heart is beating, and how out of breath they are immediately after a stunt,⁴⁶ so the actor can better portray this state once the character torch passes back to them. In this regard, the stunt performer acts as the barometer for how their character feels, and thus how the audience should feel when looking upon that character. The stunt performer supplies the feeling to the diegetic character and thus informs the narrative's construction. The actor's role, for Banks, is merely in translating stunt to character.

Stunt ties to diegetic narrative also emerge in behind-the-scenes planning and troubleshooting. Stunt coordinators storyboard stunt sequences and show them to the stunt crew before rehearsing begins. The process in action units is similar to that of an above-the-line director, following a pre-planned, narrative progression.⁴⁷ Yet, as it ever has been among studios, the stunt's diegetic contributions stop short of imbuing the performer with the same value assigned to an actor. Insuring stunt people is simply too expensive, and instead the Screen Actors Guild – American of Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) offers a fund to offset medical expenses. Multiple stuntwomen and stuntmen's associations pool their resources to help stunt performers who become disabled. One such organization, the Stuntwomen's Foundation, became a legally recognized non-profit in 2003.⁴⁸ The need for such groups reinforces that stunt roles are there to cut production costs by taking hits and protecting the actor; their resulting

health issues are not a studio concern. Stunt work's money-saving purpose predicates itself on serving the actor, and this purpose reflects in other dimensions of the film industry. In the SAG strike of 1980, for example, stunt people worked security details for picketing actors.⁴⁹ Stunt workers are treated as all-purpose protectors of the actor/ studio commodity, even though actors independently contract themselves. Studios no longer "own" them in the fashion of the early star system. Stunt people similarly contract themselves, using SAG-AFTRA and their own trade organizations to stay informed about job openings. Stunt workers' constant "hustling," or job searching, means most studios enjoy a steady flow of labor. It also means that the entrance to work on-set is a revolving door of injury and replacement.

Sylvia Martin interviews to gauge stunt performers' attitudes toward these daily, occupational injuries and risks. For Martin, as Chisolm and Steimer, spectacle's purpose is primarily an industrial one. It is there to generate revenue. Risk and doubling bring connotations of impending death.⁵⁰ Martin notes that, despite advances in CGI, many directors demand increasingly brutal, physical stunts to authenticate film spectacle.⁵¹ While live audiences in the 19th century observed stunt performers (the aforementioned human flies, bridge jumpers, lion tamers) directly and employed affective techniques (such as hiding their eyes at a critical moment) to mediate fear, film audiences enjoy a greater degree of separation from stunt risk. CGI stunt doubles protect stunt lives by eroding their necessity, contextualizing one stunt worker's observation that "we are expendable."⁵² The synthespian double seems to herald the impending termination of stunt careers, and unease characterizes a digital stunt actor's relationship to both stunt performers and actors;⁵³ a tense trinity of digital stunt actor – stunt performer – star actor. The stunt double's injury promises longevity to the actor and iconic status to the actor's character, whereas CGI promises eventual obsolescence of both acting and

stunt. For now, the actor remains a studio's valued player, and studio finances speak to this. Use of "completion bonds" insures a film's producers in the event that an actor is injured or killed, as this can derail a film's production indefinitely. No such bond is associated with stunt laborers, as they are quickly and often unceremoniously replaced if killed on set.⁵⁴

While Martin addresses it to a limited extent, Lisa Bode is the only scholar thus far who focuses extensively on crossovers between the digital and stunt realms. She points out film artifice's gradual acceptance and descent into unremarkability. While early film critics worried that stunt doubles harmed a film's authenticity, such activities are now afforded the usual "uneasy acceptance."⁵⁵ Digital synthespians have replaced some stunt roles, inspiring murmurs about posthuman labor. In the same way critics of the 1910s and 20s once drew attention to the questionable ethics of editing trickery involved in stunt work, today's critics worry over digital face replacement techniques in performance capture.⁵⁶ Replacement in certain contexts is met with disappointment and outrage (i.e. Natalie Portman did not dance through as many scenes as advertised in *Black Swan* (2010), and her face was placed onto a trained dancer) and celebration in the case of physically authentic stunts.⁵⁷ Despite replacement anxieties, Bode believes CGI also enhances stunt work in unintended ways. She observes that stunt doubles are not simply credited as a "double" for a specific actor; just as often, they receive credit for the character they play. Bode writes that "it is the character that badges the double, not the actor,"⁵⁸ a distinct break from Smith's assertion that the stunt double is sutured into and subsumed by the actor. The actor and authentic character separate in many industry discourses due to insurance policy. Actors featured in, say, a motorcycle chase are often restricted from accelerating past a certain speed. Stunt drivers or digital doubles fill in the blanks for the cost-constrained actor. Bode echoes Smith's assessment of 70's stunt performers, declaring that the heroic character's basic

qualities rest with the present-day stunt performer rather than the actor. The pendulum of 70's stunt work has swung back around in this account.

A similar phenomenon has repeated itself since the 1920s, when the advent of sound and singing became widespread. Critics ridiculed actors for “sprouting” a singing voice overnight, and both the press and audiences viewed even those who genuinely did sing on screen with suspicion.⁵⁹ Bode notes that the modern stunt is a marker of authentic action, whereas digital stunt actors absorb the accusations of inauthenticity that were once heaped upon stunt work.⁶⁰ However, stunt performers find themselves similarly beleaguered with accusations of inauthenticity in a different form. Audiences often attribute their genuine performances to CGI doubles, even when minimal CGI is present. While Bode addresses the importance of examining superhero movies as a genre in which stunt interactions with CGI are consistently important, her case study of Heidi Moneymaker (Scarlet Johansson / Black Widow's stunt double) is tantalizingly brief.⁶¹ Bode's foray into Black Widow's stunts in *The Avengers* (2012) sets the course for a more involved study of stunt work in the ever-popular superhero movie and stunt interactions with authenticity in superhero film genre.

Scott Bukatman defines morphing as “a computer-generated transformation of a photographic base image.”⁶² It resembles a collage, reshapes bodily form, and is familiarly difficult-to-define due to its palimpsest nature. A parallel to Smith's subsumed stunt double emerges here. So follows the “morph” as a term relevant to superheroes and stunt performers alike. Morphing is performance of vision and memory,⁶³ and audiences are inclined to perceive movement as continuous,⁶⁴ imbuing a chopped-up sequence with coherence and narrative quality. If we consider early audience's opposition to stunt doubles as both disingenuous and evidence of cinema's mechanistic, fabricated underpinnings, then the “transgendered,

transracial” aspects of the stunt may be interpreted as a piece of the larger electronic culture that Bukatman calls terminal identity. Digital intervention constructs the character that audiences perceive (in this case, the character formed by intersecting actor, CGI stunt actor and stunt double) and is a product of what the author calls endosmosis: when elements of one picture mix with another to form an (illusive) whole.⁶⁵ The author writes that usually an “other” morphs on screen, not a character we view as ourselves.⁶⁶ He is likely referring to various grotesque transformations of villainous antagonists. However, when considering the stunt, so too do all major characters become frequent morphers. The main difference is that a character’s transformation is diegetic, while the stunt morph remains invisible and undefined.

Stunts in superhero genre films appear indistinct from those in any action film. Heroes and villains meet and pummel one another as objects fly apart in an orgasmic series of explosions. Why is this genre worthy of special examination when any generic action film sounds equally serviceable? In short, if stunt work teaches the viewer and the scholar anything, it is that appearances are deceptive. Superhero films contain a lexicon for understanding the stunt’s linguistic mutation and the shapeshifting relationship between actor and stunt double in all film genres. Comic-inspired stories of heroes who change size, build, coloring and gender on a whim reflect in the stunt doubles’ bodily fluidity. Male and female stunt doubles regularly represent actors of the opposite gender, as their diegetic images shift and subsume under the actor and character.

Terms such as morphing, shape-shifting, assimilating, teleporting, phasing and stretching all characterize the superhero’s uncanny form. Comic films and their body-bending characters give critics the arsenal of metaphors to think through the bodies of stunt performers. The X-Men’s mystique swaps races, genders and sizes at will. Shadowcat passes through other people’s

bodies. Nightcrawler shifts through time and space with a “BAMF!” sound effect. The Hulk transforms from an emotive human character into a kinetically unbound strongman who speaks minimally (not unlike a stuntman). Deadpool regenerates from catastrophic wounds and takes damage that would kill a normal person. Superman and Batman, like the trains in Bean’s “catastrophe machine,”⁶⁷ collide with one another to create a spectacular collateral damage and body count. Further, these heroes and villains’ elastic forms construct themselves through stunt work and CGI motion capture, leading to yet another struggle to affix narrative authenticity to a definitive source.

Stunt Philosophies

Antonin Artaud once wrote that the actor is an athlete of the heart. The affective athleticism of the theatrical stage finds roots in the actor’s breathing and its effect on that actor’s vocal expressions and gestures. While not overtly referring to stunt performers, the parallels between Artaud’s actor and his athletic double echo the sutured, stitched-together relationship between star and stunt performer in Smith’s writings. The actor’s “affective organism [breath] is analogous to the organism of the athlete, is parallel to it, as if it were its double, although not acting upon the same plane.”⁶⁸ Artaud conceived affective athleticism for the stage, but the concept possesses an almost prescient application to modern movies. The theory posits that no matter who an actor is, or what the role is, there is always an underlying “ka” or spirit to what is acted.⁶⁹ The person behind the character almost does not matter, and certainly not in comparison to the consistency of the icon handed down. A player’s purpose is not to be themselves or to foster a trademark persona; it is to give expression to a spirit that always already exists for their character. Although the character may wear a different face and fall through different cultures and places, much like a stunt performer in a sizzle reel, the “ka” remains.

The stunt provides a narrative lattice to sustain illusion and viewer immersion in diegetic events. It is a facilitator of audience affect. This, perhaps, is partially why stunt authenticity is such a crucial element in reaching the audience's heart. It is also why we groan and roll our eyes when we see an artist's hand (in the form of a computer-generated effect) in a film. The narrative rupture of obvious CGI adds still another layer of interruption within these narrative-interrupting stunts. The practical stunt is authentic compared to a digital stunt synthespian because it is less separatory.

The stunt's authenticity is complicated in still another way. Gray points out widespread critical disdain for paratexts such as promotional trailers, posters and online ads. These remind viewers and critics that the diegetic piece they are about to see is not a piece of art, but a product to be sold for profit. However, behind-the-scenes paratexts can function in the opposite way and act as authenticating devices. Stunt roles are, as Banks and Steimer argue, mechanisms for authentically uniting actor and stunt performer under the image of a heroic character.⁷⁰ The stunt performer's work may appear in the diegetic narrative as the authors note,⁷¹ but it is only visible in a form subsumed beneath the actor.⁷² It is labor that "hides in plain sight."⁷³ Looking toward DVD extras becomes avant-garde if stunt performance paratexts are experienced as part of the film itself, as such viewership reveals what is not meant to be seen.

With such an understanding of stunt work, the viewer experiences the stunt as a magnetizing focal point among a slurry of narrative moments. Barthes constructed *studium* and *punctum* as divisions for semiotic images. While he conceived these as applications for photography, each has a relevance to the cinema of attractions. *Studium* is the way the viewer (or audience, in cinema's case) "participate[s] in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions" of the image.⁷⁴ It is defined through cultural associations and can be read as the

audience's prejudices and notions attached to an image. So, too, do audiences project culture onto images. The audience searches out these images, sifting through them as they appear, say, in a narrative film. It is impassive observation, without emotional or affective investment and without "delight or pain."⁷⁵

The truest marker of studium is its ability to alter reality without "doubling it"⁷⁶ through disturbance or an eye-catching detail. Its emphasis is on cohesion, much like narrative, and its function is unary. Punctum is the opposite. It is not sought (though it may be anticipated), but interrupts and demands attention through its affect. It "shoots out of [the] scene like an arrow, and pierces" the audience.⁷⁷ This arrow of punctum leaves a mark because it goes beyond studium's blandness and becomes memorable. Studium elicits fleeting interest, punctum elicits love. It reaches authentic, affective emotions as Artaud's athletic double reaches the heart. Like narrative, which is broken by attraction, which is broken further by stunts, punctum's connection with studium cannot be defined beyond saying that the two maintain a "co-presence."⁷⁸ This strafes the stunt double's oscillation between diegetic and non-diegetic realms, or their absorption beneath the star while largely defining the star's diegetic character. The "incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance," Barthes says of the punctum's indefinable jab.⁷⁹

Stunting Death in Deadpool (2016)



Figure 1: SJ Harris, moments before a wipeout.⁸⁰

The DVD release of *Deadpool* and accident reports surrounding its sequel constitute the current project's first case study. The film features overt use of cinematic attraction in the form of Ryan Reynolds' character talking directly to the camera and audience. It also relies on stunt gags with ND stunt characters and Reynolds/Deadpool's stunt doubles, Alex Kyshkovych, Justin Eaton and Will Erichson, to establish the character as a living stuntman able to heal and regenerate from catastrophic injury.

Deadpool 2 made headlines during its production phase due to the death of stunt cyclist Joi "SJ" Harris. Texts such as *The Hollywood Reporter's* "*Deadpool 2* stunt motorcycle death leaves stunt community asking tough questions" detail the situation that led to Harris' bike crash and offer reflections on stunt expendability and unnecessary risk for the sake of authentic action scenes.⁸¹

Stunting Faces in Logan (2017)



Figure 2: Stanton Barrett doubles digital Logan.⁸²

The second case study focuses on the DVD release of *Logan*. In addition to analyzing the attached stunt reel, I look at trade publication articles such as *Cartoon Brew*'s "The CG Actors in *Logan* you never knew were there."⁸³ The text trumpeted the film's unnoticeable use of CGI techniques to blend stunt double Stanton Barrett with intermittent shots of Hugh Jackman during a car chase scene.⁸⁴

The stunt's relevance derives from its historical irrelevance and invisibility. Its omission from histories and its unnoticed, un-remarked upon status shows that it has not been well-represented in academia. In considering stunt paratexts as devices that orbit, intersect and puncture narratives, scholars may resituate the stunt as an avant-garde moment within a film. In looking toward the overlooked and examining those stunting populations whose histories remain unwritten and unincorporated, future scholarship may continue to expand upon stunt theory. Fantasy genres and the unique vocabulary of superhero films offer a starting point, a means of deciphering the palimpsest figure that stands within the actor and within the heroic character.

CHAPTER 2: STUNTING LAUGHS IN *DEADPOOL* (2016)

“The joke of life is the fall of dignity.”

– *Mack Sennett*⁸⁵

In the distance, a masked red-and-black figure sits atop a highway overpass. His legs loll over the railing, feet kicking back and forth. With the red Crayola crayon stub clutched between an index finger and thumb, he scribbles into a notebook and bobs his head in tune with the crude rap lyrics blaring from his headphones. His attention turns toward the viewer and his eyes widen with recognition. “Oh, hello there,” he says. He proceeds to joke about performing various carnal favors in exchange for starring in his eponymous movie. He proudly displays the notebook, a roughly-hewn drawing of himself brandishing two katanas like a giant pair of scissors. His stick-figure self decapitates a masked bank robber and giddily upturns its eyes. Breaking off this intimate moment, he interjects “Gotta go. Bad guys to kill!” and leaps from the overpass into traffic below. What ensues is a series of ultra-violent action spectacles interjecting a loosely-defined narrative plot, all brought to life by a mishmash of stunt work and digital effects. This is *Deadpool* (2016).

To follow the film’s antihero as he drops into the fray is premature. While the action set pieces ahead remain a key source of audience affect, it is advisable to linger on what the viewer has just witnessed. The idea of a lead character snickering cheeky asides to the audience was hailed as a first for an X-Men franchise film and for superhero genre films, with prominent trade magazines analyzing the comedic affect of “the fourth wall break.”⁸⁶ In popular culture, this term refers to a self-aware interruption in narrative. A character displays an understanding that

they are in a film, thereby interrupting the audience's immersion in the larger narrative. The moment essentially shouts "look at me!" and rips the viewer's attention away from the plot.

However, this is not the only kind of interruption. The violent spectacle of the performed stunt similarly breaks the narrative spell. To understand how these ruptures are significant and how they impact film spectatorship, the fourth-wall break and the stunt must be further broken down. In analyzing narrative's varying affective ruptures, I look at two primary sources. First, I examine key scenes in *Deadpool*, paying special attention to how they focus audience expectations on a super-heroic body that can recover from any injury. Second, I turn toward industry paratexts surrounding the film's star actor, Ryan Reynolds. Lastly, I shift focus to stuntwoman SJ Harris's death on the set of the film's sequel, *Deadpool 2* (2018). Analysis of these sources shows that the first film's comedic and cartoonish portrayal of injury and maiming helps to cover over the daily, socially-ignored pain surrounding the average stunt performers' trade. In the case of SJ Harris, these narratives are useful in extrapolating why popular discourses negated her status as a stuntwoman and why Fox Studios attempted to render her death as invisible as the stunt trade itself.

Audience awareness of the true risks and brutality behind comedic action films does not necessarily mean viewers will refrain from laughing. I do not argue that they should. However, awareness of frivolous death in the second *Deadpool* film's production changes the affective viewing of the first, and of the franchise as a whole. A viewer cannot remain fully immersed in a narrative if an overhanging tragedy consistently removes attention from diegesis, or the film's universe. Spectators cannot view the film as a completely safe and controlled production. They can no longer fully believe that everything represented on-screen is the result of a film studio's careful plan. We would like to believe that no people were harmed during the making of our

film. Yet, in *Deadpool*'s case, to believe what is most reassuring is to ignore a woman who died in the service of making a film universe possible. It is also to follow a tried and true mode of selective seeing, one that Hollywood studios have encouraged since the turn of the 20th century.

The Original X-Men and the Cinema of Attractions

Before proceeding to an analysis of audience affect, stunt work deserves some contextual attention. It is relevant to note that production studios have been historically focused on de-emphasizing stunt doubles' roles. This is partly because the first doubles were plastic dummies. The human stand-ins who eventually replaced these mannequins came from pools of mob scene extras and appeared in 1922. When a star took a break, their spot on set was marked with an X. The original X-Men, then, were the stand-ins who held a star's pose and place on set.⁸⁷ In studio logic, doubles were understudies to the stars who accepted lower-class work in exchange for a shot at one day becoming a star.⁸⁸ Looked-down-upon as mere artifice to the star's embodied authenticity (actors were seen as coterminous with the heroic characters they played), the double's labor served to protect the star. The 1930 California State Work Order #16A, which governed minimum wage contracts for extras, set the Academy Minimum Contract for Artists. This document specified when producers could legally use doubles. Of five guidelines, Rule #3 stated that a double could be called in when the producer thought the artist [star actor] could be injured. The stunt performer's expendability, therefore, holds legal precedent.

The stunt is also an attention-grabbing device that intrudes into narrative. If we conceive of it as a kind of cinematic attraction, it is an "address" to spectatorship. Attraction, to Tom Gunning, does not meld with the narrative, and usually "intrudes on the narrative development."⁸⁹ It is the manic energy of viewing and vicariously partaking in something risky; it stunts narrative progression. Its affect is visceral, violent, and sudden. Attractions, then,

redirect attention from “narrative to display.” The story is there to ferry the spectator between a series of spectacle markers, and these (not the narrative) are the reason the audience remains affectively engaged.⁹⁰ In the case of stunts, it could be Deadpool running toward a stuntman dressed in SWAT gear. The payoff comes when Deadpool (more likely a double than star actor Ryan Reynolds) launches through the air, drop kicking the opposing character and sending him crashing into an adjacent building. The stunt gag is therefore a “relay” between attraction and narrative.

