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**Always On, Always On-Screen:  
blockbuster event cinema and the mediation of post-2005  
digital cultures and experience.**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

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**William D. Muirhead**

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the extent to which novel formal practices displayed in the contemporary effects-driven blockbuster can be shown to reflect wider developments in contemporary digital capitalism. It argues that the recent blockbuster features recurrent visual and thematic elements uniquely tied to our current techno-cultural context, and that these elements can be read as a mediation of changing social behaviours in the world beyond the movie screen. The research marks an intervention into two distinct and established bodies of literature: a large body of work on blockbuster cinema and an equally significant body of work on digital capitalism. Despite the significance and urgency of this argument, neither branch of scholarship has fully probed into the blockbuster's mediation of, and sporadic attempts to redress, the cultural and behavioural impacts of what Mark Deuze (2012) calls "a life lived in media." Taking a broadly allegorical approach, as outlined by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), and employing close textual reading as its primary method of analysis, the research draws out the recent blockbuster's expression of "collective thinking and collective fantasies" unique to the *cultural dominant* of digitality.

Each of the three substantive chapters explores a specific formal quality of the films in question, and locates a correlating cultural development: shifting conceptions of what constitutes public or private information; digitality's displacement of traditional temporalities; the diminishment of basic physiological needs such as sleep, food and procreation in a world increasingly experienced through the online avatar. Through analysis of over two dozen

films, spanning from 1996 to 2019, this research tracks what Scott McQuire terms a "passage of negotiation," from early suspicion and fear over digital technology to its comprehensive cultural assimilation, "[having] entered the dominant social habitus to such an extent that it can ground new forms of abstract knowledge and social practice" (2008, x). This work contends that in the changing form of the Hollywood blockbuster, a mode of cultural production rarely analysed against the critical horizon of contemporary informational capitalism, can be charted digitality's recent reconfiguration of nearly all aspects of personal and political life in advanced capitalist nations.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE LIFE OF MEN'S SOULS

*"It may be that they will not add to the beauty of the world, nor to the life of men's souls. I am not sure. But automobiles have come, and they bring a greater change in our life than most of us expect. They are here, and almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring. They are going to alter war, and they are going to alter peace. I think men's minds are going to be changed in subtle ways because of automobiles; Just how, though, I could hardly guess. But you can't have the immense outward changes that they will cause without some inward ones, and it may be that George is right, and that the spiritual alteration will be bad for us. Perhaps, ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn't be able to defend the gasoline engine, but would have to agree with him that automobiles 'had no business to be invented.'"*

- Booth Tarkington, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1918.

*"Brother, you may believe in machines, but we believe in people. You may have all the technology in the world. We have heart. No machine will ever beat that."*

- Luke Hobbs (Dwayne Johnson), *Hobbs & Shaw* (Leitch 2019)

## SC1

### What is and what was

I first watched the extant cut of Orson Welles' *Magnificent Ambersons*, his studio-mutilated 1942 follow up to *Citizen Kane*, in 2008, when I was in my mid-twenties. The words of Eugene Morgan (Joseph Cotten) quoted above, which consider the potential societal ramifications of the early automobile, struck an immediate chord.<sup>1</sup> Part of the last generation to enter their teens without ready—indeed, omnipresent—access to the internet, cellphones and sundry other digital technologies, I was amazed and delighted in the nineties to discover a world of search engines, mp3 files and online email. A decade or so later, I found myself arguing with friends about the merits of camera phones, social media and perpetual online visibility. "It's just a photo," they'd argue, after I demanded a covertly snapped picture be deleted, "and it's only going on my private page." Your page is *not* private, I would counter, simply by virtue of being on the internet. It will live there forever, and in any case, exposing my unsolicited photographic likeness to even an audience of 150 Facebook "friends" I've never met hardly seems *private*. Further, I droned on, what does it mean for our sense of *what matters*, which of life's moments are really worthy of documentation, when anything can be recorded, at any time, and in nearly

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<sup>1</sup> Welles' adaptation of this crucial passage is almost verbatim from Tarkington's original text: "I'm not sure George is wrong about automobiles. With all their speed forward, they may be a step backward in civilization. It may be that they won't add to the beauty of the world, nor to the life of men's souls. I am not sure. But automobiles have come, and almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring. They're going to alter war, and they're going to alter peace. I think men's minds are going to be changed in subtle ways because of automobiles. And it may be that George is right. It may be that ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn't be able to defend the gasoline engine, but would have to agree with him that automobiles 'had no business to be invented.'"