Brian Ott defines cinematic affect as “direct sensory experiences (of color, light, sound, movement, rhythm, and texture), along with the feelings, moods, emotions, and/or passions they elicit.”⁹¹ From this affective standpoint, the author examines another superhero film, James MacTigue’s *V for Vendetta* (2005). Ott here excavates affect’s relevance, proclaiming that a film’s narrative meaning is secondary to what it accomplishes, viscerally, within the viewing audience. Affect creates the potential for awareness of an issue or social problem among spectators.⁹² Massumi observes that autonomic affects (like increased heart rate and breathing) are associated with anticipation. Further, anticipation arises from the viewer’s ability to place themselves within a narrative.⁹³ Following a coherent storyline presupposes a continuous audience affect. The author then distinguishes “intensity” from film’s narrative affects, defining it as “interruption,” as “temporal and narrative noise.”⁹⁴ Massumi is here articulating affective divisions that Soviet film theorist Sergei Eisenstein, and later, Tom Gunning, functionally grouped into narrative, attractions, and gags.

Attraction, utilized in the Deadpool character’s frequent audience addresses, has a long history in cinema. It preempted narrative and arose first as a series of vaudeville-like short skits; movies were these disconnected moments first, only coalescing into extended storylines during

the early twentieth century. Gunning posits that the cinema of attractions did not disappear with the advent of storytelling and narrative film, as has often been declared. Rather, it became part of narrative as it shifted to avant garde status. The avant garde, according to Gunning, is that which is not meant to be seen; it rebels against narrative. It is exhibitionist theater meant to “rupture”⁹⁵ the audience’s immersion in the story. This is ultimately done to gain the audience’s attention with an attractive, self-contained mini-narrative. Affective attention is momentarily shaken out and dislodged from the story, long enough to be reconstituted moments later. The attraction interrupts attention with the larger goal of sustaining it. Just as we are about to lose interest in a sustained story, these interruptions jostle us back to life. Many early films used an extreme closeup of an actor’s face as an attraction; the actor would wink knowingly at the audience, casting aside story for attention. Lacking a diegetic face, the stunt performer accomplishes this narrative punctum through violent spectacle, which Jacob Smith refers to as a stunt gag.

Punctum, Studium and The Cruel

I refer to punctum as a nod to Barthes, whose constructs offer further insight into affective dimensions of narrative, attraction and gag. Barthes describes studium as the audience’s preconceived notions and cultural associations attached to an image. As Dickinson’s concept of the spatial imaginary articulates, none of us walk into a film as a tabula rasa. Always, we carry expectations and prejudices. We bring to a film what we have experienced in the past. Further, these experienced are dyed in nostalgia. We expect a certain predictability, and in that predictability rests a sense of safety.⁹⁶ This also makes us less likely to perceive or acknowledge nuances or things that do not fit. In the case of filmic stunt work, audiences do not often consider the ubiquitous pain and injury that is part of an authentic-looking action sequence. We expect a cohesive narrative with (in *Deadpool*’s case) entertaining comedy. Ruminating on the

action stunt's true costs exposes the machinery behind our carefully-crafted narrative. It also dispels any assurance that production control is absolute. Knowledge of a stunt death or maiming is therefore a punctum, and punctum is analogous to attraction and gag. It reaches authentic emotions, and thus hearkens to the way in which another theorist, Antonin Artaud, situated affective interruptions.

Artaud's manifesto on the theater of cruelty laments that live theater has become mired in dialogue and obsessed with textual exchanges. "We need above all, a theater that wakes us up: nerves and heart," he proclaims, demanding that the theater take up violent action as its centerpiece, rather than dull character details.⁹⁷ Essentially, The Cruel in this sense is describing the modern blockbuster before the modern blockbuster existed; it is the demand for authentically brutal stunts. The cruel stunt exists to strike the audience, to affectively reach into the viewer's chest and grip the heart. The cruel exists as a breaker of narrative and of stunt performers' bodies, as Massumi's intensity is a narrative-breaking "backwash" travelling between "head and heart."⁹⁸ Cruelty, if viewers find it entertaining or amusing, carries an implied ethical element. Viewing accompanied by knowledge of real injury may not prevent a moviegoer from chuckling, but it will likely cause an ambivalence toward and a questioning of the morality behind this reaction. Plato discusses this moral tug within all spectators, framing our souls' "chariot" as ever careening between paths trodden by dual light and dark horses. Those following the dark horse pursue "unnatural pleasures" and take delight in lack of restraint.⁹⁹ It is therefore pertinent to ask whether even an unaware audience is ethically implicated when taking pleasure from brutal stunts. Does failure to acknowledge the stunt pain behind action sequences and its role in propping up heroic icons change the echo of a carefree laugh?

As Sobchack writes, “a sign-function is only so functional within a text as it is not challenged or subverted by extra-textual knowledge.”¹⁰⁰ Knowing that a scene hinges on the damaging or destruction of a living being is enough to launch the viewer’s perceptions back into the real world, where spectators judge situations as “make decisions ethical beings.”¹⁰¹ Narrative boundaries and expectations lead to diegetic character deaths; the slew of ND stuntmen whom Deadpool hacks apart, shoots and bludgeons follow expectations for an over-the-top, R-rated character defined by cartoonish ultraviolence.

Deadpool’s penultimate scene offers a payoff to Wade’s quest for revenge. The moralizing Colossus launches into a lengthy and somewhat sappy monologue designed to convince Wade that killing Francis / Ajax will bring nothing good. Wade cuts him off mid-sentence by firing a bullet into Ajax’s head, and Colossus immediately throws up to comedic affect. This is one of those violent spectacle deaths that we are supposed to look at and embrace for its cathartic (and humorous) properties. In a film predicated on a vigilante hero’s absurd murder sprees, audiences suspected that the irredeemable villain would die. The inverse of this expected, impermanent mortality is the death of “ferocious reality,” where bodily destruction is both diegetic and non-diegetic. Ferocious reality and Steimer’s “hypervisibility” share this quality—the former refers to a rupturing death or injury, and the latter a scene where a stunt actor’s dangerous feats so overwhelm the union between actor and character that the stunt performer becomes the character and a star in their own rite. Both conceptions of narrative rupture cannot fully be placed in traditional narrative divisions, as they mark instances where the walls between diegesis/non-diegesis break down, phase into one another and oscillate always back and forth between each other’s domains.

Drifting Laborers and Peak Action

Peacock separates the “slapstick stunt” from more serious action sequences. Excessiveness characterizes slapstick stunts and makes them (and the narratives they supplement) inherently cartoonish. The audience views such a stunt and thereby knows that reactions to injury will be hyperbolic and comedic. The painful stunt the viewer sees at once leads them to imagine what it would feel like to be similarly struck and to laugh when the stricken character quickly recovers from what should be catastrophic marring of the body.¹⁰² Editing shots to hide whether a stunt double or the actor sustained the hit further “muddies the viewer’s process of embodied perception.”¹⁰³ The stunt double is “subsumed”¹⁰⁴ beneath the character’s persona through editing. If the audience discerns a double’s presence in a scene, their ability to affectively react to the character’s body and its traumas is diminished. They realize the exact points where a specialist takes over and their connection to the diegetic character’s body ruptures. Further, the excessiveness of slapstick stunts can itself be rupturing. As Bean points out in illustrating filmic “catastrophe machines,” or the habit of creating destructive scenes to generate perceptions of high body counts,¹⁰⁵ observers are prone to wondering how much spectacular scenes cost to orchestrate. Narrative ruptures again when the audience contemplates the cash that pumps through these machines’ veins. Similarly, audiences look through the rupture and see cinema’s machinery when they arrive at a film with a heightened awareness of stunt labor. How much more, then, does knowledge of injuries and deaths splinter the viewer’s focus? Further, how did laborers risking their lives for spectatorial entertainment become an accepted cultural practice? The answer rests with conceptions of stunt performance as a kind of hard labor, and with the unfortunate stereotypes attached to labor.

Leo Charney divides both hard labor and spectatorship into “drift” and “peak moments.” Citing an artifact of the 20th century, Frederick Winslow Taylor’s 1911 *Principles of Scientific Management*, the author points to a cultural effort to “defeat distraction by marshalling concentration.”¹⁰⁶ Taylor wrote at a time when industrialization transformed corporate understanding of efficiency. The book details his attempts to standardize labor practices at the Bethlehem Steel Mill in Pennsylvania. Taylor conjured up the precise number of inches a bricklayer should keep between his feet when constructing a wall, the most optimal angle of his shoulders, and the way he should move his arms to decrease fatigue. He admitted the average worker’s physical limitations, calculating that a worker needed to be entirely free of weight for 57% of the day.¹⁰⁷ Without these rest periods, efficiency sank and death by overwork became a danger.

Spectatorship evolved alongside this kind of industrial work ethic and manifest itself in film production. Even today, it is not uncommon for production workers to be on set for 20 hours at a time.¹⁰⁸ Such continuous engagement with a production, which is fundamentally a driven narrative with specific, tightly controlled goals, requires periods of disengagement. The laborer rests to work, and the viewer’s attention is shattered to be reconstituted into a storyline. Likewise, cinematic narration contains “peak moments” of vivid action, but the majority of the story rests in a “valley” of lulled action, dialogue, and character development.¹⁰⁹

Beyond the necessity for drifting moments of rest, Taylor believed it was also necessary to substitute a work science for human judgement, since the typical laborer was, in his view, “a man of the mentally sluggish type . . . so stupid and phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type.”¹¹⁰ This perception, though antiquated, still lingers today and seeps in to the way stunt workers appear in popular culture. For instance, there

exists a body of literature on “dangerous jobs.” Reid’s *World’s Most Dangerous Jobs* offers interviews with wildland firefighters, ice road truckers, loggers, Icelandic fishermen, storm chasers, avalanche controllers, bush pilots and bomb disposal experts, and finally stunt performers.¹¹¹ Stunt work finds itself shoulder-to-shoulder with people who spend their time outdoors, braving extreme conditions and nature’s wrath. They are situated as being “of the earth,” fundamentally self-reliant laborers who toil alongside death and who fail to see risk as a reason to cease these activities. In Jones’s *Risky Living: Interviews with the Brave Men and Women who work the World’s Most Dangerous Jobs*, stunt performers appear in a roster consisting of ironworker, bullfighter, high-rise window washer, tiger trainer, football player, power lineman, knife thrower’s assistant, crab fisherman, coal miner, alligator trapper, and MMA fighter.¹¹² There appears a desire to connect stunts with trades, nature and physicality. Such portrayals hearken back to the engineering professionals or the “property men” of Buster Keaton’s era. Self-reliance, ingenuity and willingness to confront daily risks go with these trades, but so too does the expendability that Frederick Winslow Taylor saw in his ox-like workers.

Despite this unflattering framing, a body is only interchangeable when an insurmountable risk crushes it. The frequency with which stunt people truly encounter such situations continues to be debated, and the contemporary risks behind stunt work are overblown according to some viewpoints. A 2014 article in *Industrial Safety and Hygiene News* outlines this point, offering movie production safety supervisors’ perspectives on stunt work. Safety supervisor Chris Merrifield addresses popular perceptions that the demand for more brutal and realistic stunts creates a more dangerous atmosphere on set. While this is true to a point, the article suggests that enacting an individual stunt is not typically the biggest source of on-set fatalities and injuries, nor are stunt performers injured at a particularly high frequency when considering other

staff. The risk behind increasingly spectacular stunts lies with the web of ancillary factors enabling the action. Keaton observed these same conditions during his early career, remarking that injuries were more likely to arise from some mundane source, such as slipping on a waxed floor.¹¹³ Another *Industrial Safety and Hygiene* article passingly describes the 40 stunt-related deaths reported to OSHA from 1980-1989. The article (which appears on a page with short news clips about workers in road maintenance, oil refineries, auto-assembly lines and crane operation), points out that only eight of the 40 stunt-related deaths involved stunt performers.¹¹⁴ The remaining casualties were made up of “six actors, four camera operators, two bystanders and one pilot.”¹¹⁵ The article groups the remaining 22 deaths into a murky “helicopter-related” category, without specifying the exact personnel who were killed. “Stunts and special effects put not only stunt performers at risk, but everyone else on set as well,” the clip concludes.¹¹⁶

Polyurethane and polystyrene’s widespread use in set construction lend a good example of banal hazards. These foams supply the glue holding various set pieces together and come in fire-resistant iterations. However, given the fact that action scenes often take place near live ammunition, explosives and fireworks, “even the fire-resistant kinds will burn under the right conditions.”¹¹⁷ Stunt performers, extras, and camera crew can be exposed to airborne dust, as special effects-heavy scenes utilize obscurants, fog and smoke. Sleep deprivation poses a serious risk in an industry where 16-hour workdays are an accepted reality.¹¹⁸ Margaret Buckalew, also a safety supervisor, points out that film and television studios are exempt from Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) injury and illness reporting in all states except California. This caveat makes it difficult to realistically gauge the number of on-set stunt and crew injuries in a given year and circumvents government oversight.¹¹⁹

From Diegesis to Documentary

These examples address the production side of stunt work, but there is a crossover between the battered heroes stunt performers portray on-screen and the risks they take behind-the-scenes. How then, is stunt work truly beyond the range of diegesis and non-diegesis alike? It would seem ridiculous to claim that the work of a Foley artist, for example, defies traditional narrative categories. Imagine a movie spectator who sees a character walking through snow and hears the crunch of the character's footsteps. The crunch, though, is not the sound of boots compressing snow, but the sound of the Foley artist standing in a studio and stepping on a bag of corn starch. No one would argue that this sound, once edited into the film, is something other than diegetic. The same could be said of the stunt laborer's work. Why is the momentary swapping of an actor's body for a stunt body any different? The short answer is because the bag of corn starch is not bruised, nor does it have ribs to fracture. The fact that doubles are (at least some of the time) people connects them with cultural fascinations over mortality and makes their ability to shatter narrative through hypervisibility all the more potent.

The stigma of laborers who must not be seen carries forward most powerfully in certain forms, particularly when serving a narrative involves both presented and representational dying. As Sobchack writes of a stunt animal purposely killed for the film *The Rules of the Game* (1939), a rabbit's on-screen death carries several narrative complications. The dying animal dies as a film "character" and in real life, setting it apart from actors who survive their own characters. The rabbit dies in service of the narrative and is little more than a minor appendage of the story. It also breaks the film with its death. Drawing up a moment of what Sobchack calls "ferocious reality," its real death moves the fictional narrative into a documentary space. This move, like knowledge of stunt injuries and deaths, depends on cultural knowledge extraneous to the film's

diegetic world.¹²⁰ Dying, taking risk and being injured for a film is somehow reductive, in that it diminishes the importance and rights of the risk-taker and renders them expendable. Stunt people are capable of feats most would consider superhuman. Yet, they are summarily replaced. Their wounds are disguised so they may be alternately laughed at, gaped at and cringed over without undue discomfort. Some of this, at least, goes back to Taylor's opinions of laborers and the way popular culture situates stunt work as a type of hard labor entailing accepted hazards.

With regard to stunt ethics, the critical magnifying glass hovers above trickery as well as injury. Critics invite audiences to ask "am I being tricked?" The fact that our entertainment is constructed through widespread tacit acceptance and willful inattention to behind-the-scenes injury has been historically subsumed beneath concerns over inherent dishonesty in filmic artifice. It should perhaps give us pause that we are more unsettled by the possibility of a lie than by the existence of a professional whose trade is to be punched, burnt, smashed into walls and hurled down stairs. The fact remains that viewers want this, as Artaud wanted realistic and authentic cruelty for the stage. It is fair to surmise that stunt people also want this. So audience and stunt performer alike are confronted with moral issues of mutual consent to participate in a creation and consumption of performed risk. The stunt performer who finds herself at the mercy of a sadistic director or a studio that covers up abuses, finds that their contractual consent to shoulder risk is not always aligned with personal consent. Likewise, an audience who views a filmed injury or death under the assumption that it is performed and later realizes that the death was real, has similarly had their will to consent exploited. They have unwittingly passed through a membrane separating fictional diegesis from documentary.

Laughing through the Pain

It is easier to laugh at a character leaping off an overpass than to laugh at his splattered body on the pavement, Peacock writes.¹²¹ Deadpool's macabre humor and ultra-violent injuries appear to contradict this, making full use of the film's hard R-rating by inviting the audience to laugh at over-the-top gore as attraction. In one sequence, the titular lunatic breaks both hands and a leg while trying to punch the character Colossus, an X-Man who is made of metal. Hands flopping limply from his shattered wrists, Deadpool staggers toward the viewer, his white eyes wide. "All dinosaurs fear the T-Rex," he says, folding his arms inward as if to mimic tiny, nigh-vestigial forearms. It may be hard to laugh at a mangled body. At the same time, though, art for an animator is a felony offense for a photographer. In the same way, a brick to the head on film, enabled by digital animation, is sometimes a real concussion behind-the-scenes. The film's narrative establishes Deadpool as a walking cartoon and an inflatable punching clown who rebounds from all manner of battering. CGI assuages any potential guilt the audience may feel in laughing. The injuries depicted are never real, the viewer is to assume.

The Deadpool character reimagines terrible injuries, deploying them as a morphing device that turns his whole body into something else; a living animation immune to incapacitation.¹²² His broken limbs form a comic prop. They also transmogrify shattered bones into a symbol of predatory strength. Deadpool mimes a terrible lizard. He channels the spirit of an unconquerable beast that viewers can laugh at while remaining assured that the beast acts within the confines of a safe narrative. Pain is strength, and the recurrence of pain lends to the expendability of body parts that can heal at an accelerated rate. Cells multiply and fill-in torn tissue. The audience knows their protagonist will heal and regenerate any perforation, however awful. Deadpool, in this regard, embodies the stereotypes and idealisms surrounding the stunt

performer. He acts as a living stuntman, crashing his way through one thanatological impossibility after another. He marks everything stunt performers wish to avoid being associated with and at the same time magnetizes everything production studios (and therefore audiences) project onto a stunting body. He is expendable without being disposable, which is really expendability without true consequence.

As Peacock also points out, cartoonish pain is more conducive to laughter.¹²³ It allows the audience some cathartic relief from the fragility of the human form. It offers an ephemeral glimpse into a “what if” scenario. In *Deadpool*, audiences see a being who is not impervious to injury and pain. He is terribly human, like the audience, and is frequently stabbed, shot, bathed in acid, bludgeoned, and otherwise subjected to harm that should logically end him. He is covered head to toe in disfiguring scar tissue. Yet, he rises again, reduced to hamburger and still standing, often with a juvenile quip at-the-ready. This character laughs at injury, and invites the audience to laugh with him. Indeed, laugh they do. Setting aside the hoards of YouTubers who recorded reaction videos for this film, *Deadpool* also prompted fans to record in-theater audio. Typically accruing views in the hundreds of thousands, these clips sport titles like “Deadpool - Theater Audience Reaction,”¹²⁴ “Deadpool Audience Reactions IMAX”¹²⁵ and varying combinations of the film title, the words “audience,” “reaction” and a word denoting the physical environment as an authentic theater. The purpose and focus of these audio clips, usually played over a still image of the Deadpool character, is not to spoil the plot or offer moviegoers a way to avoid paying \$15. It is to highlight moments that elicited a strong affect.

This is measured through awed vocalizations and cackling that the viewer experiences as responses to spoken dialogue and sound effects. Ignoring the fact that some of these videos offer subtitle-like text descriptions of the action, they appear as affect sensory deprivation. One hears

laugher and a palaver of indistinct comments at predictable junctures. The sound of Deadpool's head colliding with a shipping container explodes the audience into guffaws. In the film itself, the character's eyes appear absurdly wide in this shot, eliciting a humorous effect. A similar aural response results during other slapstick scenes, such as when Deadpool's arch nemesis, Ajax, smashes a knife into his head. Deadpool's nonchalant responses to these injuries arise from the realm of animation. He and his fellow super-beings are expected to shrug off pain, and we are not expected to notice the physical stunts that allow them to do so. If we did, the ethics behind our laughter would become questionable. Worse still, our attention might stray into realms it was not intended to traverse.

Death's Cultural Invisibility

This relationship between close-up actor and distant stunt person becomes complicated when considering diegetic and non-diegetic death. Sobchack discusses death's evolution through Western history, tracing its cultural place from one of public spectacle and human mastery to one of private and sexualized secrecy. The once common sight of dead bodies in public spaces and the spectacle of funerary processions are contrasted with a desire to steal our dying selves away from society by entering the bed chamber.¹²⁶ Death and crippling injury morphed from being a part of life to something interruptive, another shameful type of rupture in coherent being. It was not meant to be seen by anyone save for a few "connoisseurs," such as the deceased's immediate family and close friends. For others to gaze in on this would be a taboo affront to privacy and a repugnant kind of voyeurism. To see it was to spoil its sanctity, but also to disillusion oneself. Life could not be viewed in quite the same way thereafter. Death became the ultimate stunt, and to gaze upon its works was to ironically break one's naïve, child-like belief in immunity from it.¹²⁷ Death viewed as rupture demands the spectator cast away any illusions that the same fate

doesn't await us all. In seeing what is meant for only a few special eyes, notions of specialization break down. There are no connoisseurs, no laypersons, but only bodies marching toward a singularity.

The suspension of disbelief around death resulting from moving natural death from public to private spheres and the following psychic rupture changed death's public aspect. Dyings secluded behind hospice curtains emerged as "natural" in the 19th and 20th centuries and stood in contrast to the greater instances of public dyings in prior human history. Where once the public enjoyed the colosseum while being also familiar with the sight of people meeting their natural death in the street, the rupture between public and private death saw spectacles of death become magnified, fetishized and commodified. Violent death was public death and therefore increasingly consumable. Groer specifically refers to films and comic books as signifiers of this trend: "violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences — detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction, and eventually horror comics."¹²⁸ One might infer, then, that the popularity of superhero films in the early 21st century represents a clashing semiosis of fragmented "body" archetypes. The actor-as-character carries out the spectator's desire to master death, or at least inure ourselves to its effects, by absorbing kinetic shock and leaping up again. Behind this curtain of diegetic hero stands the stunt performer who, although more physically capable than the average viewer, suffers real-world effects of the blows that diegetic hero/actor simply shrugs off. A stunt worker is the privatization and shaming of death locked not in a bed chamber, but behind an iconic face and behind a convenient camera angle. Of course, not all stunt performers suffer crippling injury or death on the job. Yet, for those who do, the actor-character's diegetic visage might be thought of as the locked doors blocking our way into a charnel house.

While Sobchack's writing is concerned specifically with representations of death in documentaries, action-heavy genres like superhero have a special relationship with mortality and injury. Fictive violence is enacted through factual violence. It is made possible through bodies willing to undergo daily battery for the thrill of risk, for a believable scene, for a paycheck, and foremost, for industry profits. Facsimiles and realities of pain coexist in a blurred space where the boundaries of each dissolve at unpredictable junctures. They are a dual force that can be viewed as a reflection of sorts; and looking back from the mirror are the workings of a machine that grinds human bones to make its bread. Publicly visible cases are rare, and an audience has no reliable, in-the-moment method of knowing which depictions of injury caused real damage to the subsumed performer. Indeed, most spectators have no impetus to search for these rupturing moments or to give them any thought beyond the scope of the film. To suggest looking at and for the stunt performer elicits reactions against pointless geekdom and uncritical buffism.¹²⁹ It is not something rational people are supposed to see.

We viewers are too caught up in grappling with the semiotics of death, and violent film moments are crucial in assuaging our fears of inevitable reckoning with mortality and infirmity. Stunt work as invisible, subsumed labor and heroic character contribution therefore holds a ritualistic quality if read through Sobchack's paradigm: "always in some way treated as sacred—either through the observance of ritual *or ritual nonobservance* [italics mine]—the deformed living body and the human corpse serve as radical signs of human "matter" transformed "from one state into another."¹³⁰ The transformation from healthy to injured, living to dead is reflected in a diegetic character's shift from actor body to stunt body. We have been taught not to observe a massive lynchpin in the construction of violent, believable action, as we have always been taught not to think about bodies changing between states.

Even viewers who have access to studio-released stunt paratexts (“behind-the-scenes” extra footage) see a carefully selected representation of stunt work. DVD extras are usually light-hearted and showcase successful stunts that appear to be minimally injurious. The spectator is unlikely to ever see a stunt performer’s bloody face after falling through a skylight. Nor does the viewer see the bruises that cover a stunt performer after carrying out a stair fall for ten takes.¹³¹ The cinematic catastrophe machine may thrive on sequences generating high body counts, but only if its own machinery is not allowed to affect the audience. Simply put, an affectatious stunt runs two risks in terms of causing a narrative rupture in the audience’s minds. First, the beaten bodies needed to sustain a stunt must not become the focus. They must appear seamless¹³² and subsumed¹³³ beneath the actor and thus the character’s persona. Second, the costs of a stunt must not become the focus. If they do, the machinery behind diegesis is exposed, and the narrative ruptures. To avoid any actualization of these rupturing realities, studios and media industry texts alike situate the actor as sole proprietor of authenticity and a nexus point of the diegetic character’s heroism. As carefully as film studios filter the content they release, industry journalists are often equally complicit in reproducing these same narratives of studio control, success and safety. As such, their writings are optimal sources for critical examination.

Authenticating the Actor

A *Daily Mail* article observes actor Ryan Reynolds, masked in Deadpool attire, watching a stuntman execute various physical feats.¹³⁴ Which of his three doubles is unspecified. Inferring from the film’s end credits, it is either Alex Kyshkovich, Will Erichson or Justin Eaton. While the piece positions the stunt worker(s) as performing “all the dangerous work,” Reynolds’ claim to the Deadpool character is nonetheless authenticated. Pointing to the actor’s wounded condition, the authors whimsically suggest that he has absorbed his character’s healing powers.

He is, after all, present on-set despite being hit by a car only days prior. Persisting on despite injury marks not only his own embodied toughness and worthiness of the Deadpool role, but his connectedness with the stunt trade. A performed car hit is a rite of passage in the stunt world, and an actor who shrugs off a similar, non-performed hit then gathers an added toughness and worthiness. Reynolds would be participating in stunt work if not for his temporary, fragile state, the text implies.

The notable absence of stunt doubles' names in an industry-focused article suggests the anonymous performer's expendability and interchangeability. They are subsumed beneath the red and black attraction that is Deadpool's costume, and the costume is thus an extension of Reynolds-as-Deadpool. Photographs included in the report depict Reynold's back toward the camera, as a double corkscrews through the air, suspended in mid-fall. The actor peers in on the processes of well-tuned, second unit mechanics. The reader acquires a sense of the structure and mastery audiences are supposed to associate with studio processes. Everything goes off without a hitch. This structure is "the place where nothing ever happens," in Massumi's words.¹³⁵ It is the celebratory reel of DVD extras showing smoothly-executed stunts where workers quickly leap up and do not appear to be hurt. This studio narrative owns the stunts and carefully selects which ones are fit for viewing. The film-as-product sets itself on mastery and the appearance of safe control. This is because the stunt seen on film is meant to be coterminous with the actor's personality. The un-recognized stunt is the avant garde, the forbidden notion that heroism resides with the stunt performer rather than the narrated actor. Therefore, industry paratexts often reinforce illusions of the actor-as-authentic-character just as they help to create this image.

From this brief paratextual exploration, the connection between stunt mastery and actor-as-authentic hero begins to coalesce. Smith and Steimer have already made the case that a stunt

double's toughness, absorbed by and channeled through the actor, creates a heroic character's narrative authenticity. Deadpool's antics turn this authenticity on its head, while still upholding the actor as reservoir of the real, believable and authentic. Whether it materializes in a gunslinger's grit or an Amazon warrior's martial arts prowess, toughness resides at a hero's core. In the case of stunting star-turned-actress Zoe Bell, Steimer observes that the stunt performer is both the "instrument through which the [action] spectacle is made manifest and the spectacle itself."¹³⁶ It emanates from an ability to fight and to appear to be in danger. A film's generic narrative determines the parameters for the action spectacle and therefore how a stunt body will behave. As Bukatman notes of Western heroes, a protagonist must stagger through brutality, fracture and frenzy¹³⁷ toward victory and dominance over the enemy. An embodiment of toughness dishes out beatings and death. It also takes such punishment without succumbing. It is expected to shatter before our eyes and bounce back up, like any good stunt performer. We will see in *Logan* (2017) how the Western vigilante connects (or fails to connect) to the stunt player's super-heroic authenticity.

For now, it is enough to acknowledge that an unbeatable, ever-regenerating body projects onto the character and actor despite typically being created through stunt performance. It is also worth remembering that very few stunt performers reach "stunting star" status, where viewers know their names and popular trade magazines and mainstream press regularly discuss their careers. At the height of *Xena*'s popularity, audiences may have seen the diegetic character set aflame and realized that Zoe Bell, not actress Lucy Lawless, carried out a full-burn stunt. They may have then been aware, to a far greater degree than usual, of Bell's on-screen intercessions, viewing her as a part of the *Xena* character. A stunting star thereby transforms into "a congealed artifact of generic translation."¹³⁸ Most stunt doubles are not allowed to "congeal," and they

never escape the status of an invisible visual effect. A stunt person as key player and laborer clings to an action scene, but is rendered incapable of defining or creating said scene. Studio discourses and surrounding paratexts consistently privilege the actor's image and deemphasize stunt work as a vestigial add-on, hanging numbly from the greater body of the character/actor. In *Deadpool*, Reynold's stuntmen dissolve beneath the actor they serve and the character they represent, and their stunt's realness bubbles upward, osmotically infusing into the anatomy of star and protagonist character. Deadpool is unique in that his believability also arises from a cartoonish parody of femininity, something that paratexts surrounding the film present as the star actor's domain.

Funhouse Femininity

Since he straddles the border between live-action superhero and animated caricature, Deadpool's torture, gory murder scenes and extended fistfights intermix with an effeminate body language that seemingly contrasts masculine toughness. In the same way that Bugs Bunny dons a dress and a coquettish demeanor to lure Elmer Fudd into the path of an oncoming train, so too does Deadpool pass femininity through a funhouse mirror to create its parody. This distorted girliness is evident in the film itself and in the accompanying viral marketing campaign. In one image collage posted to Ryan Reynold's Twitter page, Deadpool lies on his side before a stone hearth, fireplace crackling behind him. He rests his head on one hand, hooking a leg behind the other to accentuate his hips. In the same post, Deadpool lays stomach-down on a bed, surrounded by melting candles, kicking his feet in the air. Another image depicts Hugh Jackman / Wolverine holding up a single claw, which a miniature Deadpool uses to perform a pole-dance.¹³⁹ A popular fan-made image shows Deadpool holding onto a parasol, Mary Poppins-like, while sailing through the air, skyscrapers stretching out below him.¹⁴⁰ The film

itself features many scenes where the character girlishly sashays between brutally murdering evildoers.

The way the character carries himself was, according to several paratextual sources, a product of Reynolds' vision. "Deadpool is so feminine. At least, in how I saw him,"¹⁴¹ Reynolds commented. According to the actor himself, his doubles struggled to match the exaggerated, effeminate mannerisms needed for the role. Specifically, they found it difficult to "drop the macho act so often associated with superheroes."¹⁴² Deadpool may invert prototypically masculine toughness to create a pansexual parody of femininity, but the actor still stands as the source of this authenticity. Bode's work describes situations where studio regulations prevented actors from putting themselves at physical risk, thus removing them from their character's authenticity to a laughable degree. Here, then, is a character whose believability rests with behaving in a fashion that looks emasculating and that presumably felt emasculating to the stunt performers asked to embody it. Deadpool's gender-bending antics speak to the actor's fluidity in reconstituting himself in whatever form best suits character authenticity. In both the case studies surrounding Reynolds and his doubles, stunt doubles are presented as unequivocally masculine and tough; but this is not enough to lay claim to the "ka" of the character. In the first case, the doubles' services are permitted only because their star is out of commission. In the second, their grit turns against them and further distances them from the character's essence.

Manifested Space and Deep Play

The film's final fight scene features a to-the-death battle between Deadpool and the villain who tortured and maimed him in the film's beginning, Ajax. While the audience is meant to believe that the figures stabbing, punching and shooting one another are one with the star actors who supply their faces and voices, use of long-shots and conspicuously-turned heads hints

otherwise. As with any explosive, visceral fight sequence, stunt work builds Deadpool's ultimate death match. Shots where the characters clash swords and axes together are often taken from a slightly greater distance than the majority of the fight scene, and Ajax's face is tellingly blurred by movement and what Plantinga calls manifested spatial distance¹⁴³ in these instances of bodily danger. The villain's back faces the spectator as Deadpool kicks him through the air and into a pile of boxes, suggesting that this shot may be Jeffrey C. Robinson (actor Ed Skrein / Ajax's stunt double). Ajax the character's face is visible, so spatial manifestations serve to mask the character's stunt performer. However, these are not flawless, and there is at least one (albeit barely noticeable) shot where Robinson's face has fully replaced Skrein. The shot ends so quickly that it cannot be said to rupture the narrative or the fight sequence. Rather, it stands as a fleeting moment in which the actively discerning eye can capture the guts of Skrein's character. Here, the stunt aficionado sees Ajax's other face, ducking in and out of each shot.



Figure 5: Ajax, a team effort.¹⁴⁴

No such use of illusive space is needed in the case of Deadpool, whose face is hidden by the bright red attraction that is his mask. The mask, rather than space, stitches and subsumes stunt performer to character. When Deadpool's head smashes into a metal cargo container, his white eyes stare directly at the viewer, emoting surprise and pain. Given the loud bang this impact makes, the man behind the mask may be any one of Ryan Reynolds' three stunt doubles. The audience will never know with absolute certainty, and therefore they are unlikely to think of the stunt at all. The mask-as-attraction covers any such distinction, reducing a visible swap of actor and double to a mere jerk in the narrative. Deadpool's cartoonish, expressive face briefly interjects in the fight before flinging the viewer once again into the fray. A masked protagonist serves the same function as the always-faceless stunt double: an attractive mask creates affective distance between the audience and the stunt performer just as manifested space accomplishes the same goal for the unmasked Ajax. Attraction covers for gag and affective narrative remains unruptured. The viewer does not see what the studio does not wish them to see. What the viewer does not see, they presumably do not desire to see.

The film's high-stakes fight and the stunt miming that builds it are a form of what Clifford Geertz contextualized as "deep play."¹⁴⁵ Geertz wrote an anthropological study on Balinese cockfighting, in which two roosters are pitted against one another. Deep play is a mimetic investment in the fighters' success, powerfully tying the actor's image of authentic toughness to the life of the stunt performer who mimes a fighter character (or chicken, in Geertz's case). While Miranda Banks conceives filmic deep play with stunt double as cock and actor as owner / gambler, this concept is also applicable to the audience's affective investment in a seamless narrative. The viewer's immersion in diegesis rests contingent upon the relay between stunt performers and actors, who mime how their heroic character should move and fight.

It is then significant that the Deadpool character's origin story and source of superheroism comes from severe bodily injury. In one of the film's few solemn scenes, Wade Wilson is diagnosed with cancer. Desperate to extend his life, he falls in with Department H, a shadowy government entity. The group of agents promise him not only a cancer cure, but a series of experiments that will transform him into a super being. Wade willingly follows these people to an abandoned warehouse and allows them to strap him to a gurney. He realizes that the path toward heroism will involve severe physical trials. What ensues is a montage of Guantanamo-esque torture scenes that physically transform Wade's body into a monument to injury. He is confined in a glass tube and immersed in noxious gas, nearly drowned in a bathtub, injected with chemicals, beaten, and set on fire. As the perpetually gloating Ajax tells him in an extended monologue, "if you think superhuman powers are acquired painlessly, you're wrong." He adds that he and Angel, a character who pummels Wade throughout his incarceration, were once patients themselves. The "treatment" gave Ajax enhanced reflexes and took away his ability to feel pain, while it made Angel super-strong and invulnerable. Read with industry paratext in mind, Department H is a stunt performer factory. As evidenced in trade magazine coverage of Reynolds watching his stunt doubles perform, stunt performers are portrayed as skillful, careful trouble-shooters able to execute maneuvers that would prove impossible or deadly for the average person. One of the primary ways viewers see them is through their stupendous physical feats. The other way is through their injury and death, which is ultimately necessary to protect studio investments in star actors. The stunt performer is situated in a position of servitude to the actor despite their uncanny skills, and this too is oddly echoed in Wade's torture and transformation. As Ajax wryly adds, "this workshop doesn't make superheroes, we make super slaves."

While it would be grossly hyperbolic to assert that stunt labor is slave labor, it is at least worth remembering that doubles in the early 1900s prostituted themselves to make ends meet and to secure prominent film roles. The State of California issued work order #16A in response to widespread allegations that doubles were being victimized by a Hollywood-condoned system of “white slavery.”¹⁴⁶ This is not to imply that a sense of humor cannot or should not survive awareness of these ancillary details. It is only to intimate that knowing about the stunt trade affectively alters one’s viewing of both *Deadpool*’s comedy and heroic origins, which are based on injury. Indeed, Wade must be tortured to activate the mutagenic chemicals injected into his bloodstream. Conveniently, their catalyst is pain. To the viewer whose thoughts do not linger on the physically punishing nature of stunt performance (and the stunt performance that went into these torture scenes), this narrative fits stunt laborers. Stunts may carry risks, but these are needed to facilitate amazing attractions and gags. The stunt performer’s invisible nature makes it tempting to assume that, like any superhero, the bruising they undergo is nominal. It is not so severe that they cannot pop back up again and film another take. Stunt performers largely espouse this view themselves. Smith writes of legendary stuntman Hal Needham’s disdain for being likened to a daredevil, or an Evel Knevel-like performer whose fame is based on breaking bones and months-long hospitalization.¹⁴⁷ Stunt performers know how to mediate pain and risk because they are cautious professionals. Their invisibility invites the viewer to comfortably believe that evocative spectacles are pure fantasy and that no one was harmed. Stunt performers in the Screen Actors Guild voice such views. These discourses preclude the possibility of severe or mortal injuries befalling an authentic stunt person. To find an alternative story, one must ask the dead.

The Banality of Injury

Pain and injury on film occupies a liminal space in viewers' minds according to Peacock.¹⁴⁸ Depending on how much individual spectators know about the real or performed pain, a stunt's affect and moral implications can change dramatically. The background knowledge audience members bring into a screening may fundamentally alter affect on a person-to-person basis. A connoisseur who follows trade magazine reports of stunt performer accidents may be desensitized to the point where such bodily injury is part of showbiz and a worthy sacrifice for the entertainment and cash value gained. A casual moviegoer who happened to see a stunt death on CNN mere hours before attending the very film that contributed to this death may feel a greater moral unease. This tension influences how much the viewer can immerse in the film's diegetic world. While the clearest example would be in cases where stunts go tragically wrong and result in permanent injury or death of their performers, stunt scholars would do well to reflect on the reality that most stunt work entails injuries considered "everyday" for the trade. Stories of concussions, fractured ribs and vertebrae and hospitalization are common. Stunt doubles tend to dread wearing wigs, as these are typically pinned to their scalps with metal fasteners. With enough impact, the pins stab into the double's head and become lodged there. The production studio's primary concern is salvaging the wig and costume for the replacement double, who is brought in to substitute for a hospitalized performer (typically within minutes).¹⁴⁹ Despite stunt workers' emphasis on safety and troubleshooting, injuries multiply due to directorial perception of computer graphics imagery. To sidestep press (and therefore, audience) criticism of excessive CGI, directors are demanding increasingly brutal stunts to stake a claim in authentic action. Martin writes of a stunt coordinator tasked with finding a stunt person willing to be run over by a moving car, rather than have a visual effects team animate a digital body

beneath the car's wheels.¹⁵⁰ In the current Hollywood climate, one thing is certain for any action genre production: people bled for the film.