Fig 1. Eugene Morgan (Joseph Cotten, middle right) introduces the Ambersons to the early automobile. Orson Welles, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1942, captured from Blu-ray by the author.

infinite quantities? When everything can be documented, no matter how mundane and/or incidental, the trivial moments are elevated and the significant ones diminished in comparison. By this time, usually, the photo would have been erased and phone returned to pocket—all too late for my unfortunate companion. "This reminds me," I'd announce, waving for another beverage, "of a passage from Tarkington. It concerns the life of men's souls..."

"The life of [people's] souls," the ways in which we have been quietly altered by the obligations and operations of ubiquitous digitality, is a key concern of this research. The original contribution of my thesis is the tracking of these changes through the shifting form of the recent Hollywood blockbuster. To what extent, this work asks, can certain novel formal practices of the

contemporary big-budget event movie—recurring image-formations, aesthetic techniques and narrative tropes—be shown to reflect wider developments in advanced informational capitalism? In answering this question, I draw upon a large body of critical writing on the Hollywood event film (Tasker 1993/2015; King 2000; Cubitt 2004; Purse 2011/2013; Prince 2012; Whissel 2014). That body of work will be put into conversation with a wide range of literature on the technological, social and infrastructural operations of advanced digital capitalism (McQuire 2008; Fuchs 2010/2014; Gregg 2011; Paasonen 2012, Crary 2013; Zuboff 2015). My intervention into these two fields of criticism, usually kept discrete, provides the theoretical framework for a close textual reading of more than two dozen blockbusters spanning the past two decades (1996-2019). Through this analytical method, I identify and explicate the buried "political allegories" which Fredric Jameson (1981) holds as a central feature of all successful cultural texts. The coded devices and economic operations of digital capitalism—*Big Other*, in Shoshanna Zuboff's phrase—have reconfigured many of the most mundane activities and operations of daily life. As I shall demonstrate in the work to follow, they are also manifest, allegorically, in the textures of Hollywood event cinema.

The films considered, all part of ongoing popular franchises, span a period of almost twenty-five years—over two decades of breakneck technological development and intense social and political change. While the recent blockbuster rarely engages critically or explicitly with such external events, this research contends that it nevertheless registers, at an allegorical level, the specific techno-cultural conditions of its production and release. The conditions

in question encompass not just alterations in social behaviour (Turkle 2008; Deuze 2012; Webster 2014; Thulin 2018), but massive shifts in political and economic operations on a global scale enabled by digital technologies (Lash 2002; Terranova 2012; Zuboff 2015; Franklin 2015). These changes are best captured under the rubric of "digital capitalism," a formulation introduced by communications and information historian Dan Schiller in 1999. The general object of digitization, he writes, "is to increase the economic efficiency of networks by allowing them to be shared more thoroughly and effectively among many users" (1999, xv), an object which has remained consistent over the two decades since Schiller's *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* was first published. The operations and technologies of digital capitalism have only become more sophisticated, pervasive and rapacious in recent years. As Schiller observed, somewhat prophetically, in 1999: "Far from delivering us into a hightech Eden, in fact, cyberspace itself is being rapidly colonized by the familiar workings of the market system" (xiv).

A pivotal moment in that colonisation occurred during the years 2004-2005, a techno-cultural moment dubbed "Web 2.0" by digital magnate Tim O'Reilly. It is at this point that "engagement," across platforms and on a multi-media plane, became a chief goal of digital media, actively encouraging a sense of participant ownership (Fuchs 2014).<sup>2</sup> What was not immediately obvious to many users is that these fun new apps and websites were laying the

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<sup>2</sup> There are those who question the true scope and impact of "Web 2.0" as a technological and cultural event. Both Matthew Allen (2012) and Trebor Scholz (2008), for instance, point out that social media applications are not particularly new and earlier iterations of essentially the same forms and forums existed well before 2005. However, as Christian Fuchs asserts, "on the level of usage, these technologies were not popular in the 1990s and have become popular rather recently" (2014, 37).

foundation for major developments at a political and infrastructural level. The lucrative possibilities of invisible data capture soon occurred to fledgling commercial entities such as YouTube, Google and Facebook, while established political entities like the NSA also began engaging in invasive dataveillance practices (Fuchs 2014; Constantiou and Kallinikos 2015; Couldry and Mejias 2018).

<sup>3</sup> New technologies allowed the adaptation of pre-existing systems of control into a "new form of information capitalism [that] aims to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control" (Zuboff 20015, 75). The inexorable seeping of these technologies into our lives would not have been possible had individuals in advanced Western nations not leapt so eagerly into the digital realm. Dazzled by the conveniences, distractions and connectivities of new media, we readily gave permission for random quizzes to access our online profiles, and those of our friends; some shared nude selfies and impetuously commented on fan forums. Quickly and inexorably, success in both private and professional life became contingent upon online networking and social media applications (Thulin 2018; Gregg 2011). What Tarkington called an "inward change in men" is now clearly perceivable, and often feels irreversible. Witness groups of people at the pub, on the bus or at the cinema staring mutely down at their smartphone screens, lonely in the crowd. Consider how freely we continue to give up our life's material to social media applications and search engines even after Edward Snowden, late of the NSA, went public about the realities of invasive data capture in 2013 (Fuchs 2014). Virtual life on

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<sup>3</sup> According to Fuchs, the main characteristics of Web 2.0 include: "radical decentralization, radical trust, participation instead of publishing, users as contributors, rich user experience, the long tail, the web as platform, control of one's own data, remixing data, collective intelligence, attitudes, better software by more users, play, undetermined user behaviour" (2014, 34).

Facebook and Twitter may indeed be evidentially damaging to the collective body and soul (Turkle 2008). By the time that evidence was presented to us, however, the choice had already been made.

As indicated above, this thesis explores the extent to which three formal practices specific to the recent blockbuster can be shown to reflect these developments. More specifically, it argues that these films' repeated recourse to the image of the surveilling "wall of screens," their literal representation of real life political figures and references to actual events, and their gradual removal of scenes featuring eating, sleeping and sex, indicate the extent to which the social and politico-economic codes of digital capitalism have permeated Western cultures. In the process, it also provides a periodised account of that external process of acceptance and cultural assimilation (McQuire 2008) suggested above. One of the analytical advantages of my research is that while the majority of the films discussed were produced after the advent of Web 2.0, three of the five franchises considered had entries released prior to 2005.<sup>4</sup> The comparison of these early, intermediate and late instalments, over almost a quarter century of rapid technological development, has allowed me to track their reflection of external cultural change in something close to real time. Further, the superficial anonymity of the action film franchise, their lack, in most cases, of a consistent auteurial voice, enables an investigation not directly tied to any individual political viewpoint or visual aesthetic. All but one of these series has had more

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<sup>4</sup> Six films released prior to 2005, twenty two afterwards. The *Mission: Impossible*, *Bourne* and *Fast & Furious* franchises have two instalments apiece in the first bracket; the *Transformers* and Zach Snyder-led "DC Extended Universe" series began in 2007 and 2011 respectively.



than one director; they have all employed multiple screenwriting teams.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is important to note that the novel formal elements I identify in these films both span successive instalments in particular cinematic "universes," and recur across disparate franchises produced by different studios. No one creative team or set of executives set a course for the blockbuster's engagement with the New Normals of the digital era; all these series bought figurative iPhones and set up their metaphorical Instagram accounts in aleatory synchronicity with the others.

Following a methodology and extensive literature review, this thesis consists of three substantive chapters. Each of these explore a specific formal quality of the films in question, and links it to a correlating cultural development unique to our current age of advanced digital capitalism. In the first chapter, I explore the evolving image-formation of the blockbuster's surveilling "wall of screens." These glowing banks of electronic monitors were once the exclusive domain of spy thrillers, but can more recently be found flickering amidst the high-octane heists of the *Fast Saga*, or comic book adaptations such as *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008). Concentrating on two entries apiece from the *Fast and Bourne* franchises, I argue that while often framed in geopolitical terms (Stewart 2012; Zimmer 2015), and despite appearing to be tied to pre-digital surveillance regimes, the proliferation and visual development of this formal trope may be better read as emblematising public feeling over the rise of surveillance

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<sup>5</sup> Although this is a grey area: the third DC Extended Universe (DCEU) entry, *Justice League* (2017) has only one credited director, Zack Snyder, but large portions of the film were famously reshot by credited co-writer Joss Whedon. Likewise, the *Transformers* spin-off *Bumblebee* (Knight 2008) was not directed by Michael Bay, who helmed the other five films, but is only debatably a part of the main franchise. Neither of these movies, it should be noted, are discussed at any great depth in the pages to follow, so the point is perhaps an academic one.