Stunt injuries are the everyday norm for industry practitioners. If awareness of banal contusions, sprained ankles and shattered elbows considered acceptable risks in the film industry carry the danger of rupturing audience's affective engagement, how much more does knowledge of stunt deaths? And how much greater still is affect altered or transformed into indignance or repulsion when we are prompted to laugh at a film that we know was, even partially, built on a frivolous stunt death? As Peacock observes, "the viewer who laughs at real pain is required to consider the morality of their own judgements."¹⁵¹ Such questions of affect and moral culpability in risky performances stretch back to the 1800s. One famous clown, Grimaldi, sustained cumulative injuries that ended his career in 1817. Despite shooting himself in the foot, falling onto solid ground from great heights, and being crushed beneath a piano holding 16 men, he continued to shrug off such injuries and perform through the end of such shows. His personal money troubles motivated him to continue pantomime until he could no longer walk. While stunt performers on big-budget Marvel Studios films are typically Screen Actor's Guild members and thus recipients of residuals and stunt adjustments (the riskier the stunt, the higher the bonus), the guild provides a fund to help performers with medical costs; that is to say, stunt workers are not given comprehensive health insurance on par with the actors they double. As the previous chapter mentions, insurance tasks are left to sororal and fraternal organizations, such as the Stuntwomen's Foundation and Stunts Unlimited. These groups, among others, sets up their own charities to help alleviate the medical bills of paralyzed stunt workers and those who lose limbs or suffer other injuries that derail their careers.¹⁵²

While the average viewer will not know that the comedy in *Deadpool* is facilitated by stunt workers with shoddy insurance, general awareness of injurious factors and financial dire straits can, at times, overshadow the viewing experience. If they could not, studios would not have to conceal and resituate stunt work's darker side in celebratory DVD releases. While the justification of affective laughter is impacted, so too is the viewer's ability to remain immersed in diegesis without rupturing into mechanics and into the production side of a film. At the same time, as Peacock discusses, production machineries can offer an effective assurance and license to confidently dismiss real pain as staged pain.¹⁵³ If viewers imbue the studio and professional stunt people with absolute control over each scene, this frees the audience from thinking about the injuries that bring about action and slapstick comedy. Stunt mastery, the perception that stunt workers are practiced, careful troubleshooting professionals, adorns narrative with the punctum of cinematic attractions and gags. While Peacock discusses the actor's agency as another affective factor in scenes where a stunt performer knowingly undertakes a painful performance for the sake of authentic-looking character reactions, even a more generalized awareness of pain can derail the affective laugh if the audience knows about a high-profile death attached to production.

SJ Harris

Joi "SJ" Harris was the first black woman to become a licensed road racer.¹⁵⁴ She began her career in 2009, turned professional in 2014 and accumulated eight years of racing experience during her 20's.¹⁵⁵ She typically drove 300cc bikes, which denotes a relatively maneuverable, lightweight size.¹⁵⁶ Her YouTube channel contains seven videos. All are under twenty-five seconds, save for one. "My 1st Race Crash Ever," is a four-and-a-half minute passenger's view of a live road race.¹⁵⁷ The bodiless viewer sees Harris's back, outlined in trees and a strip of

oncoming road. She shifts to the bike's left side. The engine growls as the bike tilts to a 45-degree angle. Ragged asphalt zips by mere inches from Harris' leg and shoulder. Scooting back to the center of her seat, she straightens before dipping into a right turn. This motion continues with a surety; we expect her to lean and pop back to center, as if she and her bike were a metronome. She zooms forward and despite the kinetic force behind her, the sequential, swaying turns feel slow. Mesmerizing, even. There is a slight noise, some nondescript bump, and Harris's head and shoulders vanish off-screen. Her legs lift from the bike seat and sail through open air before impact. The jittering go-pro lens follows as she log-rolls along the ground. She comes to a stop with the viewer staring at the top of her helmet and outstretched hands. A word bubble, edited into the video, pops up: "Yes, that is concrete. Now MOVE. GET UP GIRL!"¹⁵⁸

After performing a crash sequence on the set of *Deadpool 2*, SJ Harris did not get up. One scene required her to ride a 900cc Hyperstrada (a larger bike than she had been accustomed to racing, *Deadpool 2* stunt coordinator Conrad Palmisano observed)¹⁵⁹ down two flights of stairs. She executed this sequence for five takes and, on the sixth, reportedly lost control. Explanations for Harris's death can be grouped into three categories, based on the source. Each of these serves to rhetorically reinforce studio dictates. Each serves to distance SJ Harris from the authentic vision of the 'real' stunt performer, either directly or implicitly. Finally, each is tied to the Deadpool character as living stunt performer, calling into question the morality behind humorous affect and the line between authentic performative stunt and a stunt made real through accident. In the responses of fellow stunt performers, news sources and production crews, there is a collective degradation of Harris's labor, and of her status as a true member of the stunt community. In keeping with Hollywood doubles and their history, this degradation is accomplished by both authenticating and de-authenticating Harris's status as a stuntwoman. The

discourse morphs her death into something indefinable, not caused by any one blameworthy party. Its illusive quality, so familiar to the stunt worker, allows production heads to avoid culpability. It also allows the audience license to consume the upcoming film and laugh at Deadpool's foibles while being fully conscious that a woman died to help bring this film to fruition. The discourse is designed to preemptively alleviate moral unease that fans may experience, before they even set foot in the theater.

Indeed, there were certain parties who tried to sweep Harris's crash from sight and mind. There appears to be a divide between reactions of stunt performers and those of Fox Studios' representatives. A series of *Hollywood Reporter* articles chronicles stunt professionals' opinions about why Harris received her job in the first place. These stunt voices criticized the studio and subtly redirected blame onto Harris in the same breath. 40-year veteran stunt driver Steve Kelso questioned Fox's judgement and Harris's stunt qualifications. "I'm a professional race car driver, but it's just day and night [. . .] the two don't really mix. Being a professional motorcycle rider is only half the job, the other half is knowing [. . .] the art of making movies."¹⁶⁰ Harris the rider trying to break into stunt work is reframed as an outsider who reached the film set only as the result of poor hiring choices. That stunt performers often hail from eclectic backgrounds is a non-starter in Kelso's account. One either comes in with the proper experience or does not. This is a career too dangerous for novices, and a real stunt performer possess the wherewithal to drive into a disaster, crash, and walk out minimally damaged. Therefore, it is first Harris's authenticity as a stuntwoman that is questionable, and secondarily Fox's casting. To be fair, her experience was not comparable to that of seasoned stuntwoman Melissa Stubbs, who was present on set and willing to fill Harris's role. Stubbs was sidelined, however, and stunt performers familiar with the film's production said that she was not considered a match for the role. Here,

race becomes a marker of studio-defined authenticity, as it has ever been for stunt doubles. While authenticating Harris for the role, commenters from the stunt community asserted, it also led to the reckless casting of an under-experienced, non-professional person. Boiled down to their most basic components, the stunt performers' views intimate that Harris's blackness got her the role and prompted the casting director to ignore her lack of real qualifications. Racial authenticity in casting superseded stunting skills, which are tied to safety and the stunt performer's ability to repeat physically punishing roles.

Plantinga notes that audience reactions to manifestations of space (as with sounds, colors and textures) are "automatic and pre-reflective."¹⁶¹ In the case of racially homogenous ND stunt performers and in the case of doubles whose "coloring" does not strictly align with that of an actor (actress Zazie Beetz has significantly lighter skin tone than SJ Harris), manifested space facilitates narrative seamlessness. The space audiences observe on-screen is naught but an echo of the physical space experienced by a cinematographer. Yet, this spectral manifestation of space adds enough illusive distance to subsume a poorly-matched stunt double beneath the image of a character and actor. As the double recedes in a shot, so too does the double's difference.

Our initial, "primitive" response to any picture, even a moving picture, is to take it as real, according to Plantinga. Recognizing the image as a representation is a "thoughtful" response, one that occurs simultaneously with the primitive.¹⁶² In the case of an SJ Harris, we do not want (and studios do not want us to) have time or reason for a "thoughtful" response to a stunt double; thoughtfully, we know the character racing down two flights of stairs is a representation as opposed to a hero who enacts the feat in real time. What we do not know without outside research into trade magazines and stunt footage is that the racer flying down these stairs is a representation of her actor. She is both within the diegetic narrative and without

it. Meditating on this constitutes too great an affective rupture, and so manipulated, manifested, echoed space serves to keep our affective responses firmly “primitive” in relation to the stunt performer. We believe that the character we see is a unified, authentic, and real portrayal of an actor’s physical form and abilities.

One *Hollywood Reporter* article refers to Harris as a “body double” for Zazie Beetz. While body double and stunt double are completely different professions, the error itself illustrates the low status bestowed upon Harris as a novice and a black female stunt performer. There is no space between on-screen character/actor and stunt person. The two are stitched together, with the stunt performer tucked beneath the star. The stunt double occupies a place of perpetual beneath, both narratively and industrially. To audiences, a stunt person may have greater claim to a hero’s authenticity than the actor, who is typically prevented from taking risks due to insurance constraints. Actors featured in, say, a motorcycle chase are often restricted from accelerating past a certain speed. Stunt drivers or digital doubles are left to fill in the blanks for the cost-constrained actor.¹⁶³

According to an anonymous, above-the-line production crew member, Harris was well-qualified as a stuntwoman. Although *Deadpool 2* represented her first time on a movie set and as a stunt performer, Fox Studios mouthpieces sought to deflect suspicions that hasty casting caused her death. *Deadline*, an industry trade publication, reported the words of this same studio representative: “To say an unqualified person was put in this position is absolutely untrue. She was the best candidate for the job.”¹⁶⁴ The source adds that Harris did not ride directly on the stair steps, but on a ramp laid over the stairs and later removed in post-production. Further, the studio claimed she never rode her bike at speeds of more than 10 miles per hour and was afforded every reasonable safety measure in what should have been a simple maneuver.

“She rode on a flat surface through two open doors and then turned left and went out of camera range. Her exit was a safety ramp to a big platform where the bike was supposed to stop, but she overshot the platform, hit a curb, and was thrown from the bike through a glass window”.¹⁶⁵

This explanation eschews situating the studio as the responsible party. It also frames the job as simplistic, something easily accomplished. Therefore, Harris’ lack of experience is transformed into an ad hominem critique of her competency. She was chosen not because of her race and gender, nor because she possessed a particularly high level of skill. The studio, readers are to believe, carefully assessed her capabilities and assigned her to a rudimentary role befitting her limited experience. The doors were “open,” and all the rider had to do was coast through as directed. The fact that she was “the best candidate” turns from a surface level endorsement to a backhanded compliment that erases studio liability. Further, this rhetorical maneuver echoed in official interviews with *Deadpool 2* co-star Josh Brolin. The actor again reframed Harris’s labor role as something minimally dangerous and not a true risk, saying “We had somebody pass away on *Deadpool 2* and it was an absolute freak accident [. . .] it wasn’t even a stunt.”¹⁶⁶ He went on to add “It was a terrible thing that happened. Was it a nano-decision that she made in order to save the bike and this, you know what I mean? You could look into it all [these ways], but sometimes things just happen that are tragic.”¹⁶⁷

Brolin’s first statement reenacts a pattern seen in both studio and stunt performer reactions. It serves to distance Harris’s final stunt from genuine, authentic stunt work by recalling the presumed lack of difficulty involved in the ramp maneuver. The stunt was not “real,” and therefore should have posed no risk and no real intrigue under normal circumstances. Repeating the term “freak accident” urges the casual reader to consider the possibility that the death was an uncontrollable act of fate. Fox studios is absolved of all culpability in this framing. Casting not only chose correctly and exercised appropriate cautions, but the result was something

out of their control. However, the statement stops short of assigning total blamelessness. Responsibility, if it can be assigned at all, rests with Harris herself. Speculating that a “nano-decision that she made” could have caused the crash offers a sympathetic way of saying that she may have consciously decided to accelerate, preferring to stay upright rather than drop the bike and damage it. The equipment’s importance moves to the forefront, and readers are to believe that Harris would have logically seen the preservation of the studio’s bike as worth injury. Brolin’s ruminations and apparent soul-searching reflections are a veiled impetus to dismiss the value of further investigation. Harris herself is deprived of the daring risks that define her as a stuntwoman, albeit a new stuntwoman. Her purpose and status as a stunt performer evaporates once studio rhetoric ironically withdraws the danger inherent in the stunt work that killed her. In the aftermath of her death, she transforms one final time; not into a subsumed puzzle piece of a character, but into a body who did nothing more than ferry a studio-owned machine from one location to another. This, again, is the place where nothing ever happens and where there is nothing to see.

The Unwilling Stunt Actor

The impetus to avert one’s gaze wanes with time. Less than a year after Harris died, news of an older stunt crash made headlines. This case was different because it involved a star actor, and because that actor claimed that a director’s recklessness nearly killed her. She even posted footage of the failed stunt on YouTube. The video begins innocently enough. The passenger gazes forward from the backseat of a convertible. The top is down. Directly ahead is a blond head, bobbing side-to-side as wisps of hair flutter over the headrest. The blonde’s hands struggle with the steering wheel, which spins wildly. Palm trees and sand whip past the windshield. The car jolts to a stop and the driver’s body crumples, neck twisting at an odd angle. She clasps the

back of her head with one hand. Her knees jammed underneath the dashboard, she lies there frozen in position. Soon, the blonde is surrounded by several men who are trying to extract her from her seat. A man in a white t-shirt motions to the speedometer, mouthing inaudible words. He hands the blonde a water bottle, which she slowly grabs. The man helps her to her feet, and a nervous smile washes over her face as she stands. The man in sunglasses picks her up and carries her away from the crash. The woman holding her head is Uma Thurman, and she would suffer lifelong skeletal injuries in her neck and knees because of a fateful crash somewhere in the deserts of Mexico.¹⁶⁸

Thurman drove a repurposed 1973 Karmann Ghia, a car without any seatbelts. Despite repeated objections voiced to producers and director Quentin Tarantino, she found herself behind the wheel of what she would later describe as a “deathbox.”¹⁶⁹ There was, after all, a lot riding on this scene. She had already brought production to a grinding halt. Costing Miramax time and money was a cardinal sin even for a high-profile actress. She recalled Tarantino bursting into her trailer, livid that she had requested a stunt driver to take her place. He assured her that it was a straight shot, a simple maneuver on a dirt road. He assured her that there was nothing mechanically wrong with the car. Finally, he assured her that failing him would have consequences. “Hit 40 miles per hour or your hair won’t blow the right way and I’ll make you do it again,” the director allegedly promised her.¹⁷⁰

Kill Bill stunt coordinator Keith Adams and the second unit were not called to the set to oversee the driving scene, causing *The Hollywood Reporter* to speculate one whether Tarantino intentionally kept the stunt team at a distance in order to covertly pressure a star actor into a dangerous stunt. The director initially brushed off the incident, using language similar to the rationale many stunt performers would give over a decade later, when novice stunt driver SJ

Harris died filming *Deadpool 2*: “None of us ever considered it a stunt. It was just driving. None of us looked at it as a stunt. Maybe we should have, but we didn’t.”¹⁷¹

In 2018, stunt performer and coordinator Melissa Stubbs gave her thought on the *Kill Bill* revelations. If Stubbs’s name sounds familiar, it is because, years after Thurman’s accident, Stubbs would watch from the sidelines as Harris took her first and last Dukati ride. Stubbs’s take on *Kill Bill* is brief, yet revelatory. She emphasized that picture vehicles (those used for stunts on set) are usually “pieces of shit.”¹⁷² Thurman herself recalled that the car had been converted from stick to automatic shift, and the driver’s seat was coming unscrewed. There is currently no information available about the mechanical state of Harris’ stunt bike, and it would not be prudent to assume that it was in a poor condition. Common industry practices do often place stunt people in particularly broken-down vehicles, however. Thurman’s experience as an actor who was treated like a novice stunt performer sheds light on the average stunt worker’s susceptibility to exploitation. Moreover, it does so in a way that flouts easy dismissal, as Tarantino ultimately took responsibility for the incident. Sadly, SJ Harris’s case never found a responsible party. Neither was the case unceremoniously dismissed.

If above-the-line responses to a stunt death represent a predictable de-emphasis of stunt performance and a deflection of studio responsibility, it also bears acknowledging that Beetz, Reynolds and Brolin did something unusual. According to Martin, these actors’ level of public mourning cannot be viewed as typical. Beetz posted a handwritten note on her Instagram, which read “My heart has been breaking the past two days and I have been searching what to say or do. I know that what I feel is nothing compared to what her loved ones, family & family, are feeling. My heart and my love goes out to her and them all. The cast and crew send peace, healing, and their deepest condolences.”¹⁷³ Fox Studios halted production, releasing an official statement.

“We are deeply saddened by the accident that occurred on the set of *Deadpool 2* this morning. Our hearts and prayers are with the family, friends and colleagues of our crew member during this difficult time,”¹⁷⁴ a spokesperson told the press. Reynolds expressed his own condolences via Twitter, using similar language: “Today, we tragically lost a member of our crew while filming ‘Deadpool. We’re heartbroken, shocked and devastated ... but recognize nothing can come close to the grief and inexplicable pain her family and loved ones must feel in this moment. My heart pours out to them — along with each and every person she touched in this world.”¹⁷⁵ The actor later led the cast and crew in a moment of silence before production resumed two days later.¹⁷⁶ TMZ footage showed the cast and crew encircling Reynolds and bowing their heads in an almost religious-looking moment. The act acknowledges a death while simultaneously clearing the air of its consequences. Considered alongside press statements and regretful reveries, it is tempting to see these contrite figures and the public gesture they enact as possessed of a formulaic quality, as if going through the motions. At the same time, the act stands out because stunt labor exists to ensure that production continues in the face of injury and death. Stunt performers’ hospitalizations, particularly of those whose achievements have not earned them tens of thousands of YouTube followers, magazine interviews and a niche fandom, do not often stop production or generate press statements from star actors. SJ Harris was different because she entered the world of stunts with a celebrity of her own. This status partially explains why such attention circulated around her death, and it partly explains why members of the stunt community hesitated to call her a true stuntwoman.

Fox’s response, for all its apparent brevity, brought more of a spotlight to the tragedy than most doubles receive. Martin’s work displays this, following an anonymous stuntwoman called “Courtney.” When asked to describe dangerous stunts she had performed on set, Courtney

recounted leaping from the passenger door of a speeding truck. She fell flat on her face, bouncing off concrete and fracturing her skull and cheek bones in multiple places. She had been wearing a wig for the gag, which was attached to her scalp with the dreaded metal pins. These imbedded in her skin and bloodied the wig. This detail concerned wardrobe staff, who tried unsuccessfully to pry the wig from Courtney's head before an ambulance took her to the hospital. Her backup double would need to wear it so the camera crews could reshoot the scene on schedule.¹⁷⁷ These events are illustrative in several ways. They display that most stunt people work in a revolving door. If injured or killed, they are easily substituted. They also demonstrate that physical props are often more valued than the performers who wear them. As further discussed in the following chapter on CGI face replacement in *Logan* (2017), a convincing stunt double's job description does not fully end with the familiar "similar height, coloring and general appearance" requirements. Their silhouette must also be comparable to their actor, and wigs help create the illusion that two different people have the same skull contours. Similarity and the ability to authentically shape-shift into another person is the stunt double's true value to a studio. Doubles who regularly work with the same actor often reshape their noses, ears and calves through plastic surgery, all to better mimic the actor's body and thus the diegetic character's co-constitutive body.¹⁷⁸ The image of a team of studio staff attempting to detach a wig from a bloody double's head reinforces one more point. In many cases, key player and SAG member status fail to elevate the stunt performer's status beyond that of a second-tier wardrobe prop.

This observation is rooted in the stunt double's common history with the extra. Extras originally worked as stand-ins, body doubles and stunt performers as needed.¹⁷⁹ Their employability hinged on their likeness to an actor, and access to less expensive duplicates of the

star's wardrobe largely determined likeness. Their trade manifested on screen through long shots, which were dependent on silhouette for the illusion of sameness, and close-up shots of body parts. This expendability is at once exploitative and a part of the stunt's mystique.

Unknown warriors hurling themselves into harm's way for an ephemeral thrill, standing ever in flux between diegesis and nondiegesis, between avant garde and narrative, and between character and actor.

When the ambulance carrying SJ Harris's body pulled away from the film set, it left its light and sirens off.¹⁸⁰ Whether studio representatives specifically requested this or not is uncertain. This subtle act, though, reflects a greater willingness to de-emphasize stunt injury and to make invisible the real-world costs of the spectacles that captivate us. Failure to acknowledge the sacrifice behind filmic action is a failure to understand entertainment in our time. If we overlook stunt performers entirely and comfortably accept the notion that film production is a universally safe process requiring no further ethical inquiry from viewers, then we are not metaphorically leaving the lights on for these performers either. Awareness does not equate to a solution, but it is a tilt in the right direction.

CHAPTER 3: STUNTING DIGITAL GHOSTS IN *LOGAN* (2017)

“This joker’s a construct! A bag o’ parts!”

– *Wolverine, on discovering his robotic clone*¹⁸¹

“1871,” reads the date at the center of the black-and-white screen. The type fades as a pair of six shooters emerge, cloaked in thick smoke. Adorned with a hundred scrapes and notches, they appear small and toy-like in the large hands clutching them. Thumbs pull back hammers with a click. “His name was J.B. Books, and he had a pair of .45s with antique ivory grips that were something to behold,” a voice-over says. A young cowboy grins upward at two men on horseback. He draws his guns and shots ring out. The pair fall from their horses.

“1895” fades in and out. There is another extreme close-up of the mouth of a worn pistol, cascading into darkness. Now, a flash as smoke curls upward and another bang rings out. Books dives behind the churning wheels of a covered wagon, his lips stretched across gritted teeth. “I won’t be wronged, I won’t be insulted and I won’t be laid a hand on,” his voice growls as he fires blast after blast into the stomach of a would-be assailant. The man staggers and jerks back and forth as bullets tear through his body. “I don’t do these things to other people, and I require the same from them,” Books’ voice-over detachedly states.

As if waking from the throes of a violent fever-dream, blue-green mountains appear. A lone rider moves in the distance, and the plains surrounding him offer a stark contrast to the grainy, black-and-white sizzle reel of minutes prior. The figure makes its way toward the viewer, until a close-up of Book’s face centers in the shot. His cheeks sag and his sallow complexion heralds that of a man entering his final days. Yet, he is not fully spent. “Hold it right

there,” a voice snarls. A disheveled man clothed in furs points a shotgun at Books. “Hand over your wallet.” Books draws a stack of bills from his coat, then flips them into his sleeve. In a flash, a small gun is in his hand, and it fires. Blood leaks from a hole in the bandit’s stomach and he drops to his knees. Books, who is dying of rectal cancer, can still hold his own.¹⁸²

Permit a slight reality shift. Traversing across time and universes, viewers find themselves in the back of an old limousine. Their eyes carefully focus on a slumped figure who lies passed out on the leather seat. He shudders awake as the car jolts back and forth. Muttering vague obscenities, his feet hit the ground outside, teetering and dragging themselves toward the back of the car. A group of heavily-tattooed men, obviously a gang, is stealing the hubcaps. The man who woke from the back seat stammers out more incoherent, drunken speech and gestures to the tires as if to protest the ill-mannered nature of the act. One of the gang raises a Glock and shoots the man in the chest. “Pendejo,” the shooter sneers. He has already returned to unscrewing the lugnuts when the victim’s body lurches to its feet. “Guys,” the dead man slurs. “You seriously don’t want to do this.”

Raising both hands as if preparing for a bare-knuckle brawl, three metal claws slide from the dead man’s clenched fists. Each claw is a different length, giving his hands the look of unfolded Swiss army knives. The thugs pelt him with tire irons and his arms jitter with the impact. An assailant tackles him to the ground, and the others converge into a tornado of punches and swinging iron bars. The man turns over onto his stomach and his face twists with rage. He blasts a feral scream into the audience and swings his claws upward, lopping off an attacker’s hand. He slashes blindly at the group before finding his footing. From here, errant limbs sail through the air and claws stab into necks and foreheads. Soon, the entire gang lies motionless in a heap, while a lone survivor retreats in a nearby truck.¹⁸³

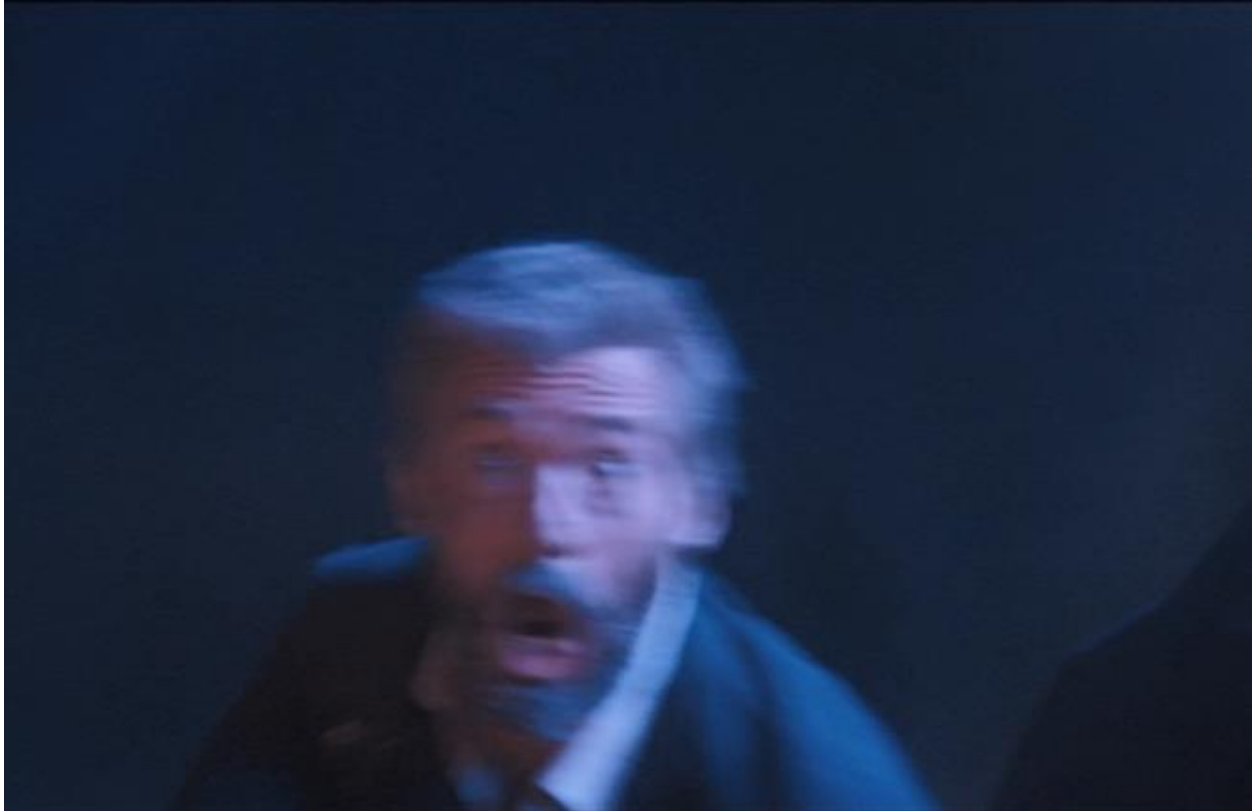


Figure 6: A ghostly Logan rushes his attackers¹⁸⁴

The first sequence belongs to *The Shootist* (1976), a film critics describe as a swan song to John Wayne's long career of playing cowboy heroes. These first three minutes tell audiences that an archetypal, mythic hero has lived his life and spent his youth. He nears his final reckoning. The ageing hero enters one final battle and goes out in the same fashion he has always lived. He ultimately dies fighting, as this is the only way he can die. The second sequence is from another swan song¹⁸⁵: the 2017 superhero film *Logan*. While critics commonly acknowledge the death of the Western and its gritty heroes, there is occasionally a film lauded as a temporary resurrection of a genre that, like its heroes, just cannot quite seem to fade into the sunset. *Logan* became the first Oscar-nominated superhero film in cinematic history¹⁸⁶ and was hailed as a revitalization of a long-deceased heroic trope. Wolverine stands in as the Western hero staving off his last gasp. Alienating, inhuman technologies encircle him. He and the

primarily Spanish-speaking X-23 (Dafne Keene) must travel from the Texas-Mexican border to escape into Canada. Cyborg mercenaries deployed by a shadowy corporation, one dedicated to engineering mutant slaves, hunt them. Automated grain threshers and self-driving trucks maintain Logan's world, and are seen whirring in the backgrounds of many scenes. *Logan's* narrative illustrates the phobias of corporate influence and technology exhibited across the Western genre.¹⁸⁷ The film's genre melding shows a malleable side of superhero genre film and its ability to absorb a range of other action genres. It also stands as a marker in the evolution of heroic characters, moving from cowboy to vigilante to superhero.

Tying all these generic threads together is stunt work's interaction with computer generated imagery and digital face replacement. These dual forces uneasily coexist to produce the grim, gritty old man Logan, his extraordinary bodily feats, and most importantly his brokenness. However, the very face replacement that makes Logan's stunts believable also returns stunt work to a hyper-invisible status, one not seen since the early star system. The CGI ghost whose reference is not fully drawn from star actor or stunt double disallows the viewer from searching for a gag rupture within a narrative realm. To study the stunt as a forbidden artifact in *Logan*, the stunt seeker instinctually turns to tactics of early film super fans. However, trade publications and reports situate *Logan's* stunt workers as bodies orbiting a computerized ghost. Stunt performers are no longer wholly invisible, but they do not enjoy the prominence achieved in the 1970s, either. Instead, they are pursued by a haunting force, a digital reassertion of narrative so perfect that it menaces the gag.

When considering the cowboy hero and his battered, beaten body that refuses to quit, one must ask "who badges this character?" In *The Shootist's* case, the answer seems obvious. It must be John Wayne. Who else is synonymous with the Western grit and heroic toughness that

defined all of Wayne's characters? Similarly, who can be called Wolverine besides Hugh Jackman? To move toward an answer is to consider that these swan-song Westerns are fundamentally about the withering and weathering of the human body. Logan's vaunted healing factor barely functions throughout the film. The narrative sees villains smash him apart at regular intervals, giving him just enough time to knit himself together before the same brutal process repeats. One scene, which follows on the heels of the opening carjacking, features Logan shirtless and hunched over a grimy bathroom sink. Far from representing the rugged vitality and strength of past *X-Men* films, his bare body is a coagulate of scar tissue and knotted bullet holes. His gaunt face stares back at him from a mirror. His hands leak pus. He winces as bullets push from his wounds and skitter down the drain. Logan's body is a synecdochal trace of his life as a killer. His decaying flesh represents the terrain upon which is mapped the suffering and tears of others – sometimes literally. Jackman's claws were metal props, and the actor has reported accidentally stabbing himself and his stunt people throughout his tenure as Wolverine.

The previous chapter discussed certain moments where stunt performer's faces became briefly visible within *Deadpool's* diegetic narrative. Indeed, the present discussion places considerable import on the critical viewer's ability to discern stunt ruptures and the increased difficulty of doing so in *Logan*. Critically seeking the stunt is not just a matter of whimsy, and it is not merely a cinephilic pastime. It extends beyond connoisseurship and into investigative realms. The viewer practices an art of "seeing" at moments where story demands spectatorial blindness. Failure to "see" means viewers are swept into directorial intent. They turn away from cinema's behind-the-scenes mechanisms. However, cinema always flaunts these mechanisms in some way, as they can prove as spectacular to behold as the narrative itself. We shall return

to this cinematic ghosting during a discussion of CGI in *Logan*. First, it is helpful to begin with an understanding of the meaning behind seeing and its roots in the avant-garde.

The Avant-Garde Finds Wolverine

Following Apollinaire's declaration that in "periods of redundancy, disciplines settle on unaltered messages,"¹⁸⁸ I examine superhero genre and its repetition. I am here applying Apollinaire to a pattern. Superhero films and Westerns alike follow formulaic stories, the bones of which are often derivative. Marvel and DC comics' properties have aped one another since the 1930s, drawing from a similar pool of artists and writers. The comics as source material bequeath their greatest pitfall to the films they inspire. This does not explain fully why critics deride these films as rehash, however. Even when a superhero film appears to break its own generic confines, as in the case of *Logan*, its narrative cannot be fully dubbed surprising, original, or avant-garde. For all its critical praise, *Logan* is a reinvention. It repackages Western tradition in the guise of its superhero successor; claws for guns, a hero's uniformly punctured and tenderized body, dramatic sunsets and grit unto death. Superhero genre merits an avant-garde examination because it has been grafted to other genres. Similarly, stunts merit such examination because characters in these films are a grafting of actor, stunt performer, and digital ghost. Seeking "unaltered messages" means to gaze upon what lies behind narrative and what seeps in from the peripheries of the camera itself.

As Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige would have it, the genre that is not genre becomes boundless and expands, formless, to suit anything viewers' appetites may desire. Its lack of definition is its authenticity, which is tied to its ability to rise from the purview of connoisseurship or geekdom and achieve the status of staple entertainment. Superhero genre is not what it appears. It gains authenticity from contradiction, and its vantage points it to peer ever

upward at the genres under which it lies, subsumed. This is how superhero genre can be thought of as avant-garde, as its continued longevity demands that critics cease to see it for what it is. It is hyper-visible and trying to be invisible. Feige's trajectory for superhero films displays the power and purpose in being visibly invisible. As Barthes wrote, "the future of the avant-garde must be the gag,"¹⁸⁹ and a very specific gag in the case of action-driven films. The source of superhero film's avant-garde must be the stunt because generic grafting has, like the stunt person to the actor, vanished narrative genre before our eyes. *Logan's* cinematic and DVD release may be likened to a Western, but the film skips through classifications. It is worth noting that *Logan's* pre-release marketing campaign featured cryptic posters of Wolverine, Professor X and Caliban caste in black-and-white. Two months after the theatrical release, Fox collaborated with the Alamo Drafthouse theater chain to show a one-day-only, fully black-and-white version. Alamo's CEO, Tim League, commented that the new presentation enhanced "western and noir vibes" within the film. Attendees wearing black-and-white were offered a similarly-colored commemorative poster.¹⁹⁰ *Logan's* Blu-ray release features the Alamo cut, titled "Logan Noir" in the menu.¹⁹¹ A superhero film is thus a Western and a noir film at once.

Robert Ray writes, "what cannot be read threatens."¹⁹² What is not read is missed because of anonymity, and this anonymity generates an archetypal grafting. A common set of character traits are ascribed to multiple individuals. In *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, this unfolds in the individual's unidentifiability and resulting temptation to commit crimes in a crowded setting. The first detective story, Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, materialized in the crowded French cities of the 1840's. "The man of the crowd" and his menace were subsumed under stereotypes, as a print series called the *physiologies* attempted to accomplish with language. The short books offered text-based descriptions of a typical banker, vagrant, butcher and so forth.¹⁹³ Their goal

was to cut through anonymity by filling out the empty vessels bustling along a sidewalk. Knowing something, or at least believing one knew about total strangers allowed the viewer to search for and identify certain types. As Ray highlights, Derrida similarly references another Poe story, *The Purloined Letter*, deducing that the way to mask something is to hide it in plain sight.¹⁹⁴ This can be understood as a method of engaging text where the narrative takes on a conspiratorial element. The audience who would discern stunt work, much like Poe's detectives, is invited to engage in a paranoiac searching of the image. However, there is one important difference between a detective story and a conspiracy film. A detective seeks the singular, ill-identifiable villain figure in the crowd. The conspiracist inverts this and is often a borderline villainous, outsider type who gazes in on a hydra-like, collective establishment.¹⁹⁵

Paranoiacs and Conspiracists

Both perspectives are relevant to the stunt. In *Deadpool*, the viewer plays detective in diegetic context and conspiracist when considering cases where stunt people are mistreated behind the scenes. To attempt a paranoiac reading of *Logan* as a film is impossible; try as the viewer might, no stunt ruptures appear. They dissolve beneath the digital approximations of Hugh Jackman, Nayah Murphy and other actors. Digital interference nullifies the paranoiac detective, whose discerning gaze is here limited to locating stunt ruptures within diegesis. Semiotics enclose the paranoiac's domain and habit of seeing, just as patrons of the *physiologies* sought to understand the surrounding world through scrutinizing printed archetypes and grafting them onto real-life body images. If the detective in question instead examines paratexts to understanding how and why the film industry's evolving strategies hide stunt labor, the conspiratorial detective must take over. While *Deadpool*'s use of masks and manifested space leaves narrative gaps through which stunt faces peer, *Logan* is not that kind of superhero movie.

The protagonist never wears his stylized comic book mask; instead, his doubles wear his face. *Logan*'s stunt work cannot be examined in the same fashion as *Deadpool* because "you never knew [the stunt people] were there."¹⁹⁶ The paranoiac, blinded in *Logan*, thereby gives way to a conspiracist successor.

With respect to the stunt gag, it is not so much an object sought, but a tear and a rupture in narrative continuity and in suspension of disbelief. The searching itself expresses an affective tension within the viewer. Elsaesser identified this concept as the viewer's fixation with an image that reveals itself and opens up. The interested spectator is left waiting around, looking for the opening. The viewer already locked into this obsessive gaze veers constantly between absorption in diegesis and a compulsive sifting-through of cinematic mechanism. Attention splits because the plot always beckons, no matter the viewer's effort expended toward focusing solely on detecting the gag. Therefore, the stunt gag refuses full separation from narrative and cannot/ is not meant to stand on its own. Its essence is interruption and a splintered kind of seeking.

The advent of mass-produced visual images and photography, while appearing to counter such broad generalizing, actually reinforced it. The glut of detail contained within the semiotic image may have been intended to produce an exact and objective representation of reality. However, images are twisted to serve the same purpose as text, and in making sense we make narrative. Narrative revolves around an enduring trope and timeless characters, hence the utility in type-casting even random strangers. I bear this technological "revenge effect"¹⁹⁷ in mind in examining the stunt in *Logan*. The double cannot be diegetically read, as it is narrative authenticity's menace. Viewing it on-screen threatens an audience's ability to suspend disbelief, and it diminishes the connection between star actor and heroic character. Hence, there is tension between the diegetically anonymous stunt player and actor.

Anything to do with real-looking injury rests in part with stunt performers. Stunt work's authenticity and connection to character began in early Western films, reaching its height in vigilante films of the 1970s. Logically, the key players who bruise their bodies for the role should badge a diegetic character defined by toughness. *Logan's* use of pioneering computer-generated imagery techniques shuts stunt work out of the spotlight, repositioning a digital hybrid of actor and stunt performer at center stage. Stunt critics may be tempted to view this as a revisiting of the old star system, where the actor appeared as sole proprietor of heroic authenticity. This is a mistake. The face audiences see during key action scenes may appear to be Hugh Jackman, but it is often not. The digital threatens to hedge out both actor and stuntman while masquerading as a return to the star system.

From Cowboy to Vigilante to Superhero

Jacob Smith's 2004 article, "Stunts and Masculinity," was the first to draw a parallel between film projections of the Western Cowboy's mythic heroism and the stunt's authentic, behind-the-scenes daring. In the figure of Yakima Canutt (John Wayne's stunt double), audiences witnessed a "literal connection to the old West,"¹⁹⁸ whereas the famous actor Canutt doubled wore the cowboy myth's public face. Charleton Heston credited Canutt with making himself and John Wayne look good on screen, and with "doing whatever [the actor] can't do in front of or behind the camera."¹⁹⁹ Stunt men became increasingly visible in paratexts, stars in their own right, during the latter days of the Vietnam era. Rather than the Western Cowboy myth that brought Canutt to prominence, stuntmen of the 70's made their mark through the vigilante. Smith points out a scene from *Deathwish* (1973), in which Charles Bronson's character watches a fake gunfight in a theater.

The image of Western heroes shooting each other down births Bronson's epiphany that pursuing "the old ways"²⁰⁰ is the best method of dispatching criminals. Justice and masculine heroism is self-reliant vigilantism, as in the old West. There is no intercessor standing between this brand of hero and his (and it is most often "his") thirst for retribution. Polite society may be content to allow proxies to mete out violence on their behalf. The vigilante permits no such interference. Traditional stand-ins like law enforcement and courts proffer a diluted justice, one that robs the hero of real catharsis at best. At worst, the system itself is corrupt and ignores or covers up injustice. The seeking of direct, visceral justice and revenge is the hero's way of subverting those who offer a poor imitation of vengeance; it is a way to get around those officials and sanctioned authorities who attempt and fail to badge the image of a hero. In similar fashion, the stunt performer can be read as authentic repository of the brutal action that signifies mythical heroes, while the actor becomes a studio-sanctioned intercessor who would take the face of authenticity rather than genuinely embody it (literally by possessing a diegetic face).