capitalism and connected dataveillance practices. The device speaks to a world in which "events, objects, processes, and people [have] become visible, knowable, and shareable in a new way" (Zuboff 2015, 77). Further, I suggest that its deployment in these films reflects a developing awareness of the extent to which we have become complicit in our own exploitation by the operations of Zuboff's "Big Other." Tracked over the course of a decade, the evolution of this device suggests a corresponding shift in the blockbuster's attitude toward invasive data capture, from anxiety and paranoia to something approaching a qualified acceptance. As in the world beyond, these characters must come to grips with a new environment in which nothing can escape "God's Eye," the constant harvesting and exploitation of personal data by the agents and organs of informational capitalism.

The second chapter examines digital capitalism's diminishment of a sense of the present—meaning, a stable and comprehensible current moment—as expressed through a formal device I term "shards of the real." These "shards" are explicit references to, or representations of, the "literally real" typically rejected by earlier escapist blockbusters. Various iterations of the trope are considered, from the simple namechecking of real-world events to historical reenactments and the representation of current political figures. In particular, I explore the recurring and historically novel formal feature of the "commentator cameo," *as-themselves* appearances from veteran journalists and broadcasters which crop amidst even the most lunatic narratives. I argue these *shards* are best read not iconically, as transparent signifiers of the people or events they appear to represent, but allegorically as ciphers for a loss of the living present. In an

digitally-driven environment, one which "constantly move[s] and stretch[es] from the current moment to the future and the more or less recent past" (Paasonen 2016, 9), such "shards of the real" function as qualified attempts to redress the diminishment of "now" required by the ceaseless, endlessly accumulative operations of big data.

The final chapter tracks digitality's attack on biology itself, documenting and exploring the slow eclipse of scenes of sleep, eating and fornication in the post-Web 2.0 blockbuster. These films reflect the burgeoning of what Jonathan Crary terms a "24/7" environment: "a time of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate" (2013, 9). The operations and expectations of digital capitalism, its baroque "temporal architectures" (Sharma 2014, 48) and state of "present bleed" (Gregg 2011, 11) between personal and professional lives, have comprehensively reconfigured domestic realities just as they have done the global and political. The earliest entries of the three franchises considered here frame food, sex and rest not as regrettable fragilities, implicit acknowledgements of fleshly weakness, but as physiological necessities and/or rewards for a hard movie's work. Such scenes vanished from the blockbuster just as the behavioural codes and technologies of *Big Other* came to convince the rest of us that any "down time" was, in fact, a waste of time. Like fugitive operative Jason Bourne (Matt Damon), or *Mission: Impossible's* Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise), we haven't stopped running since.

While this thesis does track the recent blockbuster's developing acquiescence to the expectations and obligations of digital capitalism, however, it locates also pockets of resistance hiding beneath their whirling, pixelated

surfaces. In most of the films considered, an underlying sense of sorrow persists over what may have been lost in the digital exchange. After all, their guiding creative forces—usually aged late-forties to mid-fifties at time of production<sup>6</sup>—still remember *how things used to be*. Close textual reading and allegorical analysis can therefore expose the techno-cultural growing pains underlying many of these recent blockbusters. It is the "life of men's souls," before and after the advent of pervasive and ubiquitous digitality, with which these big budget bash-em-ups are most consistently and powerfully concerned. Of course, any ripples of discomfort are usually overlaid by layers of visually spectacular action. For the heroes of the recent event film to rest peacefully, permanently evade data capture, or become unavailable to a steady stream of alerts and notifications would be a commercial turn-off; a discomfoting reminder of how dutifully their audiences now march to the beat of digital capitalism. And yet, to directly engage with these developments in a critical fashion would be just as off-putting. When I finally signed up to Twitter in my mid-thirties, circa 2017—in a fairly craven attempt to establish an online profile in hope of landing a job in social media relations—I must have come to much the same realisation the makers of these films did. The outcome of the wrestling match called *Man Vs. Machine* was long ago decided, and ended in an uneasy split-decision. Whatever hazy memories of an earlier kind of existence remain, we all live with/in/for the machine now.

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<sup>6</sup> An illustrative sample: Paul Greengrass was 52 when he directed *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007); director Michael Bay was 46 during production of *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011); Tom Cruise was 53 when he starred in and produced *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation* (2015).