If stunts and stunt performers' uncanny abilities became more heroic than the actor's persona during the rise of the once-great Western film genre, then a fuller understanding of current day stunts begins with the Western's postmodern counterpart. Steven Spielberg, if not the first to publicly connect the Western genre to the superhero film, is certainly the most well-known director to do so. Musing on popular culture's cyclical nature, Spielberg predicted that the Superhero film's soaring popularity would plunge once moviegoers became too inundated with spandex and capes. He appeared to question the existence of superhero-as-genre itself. Beneath the veneer of masks like "Western" or "Superhero" film, an enduring heroic myth exists. It may find expression in a ten-gallon hat and a stagecoach or spiked hair and metallic claws; but it is fundamentally the same archetype. "There will come a day when the

mythological stories are supplanted by some other genre [. . .]”, Spielberg said.²⁰¹ His comments precipitated the term “superhero fatigue”²⁰² in popular media, a prediction that has not yet come to pass at the time of this writing.

Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige took this theory further. Reaffirming that superhero genre does not exist, Feige pointed to the diversity of action narratives in Marvel films. *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), he insisted, was a geopolitical spy thriller first and foremost. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) represented a broader action sci-fi story. Feige’s larger philosophy was that the comic literature could supply any genre for the big screen. Regarding media prophecies on superhero fatigue, he commented “I think it’s the same thing as saying [. . .] ‘ I think people are going to be bored with novels being turned into movies.’”²⁰³ Here, a good comic book movie contains a degree of narrative borrowing, or Dudley Andrews’ idea that frequently reappearing characters claim the status of myth and may therefore transfer to film through a story that pays general homage to their lore.²⁰⁴ They are ultimately adaptations of literary works, just as their characters are adaptations of the same heroic myths that once inspired the Western gunslinger and vigilante. If this is the case, the hero’s cinematic world must “accurately” represent the lore from which it springs. To accomplish this with believable authenticity, the athletic stunt performer partly configures the hero’s icon.

Stunt work’s history contains many stunt performers who built their careers in both Western and comic book-related TV and film, particularly in the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s. Dick Durock, a one-time marine and computer scientist, performed stunts on Western-themed shows like *Westworld* (1973), as well as films like *Bronco Billy* with Clint Eastwood (1980) and *Silverado* (1985). His trademark flattened nose lent a unique authenticity to his later role in bringing comic writer Alan Moore’s patently noseless *Swamp Thing* to life (1982). He also

performed stunts on another early superhero film, Marvel's *Howard the Duck* (1986).²⁰⁵ Fred Waugh's expertise in aerial cinematography and trapeze stunts landed him a coordinator role in *The Amazing Spider-Man* TV series (1977). Prior to this, he worked on Western-themed films like *Paint Your Wagon* (starring Eastwood, 1969), *The Undefeated* (1969) and *Little Big Man* (1970).²⁰⁶

From the Neck Down

The myth, as Spielberg and Feige allude to, is something that runs deeper than creative expressions that draw from it. It always upholds a physically capable hero who appears to defy injury and balk at risk. Stunt performers should bear the standard of this hero, as they most closely embody what viewers demand and expect of the hero's myth. Smith encapsulates the friction between authentic stunt acts and studio conceptions of the actor's stardom: "Studios had to hide the potential fragmentation of the stunt performer's physical labor; the star's face was sutured to the stunt body."²⁰⁷ This notion of suturing appears in popular criticism as well. A review of Paul Brodeur's novel, *The Stunt Man*, (which inspired Richard Rush's eponymous 1980 comedic thriller) comments that "Hollywood has a saying about stuntmen. You hire them from the neck down."²⁰⁸ The reviewer goes on to highlight a passage from Brodeur's work in which stunt people are likened to "200 pounds of hamburger and a blond wig,"²⁰⁹ and comments on the faceless quality created by edited action sequences. "Actors impersonate characters; stunt men (and women) impersonate actors impersonating characters [. . .] no other members of a movie crew so embody the illusions that go into moviemaking."²¹⁰ The filmic stunt, then, is always directed away from itself. Stunt work becomes increasingly palimpsest when considering behind-the-scenes production elements, and with this layered quality goes a murkiness and

obscurity. It is telling that Canutt remains the only stunt performer or coordinator in Hollywood history to receive Oscar recognition.²¹¹

The stunt's multi-layered, nebulous aspect extends beyond the studio and into the legal world of intellectual property. There is some question over whether a filmed stunt sequence constitutes a copyright, a trademark, or neither. A copyright usually refers to a unified work, the narrative in a film for example. Trademark governs specific characters and their symbols (i.e., Spiderman and his costume's stylized, black spider insignia).²¹² Legal uncertainty surrounds intellectual ownership of a stunt or stunt sequence, and stunt performers cannot be said to definitively own their performances on screen or their techniques. Canutt, for instance, developed a stagecoach chase scene originally used in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). The *Zorro* (1957) TV series made it increasingly famous, and its filmed segments were lifted and patched into movies throughout the following decades. Some of these included *Little Big Man* (1970), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1982) and *Maverick* (1994).²¹³ While Canutt as stuntman/coordinator created the stagecoach sequence by applying cinematic montage techniques in a way that was crucial to narrative and therefore more closely aligned with an outright attraction than a self-contained gag,²¹⁴ legal ownership of any stunt sequence remains undefined. Even decades after the films referenced above, *Logan's* credits do not recognize stunt double Eddie Davenport as the man who played Wolverine's evil clone. Credit instead goes to Hugh Jackman, and the reason for this resides with digital stunt doubles.

Digital Faces, Digital Ruptures

The stunt performer's kinetic movements, as they were in the Western genre, are the wellspring of believability and authenticity in superhero genre narratives. CGI ideally acts in a way complementary to this physical/practical baseline through motion and performance capture.

When the technological side of this interplay is perceptibly unreal within an already unreal-yet-realistic universe, then the rupture. The stitches between stunt performer, actor and CGI become exposed, all because a digital face moved too woodenly. One need scarcely look further than repulsed critical reactions to Carrie Fisher's de-aged, digital face in *Star Wars: Rogue One* (2016), or outrage over recently deceased actor Paul Walker's digital face being superimposed onto a double in *Furious 7* (2015). Critics described the former as "distracting" and a feature that made "even the most sycophantic fan hesitate to applaud."²¹⁵ John Knoll, CCO of George Lucas's visual effects studio, Industrial Light and Magic, commented "making digital humans is one of the hardest things you can do [. . .] we look at human faces every day, so people are very attuned to anything that looks off."²¹⁶ Few stunt performers are recognizable enough to impact audiences in this precise way. Beyond recognizing bad CGI, the distraction of recognizing a digital alteration of human stunt performance has broader implications for audience affect and stunt performer recognition alike.

Despite its tumultuous relationship with human doubles and actors, studios have championed CGI as a safety feature for stunt performers. Read with some hindsight in mind, a 1995 joint panel conference between Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) and Kleiser-Walczak Construction Co. suggests that the realistic, close-up digital actors seen in *Logan* represent the level of refinement that digital synthespians were always meant to achieve. "The level of detail required to create a convincingly realistic person varies directly as a function of the distance of the person to the camera [. . .] 'acting' in the pure sense of the word requires the camera to be at least in the proximity of a two-shot, and the industry is on the verge of this capability," the panel's transcript declares in its introduction.²¹⁷ Readers may be forgiven for sensing a somewhat eerie tone in the overall document, as its contributors speak of human stunt performers and actors

as if they were a temporary nuisance waiting to be edited out once the proper advancements materialize. The impetus in the mid-1990s was to move from life-like, distant stunt synthespians to up-close, digital actors. Safety, cost, the difficulty of gathering a large enough mob scene for crowd shots and the impossibility of achieving certain stunts with “a live human being”²¹⁸ are cited as reasons for incorporating more digital characters in action sequences.

ILM founder Jeff Light upholds synthespian doubles as a logical extension of the historical stunt doubles that have been with cinema since its birth. “The use of puppets, dummies or stunt persons as stunt doubles has been practiced since the beginning,”²¹⁹ he says, interestingly (if unsurprisingly) lumping living stunt workers in with the dummies who preceded them as stand-ins. Stunt workers are here situated as a human blip in a genetic evolution of primarily inhuman homunculi; one whose spirit moved first through plastic and cloth, then took a brief detour into the realm of guts, muscle, brain and bone. The postmodern manifestation of this doubling “ka” is to return to inhumanity, but to return while carrying a convincing image of the flesh cast off and left behind. The goal of this primitive digital double was the same in 1995 as now. In Light’s words, “The modeling, animation, and rendering must blend seamlessly with surrounding shots.”²²⁰ The audience should never be aware that an effect has replaced an actor. Another panelist, Shahril Ibrahim, took this further by looking forward to the day when the digital double moved in from the realm of long shots and became a star actor in the foreground. Plantinga’s manifested space, then, is seen as the result of digital technology’s infant state. Once fully matured and capable of replicating details like hair, clothing and human motion, this space between double and spectator would naturally shorten. The final panelist, Pacific Data Images’ Richard Chuang, lays out the case for the digital double’s superiority to the stunt performer. “What is the difference between replacing a highly-paid actor with a stunt double, and having a

performer's data captured digitally and used to create a digital double? In both instances, production creatives are hoping to match the performance qualities of the principal actor without subjecting them to [. . .] dangerous scenes."²²¹

The Skein of Vibrations

Artaud's connection between actor and athletic double journeys beyond audience affect. He identifies humanity as itself a double. The great athlete-actor recognizes that he is but a conduit for an essence even greater; "The plastic and never completed specter, whose form the actor apes, on which he imposes the forms and image of his own sensibility."²²² This athlete-actor gives form to archetypes contained in the audience's collective psyche and, indeed, to those passed down through the sum of human history. The double's vast memory is rooted in the audience's visceral surroundings, and the audience's soul is "a skein of vibrations."²²³ The soul-specter's double in the form of athletic actor speaks to the audience through affective means.

Elsaesser's work on narrative and suture adds some historical detail to this framing. Narrative finds its roots in an omnipotent gaze that separates viewers from responsibility for their physical presence in a space and time.²²⁴ In other words, this conception of spectatorship removes viewers from the need to think about their own bodies and surroundings. An audience immersed in narrative is also asked to accept the removal of the stunt body from diegetic characters through the process of suturing. Primary identification with the camera's gaze, and by extension the narrative itself, renders secondary identification with diegetic characters irrelevant.²²⁵ Already the audience is encouraged not to scrutinize fissures in the character, which in turn aids the actions of suture. According to Stephen Heath's suture theory, combining the camera and spectator's gazes equates to an ideological movement and is the reason ruptures in diegesis fail to break the bonds of primary identification. "It disguises how this fusion and

reversal are brought about, and at what cost, making it inherently unstable,”²²⁶ Elsaesser writes. While narrative keeps itself intact, it is perpetually splitting apart and reforming, creating an anxious friction within the audience’s immersion. Tensions arise because, on some level, the audience knows that what they see (or are asked to see) through primary identification is something passed from director to spectator. This is Heath’s concept of the “perfect eye,” or the gaze the director intends for the audience. All that can be seen, is seen, the perfect eye suggests to the patron. Rupturing back into one’s immediate surroundings “engenders a sense of loss in the viewer,” and leads to a “cinema of displeasure.”²²⁷ Students of film may sense a connection with the avant-garde here, as displeasure seeps from moments when the ideologies of conflation and suture are shuttered. It is precisely this realm of denial that the stunt operates within. To fully understand the stunt’s mechanism in a film like *Logan*, which is designed more than most superhero films to hide the stunt in up-close detail, viewers must see that which perfection dictates should remain unseen for the sake of coherent narrative.

The stunt’s menace to narrative is mediated through editing and the audience’s assuredness that the only objects seen are the only narratively significant objects. CGI helps massage stunt incongruities into a streamlined story in ways impossible in the 1970s and early 80’s. Face replacement, a performance capture technique, enables successive close-up shots of Stanton Barrett driving Wolverine’s car in *Logan*. The potentially dangerous chase scene features Barrett whipping a stretch limousine back and forth across a dirt road, fishtailing the back wheels. He charges in front of an oncoming train, narrowly escaping a caravan of mutant-hunting Reavers. One image from this scene was repeatedly printed in industry paratexts. The photo shows Barrett’s face in side profile as he readies himself to fling the car into its tire-screeching ballet. Taken in isolation, this image generates what Ray calls “inner speech.”²²⁸

Barrett, framed in the car window, gritting his teeth and gripping a steering wheel as desert landscape screams past. The audience does not know this stunt actor (because they are not meant to), and so this slice of his on-screen work could represent any story: a CIA agent pursuing a drug lord, a gambler fleeing a casino, a homeless man living in his car.

Yet, this shot is a behind-the-scenes peek and does not appear on screen. What audiences see are shots of a CGI Wolverine's side profile edited over Barrett's face. The shots are quick and motion-blur provides an added cover for the trick. The stunt becomes not as much a punctum in the narrative, but a reservoir of stories cast aside. Neither is the stunt cloaked in CGI fully a standalone art form. It is instead a waypoint between sequences and a stitch in the linear narrative fabric. Artaud's "tyranny of narrative" suggests that violent, kinetic motions are de-emphasized, swept beneath and absorbed into plot. Whereas in the past, a rack shot or long shot might have provided cover for the stuntman's interruptive performance, now CGI enables a relative close-up without affective rupture. Barrett hides between cuts, and he is scarcely discernable when viewing the car chase sequence. To allow "inner speech" to resonate within the spectatorial self, one must resist narrative as Barthes resisted cinema by dropping into random screenings halfway through and departing for another screening. The stunt's art form interrupts, and a viewer who would see the stunt engages interruption within their own mind. They send narrative to the background through viewing cinema in its truer form, as a chopped-up collection of uncontextualized images. Ray suggests this approach as a method for near-tactile study of images. We focus on details and punctums. Despite assumptions that only narratively important objects find their way into shots, distracting details bloom when one's viewing method is both non-sequential and incomplete. Detail becomes the way to "touch" the grain of a projected image and to sense its unpalpable topography.

Watching for a stunt sequence in a narrative, as opposed to in a stunt reel, represents a parallel viewing experience. One no longer sees the film as intended studio product, but instead a shadow film. We cannot help but wonder about this person. The performer phases into reality long enough to absorb wounds, then phases out, leaving an unharmed double behind. That we cannot fully or reliably distinguish when one body replaces another heightens interest in telling details. Did we see, for the briefest seconds, our hero suspiciously changing height and facial features? Detection becomes our new viewing directive. Immersion in the main narrative is redirected to a counter non-narrative, an alternate reality operating under rules that privilege the rupture of aggravating detail, gag, montage; film flipped on its head. We shift through this lens and find ourselves submerged in narrative castoffs and sheddings. A boneyard of calcified energies below the story's surface. In this place, the stunt people and their incomplete stories pass before us. In Barrett's chase, a telltale sheen on the surface of Logan's CGI skin serves as one of the few visual indicators that the character is someone other than Hugh Jackman in this moment. If we considered the stuntman as a diegetic character, would we not wonder where he disappears to once his dangerous, punishing sequences are completed? Having asked the question, would it not haunt us?

Crediting the Specter

Of course, stunt performer's roles are not limited to enduring hits. Eddie Davenport plays *Logan's* main villain, X-24. A digital reproduction of Jackman's face is edited over the double's face in post-production. It is significant that this role went to a second-unit member rather than to an above-the-line actor. The X-24 character is a younger clone of the ageing Wolverine. He appears as a youthful doppelganger of Freudian mold, heralding death for the film's protagonist as doubles so often do. If interpreted as a Jungian shadow, one that "contains negative aspects

one cannot fully admit into consciousness,”²²⁹ X-24 holds implications for the stuntman hidden beneath digital skin. These implications, like the stunt itself, resist full assimilation into narration. They refract between diegetic character X-24 and the hidden stuntman who was not specifically credited as the character whose bodily movements he provided. Rather, the film’s credits show Jackman as “Logan / X-24.”²³⁰ Stuntmen Eddie Davenport, Daniel Stevens and Antal Kalik are simply credited as “stunt double: Hugh Jackman” or “stunt double: Hugh Jackman reshoots.”²³¹ The film gives them no official claim to the main villain’s diegetic character, whereas Ryan Reynolds’s stuntmen in *Deadpool* were credited as “stunt double: Ryan Reynolds / Deadpool.” Both films exist within Marvel’s X-Men universe and both are Fox Studios productions. Yet, this subtle crediting difference speaks volumes about the stunt’s relationship with narrative and the avant-garde. This is best articulated through the difference between a character’s mask and an actor’s digital skin.

X-24 tracks Logan to a remote farmhouse, appearing above the sleeping Professor X as if materializing from a nightmare. His first act is to kill Xavier by plunging three adamantium claws into his chest. He expressionlessly walks downstairs and drifts past Logan, whose mouth hangs open in disbelief. This scene, as well as the multiple trade magazines trumpeting the VFX studio Imagine Engine’s CGI achievements, lays bare the gulf between digital synthespian doubles and stunt doubles. Whereas pre-70’s stunt doubles were deemphasized in order to uphold the star actor as coterminous with the heroic character,²³² a synthespian double like X-24 is there to soak up audience’s slack-jawed amazement. It is there for industry paratexts to promote its realistic look, its lifelike eyes, and the roadmap of creases, pores and scars adorning its visage. As Smith observes, in this digital context the stuntman is sutured to the star actor and the diegetic character, so that “the stunt performer disappears even more profoundly, literally

erased under a digital mask.”²³³ The digitally doubled character who kills its original becomes something nefarious when considered as a narrative element. It represents the extreme stunt invisibility and lack of credit that dominated the old star system. Stunt performers were little more than hidden springboards for studio-minted heroic actors. CGI techniques like this are the reason stunt work has not experienced a modern revolution in visibility to surpass 1970s advances like crediting and paratextual interviews. Although current studio trends demand authentically brutal and physical stunts rather than wholly-CGI dummies clacking around a created space, this push does not unfailingly lead to greater recognition of stunt people within diegesis or in the world of paratexts.



Figure 7: Logan and X-24, Jackman and Davenport²³⁴

Lisa Bode writes about another long-running studio pattern. Publicity surrounding a film assures viewers that no doubles took part in a particularly taxing physical exercise; a star actor carried out the performance without the assistance of a double or the editorial trickery enabling a double’s work. She focuses on press and studio statements touting Natalie Portman’s supposedly

authentic dancing in *Black Swan* (2010). After the film's release, professional dancer Sarah Lane revealed that most of the dance sequences were simply Portman's face digitally edited over her maneuvers. This revelation generated scathing critical backlash. Yet, the same cannot be said of the unnamed stuntman who is subsumed beneath Jackman's digitally de-aged face.

Why then is the transference of a niche skill from double to actor regarded as scheming and duplicitous when a stunt double's entire body may be disguised as an actor without any complaint? This has to do with views of stunt people as generalists rather than specialists. If a trained dancer who spent decades perfecting their art substitutes in for an actor's body while credit goes to the actor, there is outrage. No one would become similarly incensed upon realizing that an uncredited stunt performer supplied X-24's bodily feats. Again, this touches on what studio mouthpieces implied after SJ Harris's death: anyone on a bike *could* have done the stunt.

The stunt double's role as a sponge for pain and injury reduces their labor to a form of service. They are there for the actor's convenience and to save studio dollars. The actor could take their own hits and risks if necessary, we are to assume. It is harder to believe that an actor could, as was proclaimed of Portman's dancing, master ballet in under a year.²³⁵ What skills are truly involved in merely plugging into a character role and taking punishment? However, the stunt performer's art is rebounding from pain and moderating repetitious injury. It is also in amassing a wealth of techniques to stay alive and employable. A stunt performer will not spend decades learning how to dance, but they will spend decades learning how to fall, fight and leap through a windshield without being seriously hurt. A stunt performer may be credited as a super-heroic character in cases like *Deadpool*, whereas Portman's dance double went uncredited for her work. However, there is no critical outrage when a stunt performer's work is erased, leading to a scene where lay audiences have no reason to think an actor did not perform a specific stunt.