## SC2

### Methodology

My methodology is primarily modelled on the work of Frederic Jameson, especially as outlined in his influential 1981 treatise, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. This project shares Jameson's conviction that all cultural texts are, to some extent, political allegories, "symbolically working through real social and cultural anxieties" (Buchanan 2006, 66). Indeed, it is predicated on the idea that the blockbuster's continuing appeal and interest to audiences is in large part due to these clouded connections. Allegorical signifiers, Jameson writes, are "a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality" (1981, 34). The shared antipathies and anxieties of the current age will inevitably grip the authorial imagination, itself a function of the wider collective imaginary, and serve to give the cultural artifact its *kick*. They are, in other words, why we are drawn toward a book, film, or painting, and why we stay to engage with it. All successful cultural productions are necessarily informed by their particular temporal conditions, reflecting what Jameson terms a "cultural dominant", "a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features" (1991, 203). The concept does not connote any particular aesthetic style, but rather a historical period's preeminent cultural form. I argue that the recent blockbuster connects with a massive,

international viewership largely due to its allegorical expression of the "collective thinking and collective fantasies" of the *cultural dominant* of informational capitalism, as witnessed and interacted with through the glowing screen of the ubiquitous digital device.

To interpret a text or texts through such a lens is, as Jameson writes, "an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code" (1981, 10). However, as Ian Buchanan observes, the operation proposed here is more complex than simply using a "master key" to "unlock" the hidden or allegorical meaning of a text—such as, in Buchanan's example, applying one's knowledge of the Bible to decode the apparently "pagan tale[s]" of C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* books as a "a clear-cut set of Christian messages" (2006, 57). While the optic used must place the text in a properly historicised and socio-political context, a further act of interpretation is required; defining the nature of the social itself. As in my work to follow, Jameson is primarily interested in mapping the formal and aesthetic strategies of texts onto the social world, more so than their representational aspects. He refers to the cultural text as being one "utterance in an essentially collective ... discourse" (1981, 66), and this is precisely how I propose to approach my close textual reading of, say, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (Bay, 2009) or *Fate of the Furious* (Gray, 2017). I will interpret these films in social terms, as individual "utterances" in a specific and contemporary collective discourse. The conversation here, obviously enough, being over the experiential and politico-economic effects of pervasive digitality on all aspects of daily life in advanced Western nations.

Such an approach, neatly encapsulated in the famous opening exhortation of *The Political Unconscious* to "always historicise!" (1981, 1), has lost none of its efficacy or relevance in our current era. Jameson's homological reading method, his decades-long attempt to properly "periodize" the postmodern epoch—to identify discrete movements and chapters within eras—is far from immured in the late twentieth century. In recent times, theorists such as Sianne Ngai (2012), Alexander Galloway (2016) and Sulgi Lie (2016) have all applied a similar allegorical approach to various (pop) cultural texts, mapped against the critical horizon of digital capitalism. The work done in this thesis is of a similar stripe. It departs from previous scholarship, however, both in concentrating exclusively on "popcorn cinema" and on ongoing film series which, in most cases, began prior to the event of Web 2.0 and have continued well into our current era of advanced digitality. Periodizing their reflection of social and technological developments, from year-to-year and movie-to-movie, we can see the evolution of "not just a new form of capitalism but its extension into every aspect of our lives—our attention, our affects, our cognition, and our social relations" (Baumbach, Young and Yue 2017, 2). Through the use of close and symptomatic reading, employing the allegorical method proposed by Jameson, I will demonstrate the truth of this assertion as it relates to the cultural text of the recent blockbuster.

While an allegorical approach, "reading against the grain," will constitute the primary approach of this thesis, my methodology is complicated by recourse to the more direct "surface reading" of *postcritique*, argued for by Rita Felski and Elizabeth Anker (2017), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009) amongst others.

While it would be unfair to characterise Jameson's work as entirely bypassing the readily apprehensible and perceptible, he largely treats the surface of a work as an index of its veiled depths and broader systemic ramifications. The advantage offered by the reading method of the *postcritics* is that it admits the presence of literal, rather than just encoded or figurative, references to the social in a cultural text. To fully explore the blockbuster's mediation of the conditions of advanced digital capitalism, it will be necessary to consider that which is "evident, perceptible, apprehensible in [the] texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding... what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through" (Best and Marcus 2009, 9). These films include direct gestures to features of late informational capitalism so nakedly contrived and representational that they cannot comfortably be placed within a purely allegorical framework. The affordances of postcritique, for my purposes, involve the shift from assuming that these cultural artefacts must be *hiding* their relationship to digital capitalism, that this relationship must be somehow "decoded," to allowing that these connections may sometimes be read from the surface of a text. This approach, however, does not necessarily have to sit in opposition to the critical methods exemplified by Jameson, "refus[ing] the depth model of truth" (Best and Marcus 2009, 10). Indeed, by employing both symptomatic and surface reading methods as required, I hope to demonstrate that the explicit and representational can be used to throw the allegorical dimension of these films into even greater relief.



## SC3

### Review of Literature

My fundamental argument, that many of the signature formal features of the recent blockbuster encode or reflect the conditions of informational capitalism, marks an intervention into two distinct and established bodies of literature. These comprise a large body of work on blockbuster cinema and an equally significant body of work on digital capitalism. Despite the significance and urgency of this argument, however, neither branch of scholarship has fully probed into these particular connections and mediations. As the following survey of relevant work will show, while some literature on the blockbuster has taken a relevant textual approach (Tasker 1993; Cubitt 2004; Purse 2013; Whissel 2014)—exploring the formal elements of spectacular cinema as emblematic of ideological and behavioral developments in the outside world—these examinations have not been thoroughly or consistently performed against the critical horizon of informational capitalism. Conversely, while the literature on digital capitalism has charted changes to attentivity, cognition and social relations in an age of omnipresent digital connectivity (Turkle 2008; Fuchs 2011; Deuze 2012; Crary 2013; Zuboff 2015), it has largely failed to draw parallels between such developments and corresponding changes to the form of the Hollywood blockbuster: a massively successful and pervasive entertainment medium which has penetrated deeply into the popular culture. Accordingly, while writing on effects cinema and writing on informational capitalism have tentatively edged closer to each other in recent years, there is still much to be

done in the rich seam between these two bodies of work. To establish the novel contribution of this research, therefore, I begin with a review of extant writing on the cinematic blockbuster, before moving on to survey the work on digital capitalism.

The current model of Hollywood blockbuster is generally seen to have arisen in the mid-seventies (Biskind 1998; King 2002; Gomery 2013), beginning with the release of Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and entering full flower following the massive success of *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977).<sup>7</sup> These crowd-pleasing, visually spectacular hits quickly displaced the French New Wave-inspired, auteurist works of New Hollywood directors, such as Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, from the multiplex marquee. As Peter Biskind observes in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (1998), "such was Spielberg's (and Lucas's) influence, that every studio movie became a B movie, and at least for the big action blockbusters that dominate the studios' slates, second unit has become first unit" (278). From a broader historical perspective, both the 70's brief flowering of auteurism and subsequent long-term triumph of the populist blockbuster can be read as reactions against the studio system and stodgy "classical" fare of old Hollywood (Prince 2002; Buckland 2009). The lasting success of this uprising can be noted in the business models of today's Hollywood; not least, the mania for "sequelization" perpetrated in the endless and carefully planned-out string of Marvel movies (Johnson 2012), or the slightly more ad hoc franchises considered

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<sup>7</sup> This term as applied to mainstream cinema, however, does extend much further back. Charles Ackland (2013) identifies the first use of the word, in a filmic context, in a review of *No Time For Love* (Leisen 1943). The phrase can also, and easily, be extended to encompass such cinematic cycles as the Universal "Super Jewels" of the silent era, early Technicolour spectacles like *Gone With the Wind* (Fleming 1939) and the historical epic cycle of the fifties and sixties.

in this thesis. The Lucas-produced *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* sequels of the nineteen eighties were not cheap knock-offs, quietly dumped into cinemas for a quick buck, like the cycle of *Frankenstein* spin-offs of the nineteen forties and fifties, or indeed the non-Spielberg *Jaws* films (1978/1983/1987). These sequels were *events* in themselves, heavily promoted and produced with little expense spared. For all the film-makers and films of the nineteen seventies did to revolutionise the motion picture business, however, the Hollywood product of an earlier era continued to monopolise critical analysis throughout the eighties. The films of Alfred Hitchcock's middle period, for instance—such as *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* (1960)—enjoyed particularly close and dedicated scholarly attention (Bordwell 1989; Wood 1989). Strongly informed by the psychoanalytic, semiotic approach of the early and mid-nineteen seventies (Mulvey 1975; Metz 1974), much of this work tends to marginalise the blockbuster, effectively dismissing the genre as of little serious critical interest.