The “Logan’s Run” sequence and surrounding media fanfare help illustrate this point, as does the fact that no stunt people were given credit for the X-24 character.

Logan’s Run

The sequence in question takes place toward the film’s end. With the Reavers close behind, Logan and Laura/X-23 flee to a remote outpost on the Canadian border. They meet a group of mutant children also hounded by the mercenaries. By this point, Logan’s body is breaking down and the kids have to carry him to an abandoned house. After days of slipping in and out of a coma-like sleep, Logan awakens to find the kids gone and a swarm of drones buzzing across the sky. He runs into the forest. ATVs crash through the underbrush, pursuing the world’s few remaining mutants. It is worth noting here that the Logan who intervenes in this chase scene has injected himself with a drug that temporarily enhances physical capabilities. For most of the film, he is gaunt, out of shape, frail; his flesh appears to hang off his skeleton. The Logan who appears in the “Logan’s Run” sequence echoes the Wolverine from the previous *X-Men* movies. He suddenly appears full-bodied, sprinting and weaving between trees, snarling as he cuts into hired goons. While the drug supplies a narrative rational for the transformation, in reality Logan’s head is a digital facsimile while the body belongs to Eddie Davenport. Upon seeing test footage of the “Run,” Jackman joked that he got to have bigger arms in the scene without any extra training.²³⁶

Aside from diegetic drugs, Davenport’s switch-outs are covered in another way. Key shots depicting a fully digital puppet feature a heavily blurred Logan, always from a middle-shot with the character enacting an explosive motion. He ducks machine gun fire, wildly swinging his claws and hacking at the Reavers. The Run’s conclusion shows the digital puppet catapulting through the air, trees whizzing past. It sinks claws into a screaming gunman’s chest. Without

consulting paratextual articles, no narrative rupture exists here. The puppet jumps in a perfectly believable way. The next shot reconfirms the connection between blurred body-in-motion and actor, showing a close-up of Jackman's face twisted in a feral scream. The sequence holds together because of instability of form and image, where Wolverine's face, not just his wildly ambulating limbs, is blurred. The oscillating stuntman / actor / digital puppet body represents a phantom inside the perfect eye or the spirit inside the film. It is a haunted screen image wherein the mechanism behind perfection reasserts itself in the same way that early film emphasized the devices and funding needed to create spectacle. This ghost in the directorial eye is the spectral force that cannot truly make itself available in the symbolic realm, but tries to force its way through in parallel forms and blur. Whissel elucidates another purpose of the digital creature: aside from mediating performances of actors and stunt people through motion capture, its fundamental function is to animate the inanimate, to bring "dead" practical effects objects (and sometimes dead actors) to diegetic life. "The synthespian pursues life with great determination, as it pursues its often human prey."²³⁷

The Tesseract of Wolverine

The otherworldly realm of blur characterizes a CGI puppet's rapid movements. Blur's ubiquitous use in action sequences should not detract from its importance and larger symbolism. Viewed properly, it becomes the ultimate morphing effect, and the reasoning behind this observation stems from photographic origins. Logan acts like his character largely because a digital puppet is there to take up any slack and cover over inconsistencies in shifts between actor and double. This framing crystallizes in the cinematic morph. Fisher observes that morphing is inherently contradictory, since it relies on a baseline form whose dimensions are stretched and twisted with each new movement through time. The author cites Frampton's late nineteenth-

century writings on long-exposure photographs of water. Frampton concerned himself with photographers who made a habit of what was largely seen as a novice's error at the time: those who purposely over exposed photos of liquids to capture "a strange, ghostly substance that is in fact the tesseract of water."²³⁸ Essentially, evidence of motion blur is here read as a connection to a higher plane of existence. Blurred images effectively mask CGI characters on film, but they also hint at the sum total of that character's bodily movements.

Filmgoers could be forgiven for not recognizing the word "tesseract" prior to the release of *The Avengers* (2012). The dictionary definition of a tesseract is a "hypercube," or one that stretches from the third dimension to the fourth. Fisher adds that the cube is merely a template for the fourth dimensional extension of any 3-D object.²³⁹ In *Avengers*, it is the glowing blue cube Thor's evil brother Loki used to defy the laws of physics, tearing a hole in reality and allowing an alien horde to invade New York. Loki is known to inhabit a range of forms in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, ranging from his human body (as played by Tom Hiddleston), his father Odin, and his blue-skinned, red-eyed frost giant form. The trickster god uses the tesseract or cosmic cube to make reality as fluid as his own being. While Loki is far-removed from Logan's universe, the two figures share a grounding in morph. Since one of the Logan character's three aspects is a CGI apparition (in addition to actors and stunt doubles), the nature of his morph comes from blur. Blur as a haunting condition finds roots in a semi-mystical mathematical concept dating back to Georg Bernard Riemann's 1854 treatise on hyperspace.

To contextualize why the hypercube is represented as a CGI creation able to bend reality, it is helpful to understand something of the fourth dimension. As Fisher points out, Riemann reasoned that if two-dimensional life-forms existed on a sheet of paper, which was then crumpled up into a mess of intersecting, 3-D planes, the life forms would nonetheless perceive

reality as two-dimensional. They would catch only brief glimpses and hints of a third dimension in the form of “mysterious, unseen ‘forces.’”²⁴⁰ 3-D objects that would unexplainedly move “down” along a curved plane whose downward tilt would be imperceptible save for points where the 3-D object touched the bent 2-D plane. If a sphere, for example, were to pass through this 2-D plane, its first contact with the 2-D surface would appear as a point. As the remainder of its shape passed through pole to pole, it would then appear as a series of expanding and contracting points leaving ghostly traces and suggestions of volume. The beings living in the flat dimension would experience these as unknown, paranormal phenomena or spectral ghosts. A similar gap in perception, Fisher reminds us, would exist for third dimensional beings encountering or trying to represent traces of the fourth dimension. Any interaction with a higher plane of existence is experienced “as momentary fragments of a higher-dimensional continuum that can be inductively totalized only through the passage of time.”²⁴¹ A blurred image, then, reads as all the combined motions and aspects of a semiotic subject enacted from the object’s inception to its termination. Applying this thought to the Logan character reframes his blurry, digital aspect as the sum of all character parts, absorbing actor and double alike.

Fisher states that late 19th century mathematical writings on the fourth-dimension teased methods of visually representing the semi-perceptible, thus influencing artists in the cubist movement like Marcel Duchamp. Through a technique called faceting, cubists sought to represent opposing angles of the same 3-D object on a single plane, as in Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912).²⁴² The painting’s subject is, of course, a human figure walking downstairs, but also a single figure composited from multiple different angles of the same body. The idea of seeing a face from simultaneously front and back is another trace of a conceptual fourth dimension. The dimension is mirror-like, reflecting a cross-sectional being whose angles

each show a different aspect of this being as changed through time. One angle may represent a front-facing pair of protomorphic lidless eyes developing in one's fetal self, or a self at conception. Still another angle on the same face may be a side profile of one's self aged 100 years into the future. Likewise, the being's hands may be balled into fists, extruding claws and ready for a fight and simultaneously raised to embrace a friend. All motions, ages and states of being occur together, and viewers experience their togetherness as blur. This morphing and many-angled object breaks our perceptions, and the break's side effect is every angle at once, or blur. These are expressions of the being's totality as it exists through time, from point of creation to point of expiry and beyond both poles. What lies in the middle of these is perceived as a shape change to the human mind. Like the sphere passing through a flat plane, the object only appears to change shape as time elapses; for the object itself, as it exists on a higher plane, time collapses in on itself and changes of state are always happening and therefore never happening at all. If each of the infinite moments comprising this being were collected and concentrated into one, this would be a fourth dimensional entity: the sum of all parts expressed in an explosion of all at once.

Fisher points to CGI characters as attempts to visually represent the totality of a body's movements and angles. While he uses the ever-shifting and liquid-metal T-1000 from *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) as an example, the CGI-stunt Logan displays an attempt to represent a body exceeding its dimensional restrictions. The viewer is meant to see an actor's face when X-24 walks into the scene, but what is seen is in fact a composite mask. Beneath that, unseen but referenced in the mask's contours, is the stuntman's face. A face unseen-yet-existing beneath. Further, the mask accomplishes the same thing as a jump cut. As discussed in the *Deadpool* chapter, stunt performers are often seen from the back, while careening toward the

camera eye. In these moments, the audience assumes that the back of the head they are seeing would, given the chance, eventually rotate into the actor's face. The reality in such moments is a stunt face that underlaps the expectation of a recognizable face without subverting it. Though we see the back of a head, we hold the image of the front of a head/face in our minds, and one that is inaccurate outside diegesis. The stunt body in these moments essentially has a multitude of faces; the face expected, which seems to rest in the back of the head, and the actual face, which would rest at the front of the head were the viewer able to rotate the stunt performer on-screen. Heads undergoing imaginary, axial rotations figure into Fisher's analysis of 4-D traces in morph. Like the careening stunt person, the T-1000 shifts its face to the front and back of its head, demonstrating that its core embodies any angle. Its morph is fluid while digital Logan's is spectral, but both are shaped through an ensemble of movement. This digital ensemble, however, is different from Sobchack's prosthetic-human ensemble. It does not return agency to a human element. Rather, it silences its human components by mimicking them to near-perfection. The digital becomes the enveloping whole in which actor and stunt performer are parts. A synecdochal body thereby reasserts itself in the digital and subsumes humanity.

Pointing to cases where stunt doubles are credited as characters, Bode asserts that today "it is the character that badges the double, not the actor" in dominant media discourses on stunt work.²⁴³ It is true that the techniques behind digital face replacement draw from doubles' physiology. While it is easy to assume that one digital model of Jackman's face covered over his two primary doubles (Davenport and Stevens), in reality the Image Engine animators made four full-body digital doubles and 63 head and neck replacements.²⁴⁴ Additionally, the VFX studio scanned and mapped four stuntmen's faces, heads and bodies. While a stuntman's face is never supposed to be diegetically visible, traces of Davenport and Stevens made their way into the

digital Logan. A convincing digital face replacement utilizes both the stunt performer's physical traits and those of the actor, and should not be thought of as a strict "duplicate" of the star's countenance. It is better conceived of as a halfway point between the stunt performer's contours and the actor's details. As one reporter put it, "In a sense Hugh Jackman's head works on Hugh's body, but each stunt actor needed their own Logan head, with customized proportions, neck length and features, for those stunt doubles to be read on screen as Logan and identical to Hugh Jackman."²⁴⁵ The X-24 character is a blurring together of a star actor and four doubles, overlapped and existing as a unified character.

While Hugh Jackman diegetically embodies the character he plays, he alone is not Logan. Audiences have an idea of Logan built upon Jackman, his doubles, and their multitudinous digital heads and bodies. Logan is a chimeric creature of the Artaudian sense, and a detour into the character's comic book history helps frame this notion of composite character. The print version of Logan first appeared in 1974 on the final page of *Incredible Hulk #180*.²⁴⁶ Artist Herb Trimpe first drew Wolverine,²⁴⁷ and the character has since been reimagined in the work of iconic illustrators like John Romita Jr., Jim Lee, Andy Kubert, Frank Miller, Marc Silvestri and Steve McNiven. Wolverine's comic book iterations have run the gamut over his forty-four year history. In one storyline, he is infected by an alien race of cockroach-like creatures called the Brood, transforming into a green, half-human-half-alien hybrid.²⁴⁸ Another features the cyborg mutant Apocalypse capturing Wolverine, outfitting him with ninja-like armor and a sabre, and brainwashing him into believing he is the personification of death.²⁴⁹ Still another saw Apocalypse's son from the future, Genesis, again imprison Wolverine in a vat of sinister liquids, thereby transforming him into a feral, Neanderthal-like creature with huge teeth, an elongated forehead and a Ninja Turtles-like bandana over his eyes.²⁵⁰ Though Wolverine's look has varied

through the decades, but the iconic silhouette of his horn-like hair, surly expressions and Clint Eastwood-like grit have remained consistent. Without these markers, Logan's face remains indistinct from any other post-Vietnam era antihero.

In similar fashion, the composite stuntman and digital Logan character needed to maintain a common outline. Imagine Engine merged the stuntmen's features with Jackman's, thereby ensuring that the outline of the character's head remained consistent in all shots. We are not seeing a true-to-life reconstruction of Jackman in stunt scenes, but a digital puppet that meets us between stunt performer and actor to form a palimpsest, diegetic character. The proportions of the face to the stunt body's neck and head were altered in order to match shoulder movements. These changes create the illusion that we are seeing a unified, homogenous character. Creating a fleet of slight variations on Logan hints toward the character's multiple, stylized comic book versions in another way. Throughout his print history, the Wolverine character expresses a fear of duplication. After all, the secret government program that created him, Weapon X (incidentally, the same one that gave rise to Deadpool), sought to mass produce other human killing machines with metal bones and healing powers. An early 90s storyline, titled *Marvel Comics Presents: Weapon X*, depicts Logan submerged in a vat of liquid. Spikes, tubes and wires jut from his body. A metal helmet and imposing, red visor cover the top half of his face. He appears more cyborg than human during the series.²⁵¹ Although he escapes and tries to prevent other villains from stealing his DNA, Wolverine's enemies eventually succeed in making a robotic version of him.²⁵²

The robot takes the less-than-imposing name "Albert" and tries to kill and replace its predecessor. Much like comic book Wolverine himself, the Albert character undergoes palimpsest reinventions over the course of his character arc. Wolverine eviscerates Albert's

human form, leaving a mess of intestine-like tubes and plastic viscera hanging from the clone's torn stomach. Left for dead, the clone gradually repairs itself using mechanical bits found in a sewer. It sheds its human form for a more outwardly cybernetic iteration whose face is partly obscured under a metallic, red eye plate, echoing Logan's days as a genetic guinea pig for Weapon X. James Mangold has not said so directly, but Albert is the likely inspiration behind Logan's unthinking X-24. Wolverine's doppelganger shares the same multi-layered quality as the character whose face he wears.

Rather than shake their fists at any injustice done to the stunt performers who went uncredited for Albert's film iteration, X-24, critics in popular discourse marveled at the undetectable stunt performers. Titles like "Hugh Jackman had a CGI double in Logan and you would've never noticed,"²⁵³ "The CG actors in 'Logan' you never knew were there,"²⁵⁴ "There were way more CG actors in 'Logan' than you realized,"²⁵⁵ and "These incredible CGI doubles of Wolverine and X-23 were so life-like in 'Logan' you probably missed them"²⁵⁶ speak to a sense of wonder associated with the reveal that doubles contributed to the Logan character;²⁵⁷ quite the opposite of the way media covered the ballet double in *Black Swan*.

Logan's R-rating and low budget offer another reason stunt press coverage emphasized actors' faces. *Variety* suggests that the demand for gore and death, coupled with limited resources, leads to "stunt work done in a less glossy style."²⁵⁸ The "gloss" here is wholesale replacement of action with digital puppets. Authenticity is again tied to the lead actors' expressions, as Logan's stunt coordinator Garrett Warren proclaims that Daphne Keene (Laura/X-23) had "everything for that role in her eyes — in her face — and we worked with her to help bring that intensity into the physical action. The action was a lot closer, so we choreographed the fights [so] that there could be face replacement when needed." Warren's

comment is fundamentally about manifested space on screen, and plays into historical representations of digital doubles as distant or in the background of shots. The actor's face, as in the old Spaghetti Westerns where director Sergio Leone filmed extreme close-ups of Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef gritting their teeth and narrowing their eyes before a shootout, creates a character's emotional affect. "Intensity" of expression springboards into intense choreographed fights and unmediated action sequences. As is typically the case in paratextual discourse, the actor's power to emote germinates into action. It is the primordial source. The kinesis and motion of stunt work is great acting's logical result. It is not, we are to believe, an art of its own.

Acting from Within and Without

To more fully understand why film production discourses have traditionally situated stunt work as less authentic than acting, it is helpful to examine delineations between what is alternately termed "acting from within" and "proteanism." In the era of silent film, "acting" was considered a purview of stage players and the live theater. Film actors did not act; they "posed."²⁵⁹ Film's grainy appearance and washed-out, black-and-white projected forms made facial expressions less emotionally impactful than kinetic motion. Where posing was praised, critics emphasized the performer's ability to emote through filmic noise such as over-saturated faces and jerky movement. Those who accomplished such feats did so with exaggerated gesticulations, thereby privileging kinesis and motion over subtler expressive means like speech, the twitch of an eye, or a shy smirk (all of which were imperceptible in silent film). "The noise of the machine"²⁶⁰ uplifted motion and marked it as the earliest form of proteanism, or generating a performance from without rather than generating an emotion from within first and allowing internal feelings to manifest in less obvious ways.

The split between acting from within and proteanism takes on a new meaning with digital face replacement. Where the stunt worker is the one replaced, the performance-generating medium is not limited to motion or latex flesh. Rather, the medium is the stunting body's projected flesh, as it produces the violent interstices that transform a heroic character into a battered, bloodied, R-ratable figure. As Bukatman notes, the Western genre is specially defined by the hero's grit and determination in the face of catastrophic injury and personal suffering, as well as a cinematic gaze that fixates on these injuries. While actor supplies the reaction to injury, the stunt performer feels and absorbs injury, rechanneling it into a tolerable form. The actor then absorbs a version of the physical hit with pain and visceral impact filtered out. In this sense, a stunt performer is the medium through which all action stars perform. The stunt body becomes a movable clay, and its on-screen representation is perhaps more "makeup" than the digital face. Instead of a pile of latex and plastic, the diegetic character arises from sinew, organs and bone, morphing physical features into a convincing, hyperreal actor. This stunt specter, who shifts in and out of narrative unnoticeably, enables the logical leap between the heroic and a heroism that persists despite terrible maiming. However, digital masks alter this ferrying and transmutation of injury, allowing the actor's spectral, motion-blurred visage to persist in scenes where the stunt performer is struck.

In example, *Logan's* penultimate scene features a showdown between X-24 and a ragged, poisoned Wolverine. The hero meets his end as his younger self hooks adamantium claws into his chest, dragging him over rocks and foliage to impale him on a fallen tree. Part of this scene's emotional affect arises from Jackman's agonized expressions and the despair in his eyes. The audience knows that their hero cannot rise again, his vaunted healing factor being depleted by the toxic metal covering his skeleton. Set photos from *IMDB* reveal how this scene was executed.

Daniel Stevens stands outfitted in a harness, which is attached via several cables to an offscreen winch. The winch will pull him through the air and into the stack of blue and gray foam behind him, which serve as physical reference for the fateful tree. Not only is the tree a fully digital creation, but so too is Jackman's face. Where exactly Jackman and Davenport switch out is difficult to discern within the film itself, but the diegetic character's moment of mortal injury is brought about through Davenport's physicality and Jackman's performed pain. Digital alteration means the actor no longer has to act through the stunt performer as medium, or through the conspicuous cuts and angle changes that betray stunt involvement to the connoisseur's eye. Instead, face replacement permits actor to act over stunt motion.



Figure 9: Eddie Davenport as X-24 and Daniel Stevens as Logan²⁶¹

As in the case of Ryan Reynolds, official industry discourses attempt to hedge Jackman toward authentic toughness and to redirect the perception of stunt toughness and willful risk onto his star persona. In an interview with *Collider*, director James Mangold commented on Jackman's ability to engage physical motion. When the interviewer lauds the film's stunt work

as incredible, Mangold responds by saying “[. . .] there are actors who own the physicality of their roles in action movies and there are actors who just can’t. You can show him [Jackman] stunt choreography and he’ll figure it out, and no one gets hurt, and he knows how to hit his marks, and he knows what he needs to do, but it all sort of feels alive and not a set of moves where you fill in the blanks.”²⁶²

Metonymic Claws

Jackman recounts the risks of wielding the metal claws, calling them “killing machines” and claiming to have accidentally stabbed himself and stunt doubles innumerable times during his twelve-year tenure as Wolverine. He recounts stabbing the stunt double for Rebecca Romijn Stamos’s Mystique in the arm and “freaking out.” In the story, the double herself wears the wound as a badge of honor, joking “I’ve been stabbed by Wolverine!” He adds “That’s when you realize this is not a normal character, when people are really happy to be stabbed.”²⁶³ The article, although brief, features a telling interaction between actor, character and double. The human elements involved are pierced and disciplined by the diegetic character (Wolverine’s claws as opposed to Jackman’s). If Heath’s “perfect eye” is a spectatorial gaze that sutures together film’s mechanisms into narrative, then the kind of character created here is perfect in similar fashion. Actor is conduit of the “perfect character” imagined through directorial intent. The slashes and jabs endured by actor and double mark them as the belongings of this character, two living support beams holding together the diegetic hero.

Stabbed doubles also figure into Wolverine’s earlier scene, hunched over a bathroom sink and leaking bullets and fluids. The character’s savage life, his career of killing, here takes karmic effect. He wears the scars and scabs from thousands of battles. The highways of scar tissue covering his now feeble body mark this character as part of a much larger, unseen life

filled with the mutilation of others. The character's claws, which are props outside of diegesis and metal bones within, have raked in "victims" from both realms. Synecdoche substitutes Logan for the span of a violent life, and situates perforated stunt performers as part of the authentic Wolverine character. When considering Logan's disabled state and industry discourses circling the character's woundedness, Sobchak's observations on metonymy as a mode for representing altered and disabled bodily states are worth analyzing. Here, metonymy's potency rests in its ability to cause a kinetic changing of hands – it moves the influence of one separate object to another "species" of object.²⁶⁴ Writing about prosthetic limbs, the author defines a "prosthetic device" as an "autobiographical object" that is "an addition, a trace, and a replacement for the intangible aspects of desire, identification and social relations."²⁶⁵ Actors and stunt doubles must wear the prop claws so to create the whole character, and in this way the three blades attached to gripable handles may be viewed as authenticating "prosthetics" for the people badging Wolverine. Ironically, the diegetic claws themselves are the source of Logan's disability; their toxic metal has insidiously taken away his ability to heal.

Industry discourse falls into a mode of discussing prosthetics that Sobchack views a kind of technoanimism. The claws as add-on seem to take "a life of their own,"²⁶⁶ at least insofar as they scrape (or stab together, shish kabab-like) actor and stunt doubles into an authenticating discourse for the Wolverine character. The devices physically mark their avatars. Jackman's face is Logan's and he foregrounds the hero despite this. For the stunt performers whose diegetic faces are inaccessible to the viewer, the claws are both absorptive and obscuring. They become "passive, if not completely invisible," following the best-known tropes for popular discussion of prosthetics, which are fundamentally metonymic. Agency flows from the human subject to the prosthetic. Stunt work's visibility dissolves and disavows beneath these markers.

It should be noted that Sobchack focuses specifically on how the human element is subsumed in pop-cultural understandings of prosthesis which elevate inanimate devices while deemphasizing their human users. Much like the CGI Logan who appears during “Logan’s Run,” the way industry understands prostheses necessarily renders stunt workers “present only as phantoms which metonymically embody [the human subject’s] lack of presence.”²⁶⁷

Synecdoche, rather than metonymy, would be better applied to stunt work (at least, to the extent that one believes stunt performance should receive attention). This is the notion that two separate objects connect to form an ensemble of moving parts.²⁶⁸ Perhaps an ideal film industry and accompanying paratextual discourse would situate lesser-known players not as vestigial parts in the character’s whole, but as people “included in the idea and existence” of the character. For most of cinema’s history, however, props, prosthetics and CGI have taken precedence over many human elements. Part of this may rest in a desire to imbue such technologies with superhuman power, literalizing spectatorial desire for a heroic being who defies injury and the body’s structural limitations. Another part returns to tensions over stunt performers’ hierarchical rank in relation to actors. Chisholm reminds that this pecking order extends even to on-set wardrobe matters. Actors typically wear an expensive version of a costume, prop or bodily add-on. Stunt doubles work with cheaper copies, and are generally not permitted to use the actor’s more expensive items.²⁶⁹

Further evidence of this unease between double and actor in Logan’s context appears in industry trade coverage of the middle-aged lead’s own youthful nostalgia. Jackman expressed his concerns over playing a younger clone of the weathered Logan. After all, Logan himself is hardly the “badass” protagonist featured in the *X-Men* films; rather than the typical animalistic fight scenes depicting an unstoppable Wolverine hacking through throngs of enemies, old man

Logan primarily coughs his way through the film. In situations where he is called upon to fight, he appears severely outclassed by the young mercenaries who are hunting him. In several scenes, it is his clone daughter Laura who rescues him and turns the tide of these battles. Given the character's unprecedented vulnerability, Jackman worried that viewers would like the younger version more, seeing the X-24 clone as a more genuine Wolverine. Considering that the body signifying youth and vitality belongs to Davenport, the actor's trepidation is also one of being upstaged by a physically-trained double.

One notable article focuses exclusively on Davenport's authenticity and connection to diegetic character. Perhaps tellingly, it comes not from an industry paratext, but from a *Men's Health* issue. The article states of the X-24 character, "Hollywood may have changed his face, but the body in the movie was all Davenport."²⁷⁰ Film industry artifice masks a key player, but this particular text focuses on his work and discipline in looking the part. As a stunt article written outside of usual industry discourses, the piece discards the typical actor-focus and directly attaches the stuntman to Wolverine's character. Although rare, paratexts that do not orbit the film industry as nucleus offer a perspective that may be more analogous to the casual filmgoer's perceptions, rather than the dissecting gaze of the connoisseur. This is uncannily useful, for the superfan's perspective is also infused with industry traditions which redirect labor credit for below-the-line work onto the actor. Viewpoints on stunt work from writers who are not necessarily film buffs offer a method to remove the actor's implied hegemony and give scholars an idea of how casual viewers would think of stunt work if they were given reason to look at it. Tracing Davenport's physical transformation from "fat kid to Hugh Jackman's stunt double," the article rolls out a grueling workout regimen and the discipline needed to turn into a superhero. It constitutes Davenport as Wolverine, titling a section on his diet "What Wolverine

Eats.” It also credits him as playing the character X-24, something both *Logan*’s end credits and *IMDB*’s credits refrain from doing. As Davenport poignantly reflects, “people ask me why I’m so strict with my diet. In this industry, how I look is the only thing I have control over.”²⁷¹

Invisibility becomes a marker of stunt skill and authenticity in *Logan*’s paratexts. Celebrating the invisibility of this type of labor can never be fully enacted without marginalizing the thing celebrated, and emphasis is redirected, in some cases, to the actor’s performance. Digital synthespians dominate *Logan*’s stunt discourse to an even greater degree. This focus on digital homunculi complicates the usual detective work involved in seeing stunts, and it serves as another kind of menacing specter that the perfect eye should not see. While *Deadpool* contained some brief moments where the discerning observer with pause button at-the-ready could pick out undisguised transitions between an actor’s face and that of a stunt double, *Logan* was lauded for its CGI crew’s meticulous attention to patching over these details. Therefore, stunt activity here is not wholly a return to the early star system. Rather, it represents a gradual eclipsing for both stunt worker and actor and the promise of a future when synthespians continue their inexorable march to the foreground. As ILM foretold over twenty years ago, there may come a day when the ghost of cinematic mechanism fully fuses with the perfect eye. When this happens, the only cites for rupture will be human. What, then, will remain but to expunge imperfection?

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE THOUGHTS

Where stunt scholars are concerned, the superhero film will likely remain a fruitful resource for the near future. 2017 alone saw six superhero films released, with *Forbes* declaring “the best year ever for live-action superhero movies.”²⁷² In light of on-screen superheroes’ exponentially growing popularity, the present project offered an in-depth look at stunt work in the superhero genre’s relative dearth of R-Rated films, extrapolating ways in which violence and CGI spectacle contribute to stunt labor’s subsumed qualities. The project focused on the few recent, ultraviolent superhero films and their less-than-obvious use of attractions and CGI as means to cover up stunt work. Spectatorship played prominently into the analyses of stunts in *Deadpool* and *Logan*. While the former film lends itself to stunt detection, the latter provides a more polished product where gag ruptures digitally disappear. Digital technology hedges stunt visibility in a direction similar to the Hollywood star system, where studios refused to acknowledge that their actors had not personally performed their own feats.

The commonality linking stunts in both films is that paratexts and editing tactics most often reinforce studio mandates to conceal stunts and shift the stunt performer’s toughness and authenticity toward another body. *Deadpool*’s paratexts upheld Wade Wilson’s unusual femininity as a marker of Ryan Reynolds’ character authenticity. *Deadpool*’s mask and the use of manifested space within the film’s diegetic narrative prevent most (not all) stunt ruptures. Paratexts and studio rhetoric divert attention from the causes behind a prominent stuntwoman’s death by diminishing her authenticity as a stunt performer. Film narrative and paratextual discourse proliferates Fox Studio narratives and classical understandings of stunt labor as a risk not meant for viewership. *Logan*’s editing, although distinct from *Deadpool* in its pervasive

digital face replacement, covers over stunt actions in a digitally perfect way. So complete is the perfect eye that X-24's stunt body is credited as the actor whose face adorns him. The narrative becomes inured from distraction because the plainly visible is made invisible, just as studio heads would prefer viewers to see entirely through the genre under which these films operate.

Discussions of superhero film as an invisible genre, or a genre that is not meant to be viewed as genre, run parallel to stunt work if only to illustrate how film industry discourse wrangles with distracting, disunifying concepts. Genre is potentially limiting to these films, as the term "superhero" holds a niche baggage. It comes from comics, and so runs the risk of being a connoisseur's occupation, much like stunt fandom. Superhero genre solves this problem by dissolving into familiar genres that anyone can watch. Dissolution saves these films from becoming confined to the realm of geekdom, making them more relatable to a general audience. Though comic book and superhero literature built these films, it remains an embarrassing, potentially alienating demarcation even to a comic book aficionado like Kevin Feige. Analogous are the stunts composing the action sequences in these films. To look for stunt ruptures within and without diegesis, to contemplate their subsumed place in industry discourse, and to see these performers as coterminous with iconic characters shatters suspension of disbelief and distracts from narrative's illusions. A stunt fan threatens in the same fashion that a comic fan threatens: they see what should be plainly visible, yet cannot be according to traditional studio approaches. The connoisseur enjoys ruptures and niches, but what the connoisseur enjoys is assumed to be off-putting and distracting to a larger audience. In this manner, as Ray discusses, the most staple and ever-present forms of entertainment can also be avant-garde. It is hard to imagine an action-heavy superhero film without stunts, and it is hard to imagine a film with spandex-clad super

beings as a romantic comedy; yet studios ask viewers to imagine nonetheless, and in doing so to refrain from following the peering ruptures comprising these films.

The introductory chapter provides a nonlinear history of stunt work and scholarship, underlining film industry practices of de-emphasizing this unusual labor. The stunt gag is interruptive at its core. It is built on bodies at risk, and therefore risks the very cogence of narratives that encompass it. Studios have typically treated these gags as necessary yet necessarily suppressed. Their true purpose is served when they act to momentarily break and immediately reconstitute a narrative, sustaining the audience's affective pleasure and suspension of disbelief. In accordance with common studio narratives, viewers are not supposed to grasp the stunt and treat it as its own fractured, avant-garde entity. They are not meant to cast away narrative in favor of distracting details. Such narrative-centric thought precipitates the unusual triune characters seen in action-heavy, violent films – the uneasy relationship between actor, stunt performer and non-human, digital actor. Each engages in a tug of war, trying to lay claim to an iconic character's authenticity. Character departs from a unified construct with sharp edges to become a phase-shifting, palimpsest and blurred creation within the minds of viewers who see what they should not see.

The *Deadpool* case study details stunt work's lineage in slapstick comedy, and how affective laughter encourages audiences to view real injury as performed. This friction relates to one of the largest uncertainties in stunt scholarship: whether to conceive of the on-screen stunt body as diegetic or something else. While many scholars agree that these performances twist away from diegetic narrative, I attempted to expand on Smith's idea that stunts rupture and reconstitute an audience's suspension of disbelief. SJ Harris's case displays a moment where a high-profile stunt death disrupted studio narratives and made it less possible for aware audiences

to immerse themselves. It also shows studio efforts to massage the tragedy's impact, framing it as an unavoidable stroke of fate in a risk-fraught career. The stunt's invisible-visibility and simultaneous existence within diegesis and documentary space may be understood in the same way that Sobchack situated stunt animals' authentic pain.

The *Deadpool* chapter also presents the idea that searching for a stunt on-screen leads to the paratextual realm. Once audience members encounter a high-profile stunt death, as in *Deadpool 2*, it becomes difficult not to wonder how much representational injury is in fact real injury. Seeing a violent fight scene, a flipped car with bodies spilling out the windows, or a spectacular fall all take on an air of uncertainty. Without a reliable way to tell which depictions of pain are real, the mind departs from narrative and opens a door to distraction. Sobchack's rabbit was likely easier to pinpoint as a moment of real death, given the comparatively limited technologies of its day. Its ability to rupture into documentary space was confined to a discernable, one-and-done death. In films replete with brutal action, any moment involving a stunt double could be a documentary rupture, and consequently all active moments become suspect. The viewer who becomes aware of stunt work in this sense is affectively kicked out of narrative and left to ask: what have I participated in?

The *Logan* case study extends these ideas into the relationship between actor, stunt performer and digital stunt actor. Shifting away from the paranoid searching for stunts in *Deadpool* is the only way to address stunt work in *Logan*, since convincing face-replacement hides any stunt performers and so creates a rupture-less narrative. Instead, spectatorship turns into a conspiratorial seeking of extra-diegetic evidence. As in the case of SJ Harris, the stunt spectator examining *Logan* must consider industry paratexts and what they reveal about Fox Studios' interest in deemphasizing certain labors. I trace the need for inhuman doubles to both

safety concerns and studio desires to generate a perfect, unquestioned spectacle. An audience confident in studio control is an audience averse to looking too closely. For now, CGI spectacles like face-replacement appear to serve the actor's image, as evidenced in Hugh Jackman's credit as X-24. Yet, unease characterizes the diegetic character. This is partly why I contend that characters and stunt roles within them are an incomprehensible totality of shifting parts akin to Fisher's observations on blurred visual representations of the fourth dimension. The character is a tesseract of sorts, and its extensions act like absorptive prosthetics. Discourses around these prosthetics, as with Logan's metal prop claws, draw in and dissolve human elements in favor of fetishizing technological (in this case, digital) wonder.

There are several ways future stunt scholarship can continue expanding the work that Lisa Bode began. Her short Black Widow case study offered the possibility that stunt work's qualities may change depending on the genres in which it functions. The bloody attractions, soaring limbs, bullet-riddled torsos and shattered bones synonymous with the Deadpool and Logan characters act as a diegetic mirror image for the documentary-like space stunt people perform. On the other side of the mirror are the human forms enabling narrative violence to look and feel authentic.

Industry paratexts prove themselves complicit in covering over and de-emphasizing this work, serving studio agendas that have always directed the spotlight away from stunts. Typically, this gesture served to bolster the actor as a heroic avatar. Actor became coterminous with the superheroic character. Having a diegetic face all but guaranteed audience acceptance of the actor's status. The advent of ever-more convincing digital face replacement again threatens to dethrone the actor as traditional head of the character triumvirate. Actor and stunt performer alike find their roles increasingly absorbed by digital stunt actors. This is the unsettling

implication behind uncredited stunt people who wear a digital face in post-production. It may be that questioning stunt work's human toll and ethical trepidations around mass consumption of injury are paving the way to wholesale replacement of the human element. Stunt work was first the occupation of plastic dummies, and it appears set to return to inhumanity in the name of greater safety and spectacle. If this possibility became apparent in a superhero film with a budget as limited as *Logan*, the next step would be to examine stunts in Disney and Time Warner films.

Staggering production budgets mean that stunt work may be more innovatively hidden, or shifted into full automation. Heeding Bode's call for increased scholarly attention to stunt work in superhero films rings all the more relevant in an era where Disney increasingly pursues stunt labor automation, and where Marvel's Cinematic Universe stands on the precipice of serious expansion and corporate restructuring. The most striking evidence of this transformation rests with Disney's future theme park plans. The company is now beta testing acrobatic stunt robots, which are the prime feature of their Stuntronics project.²⁷³ Their intended purpose is to carry out action sequences for more delicate, largely sessile, speaking and singing robots. If, for instance, a stationary Iron Man robot greets tourists while standing onstage, it could be wheeled away in time for its double to rocket through the air, creating the illusion of a single robot.²⁷⁴ Disney thereby envisions situating the live show robots in a relationship similar to the filmic actor and stunt double. One robot acts while another handles the protean elements.

Details revolving around Stuntronics are currently limited, and Disney's press information addresses the stunt bots only in the context of shows at Disneyland parks. However, film scholars must wonder if these stunt bots could, much like some live theater actors during feature film's advent, move from the stage onto the big screen. Would SAG-AFTRA stunt

performers see their jobs and benefits replaced by Stuntronics' unpayable creations, leading to second units populated by automatons and low-cost, non-union stunt people? Or perhaps the human element in stunt doubling and ND work would evaporate entirely, leaving a handful of human stunt coordinators to dutifully launch their robot replacements through the air. In either case, stunt work appears headed in a direction where a filmic superhero's digital skin will one day wrap metal and plastic rather than flesh and blood.

Still another ominous "What If?" scenario looms above superhero films and their stunts. At the time of this writing, The Walt Disney Company and Comcast Corporation are bidding against one another.²⁷⁵ The prize is a bundle package of various 21st Century Fox assets, including character rights to the X-Men and Fantastic 4 characters.²⁷⁶ A full forecast of this acquisition's impact on the film industry and superhero movies is impossible at present. However, media sources have voiced concerns that R-rated films like *Deadpool* and *Logan* may disappear under Disney, pointing to CEO Bob Iger's ambiguous responses to the possibility of R-rated Disney films.²⁷⁷ Perhaps more concerning for stunt work is the budgetary differences between the average Disney-Marvel movie and those produced under Fox Studios. *Deadpool* operated on a \$58 million budget²⁷⁸, and *Logan* on \$97 million.²⁷⁹ Marvel's *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) enjoyed a \$321.2 million budget.²⁸⁰ Even *Ant-Man* (2015), hailed as Marvel Studio's most scaled-down superhero film,²⁸¹ cost \$169 million.²⁸² Critics would therefore have difficulty in claiming that Disney films use subtle CGI in the fashion of *Deadpool* and *Logan*. As Bode's reflection on the Black Widow character in *The Avengers* is currently the only scholarly remark on stunts in a Marvel Studios film, critics should analyze Marvel Cinematic Universe films and ways in which increased spending on CGI and other non-human stunt elements impacts actual stunt work's visibility and media framing. Given common audience

complaints that overwhelming CGI looks fake, evaluating the interplay between stunts and digital stunt actors in box office failures may also help illuminate the workings of action that audiences reject.

Stunt work stands at a historic crossroads, and no where is this more visible (and more vehemently covered up) than in superhero films. The work is poised to evolve in ways that call fundamental traits of film and narrative production into question. My meditation on *Deadpool* questioned the balance of safety and risk, the audience's culpability in enjoying injury, the extent to which behind-the-scenes brutality can be mitigated in a believably authentic way, and the studio strategies that redirect authentic action from stunt double to actor. In *Logan*, I parsed out the stunt performer's genre-fluid genetic code, and how this fluidity plays into studio interests in preventing audiences from being overwhelmed with distracting, niche details. I also considered how modes of viewership change in the face (no pun intended) of digital replacement technologies that attempt to swap stunt heads for actor heads, and how these strategies attempt a return to the old star system while traversing beyond them.

Film scholars studying bodies interacting with digital and posthuman labor will want to watch the stunt before its diegetic ruptures go extinct. For what lies beyond the star system that sought to render stunts nonexistent is a system still more perfect; one increasingly capable of removing humanity from view.

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