Not until the nineteen nineties did scholars start taking the big-budget basher seriously as a subject for examination and analysis (Tasker 1993; Prince 1998; King 1999). To the extent that this thesis is conceived primarily as an intervention into the formal and thematic preoccupations of big-budget cinema in terms of its relation to digital capitalism, much of that work is not of direct relevance to this research. For example, there is a profusion of writing—decried by Yvonne Tasker as once dominating the discourse around genre movies—that focuses on the “commercial and institutional aspects of [blockbuster] film production” (2015, 5). That body of scholarship, exemplified by the work of Douglas Gomery (2013), Derek Johnson (2012), Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale

(2010) usefully locates event films in terms of the political economy of the blockbuster industrial complex. However, their work does not pay the kind of close attention to textual form that will be an essential instrument of this research, nor does it consider how new image-formations in cinema may be read as reflective of evolving social practices and experience. Similarly, there is a body of writing which explores the similarities the modern blockbuster shares with “early cinema,” their mutual emphasis on spectacle and relationship to different phases of technological modernity. On this front, the groundbreaking work of Miriam Hansen (1994), Tom Gunning (2000), and Yuri Tsivian (1998) is exemplary. However, while helpful as background, this literature inevitably fails to consider the current conditions of digital dependence and the effect this has had on present day modes of spectatorship. Finally, there is a good deal of excellent work on the historical development and deployment of visual special effects, like that of Michele Pierson (2002) and Julie Turnock (2015), which charts the increasing sophistication of visual effects and the new tools they provided film-makers in communicating aspects of narrative and theme. Again, however, this work operates largely in a formally comparative mode, and does not engage directly with the current socio-technological moment as an influence on the shape and texture of the effects-driven blockbuster. It also largely fails to employ, as this thesis will, extended close-reading as a primary method of analysis.

Providing a more useful interpretive model for this research is the work of Yvonne Tasker, particularly her groundbreaking monograph *Spectacular Bodies* (1993). Here, Tasker engages in the close reading of several contemporary action

movies—such as *T2: Judgement Day* (Cameron, 1992), *First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985); *Die Hard* (McTiernan, 1985), and *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986)—to draw connections between external social processes and their reflection in Hollywood cinema. In particular, she dissects what she terms the “musculisation”<sup>8</sup> of popular film and subsequent assertion of “the primacy of the body over the voice” (5). As this indicates, *Spectacular Bodies* primarily concentrates on issues of gender representation, and therefore largely fails to broach these films’ contextualization in a capitalist context, let alone in the context of informational capitalism.<sup>9</sup> However, Tasker’s conception of the recurring cinematic image-formation as both a reflection of shifting social mores *and* itself an agent of such change is of great value here. A central argument of *Spectacular Bodies* is that social “identity is formed and transformed through our consumption of images” (15), further asserting that crucial “issues of cultural power [are] at stake” in any meaningful discussion of the “status and operations of action cinema” (5). Though my own work will operate along more figurative lines, emulating Jameson, it is nonetheless strongly informed by Tasker’s identification of the image, as much if not more so than the scripted action, as key to unlocking the cinematic text’s underlying socio-political dimensions.

This assiduous investigation of formal-tropes-as-cultural-metaphor was a baton seized by Geoff King in his similarly-titled 2000 study, *Spectacular narratives: Hollywood in the age of the blockbuster*. Crucially, *Spectacular*

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<sup>8</sup> Essentially: the credibility of both male and, increasingly, female leads being chiefly established by how well they filled out a tank top.

<sup>9</sup> The latter being largely inevitable, of course, considering that Tasker was writing at the very dawn of the internet and long before the advent of widespread digital connectivity.

*narratives* attempts to dispel a popular criticism of blockbuster movies—that they dismiss the substance of “theme” and “story” in favour of the purely visceral and visual—by drawing thematic parallels between the modern blockbuster and the pictures of classical Hollywood. King posits an ongoing dialectic between “constructions of individual freedom, ‘nature’ and ‘authenticity’ – on one side – and oppressive institutions, ‘decadence’ and over-reliance on technology on the other” (13). Such themes, he argues, are as routinely conjured by clusters of pixels as they are explicated in lengthy studio-shot dialogue. While this is an important insight, it also suggests the limitations of King’s project as a model for my own: *Spectacular narratives* always has one eye fixed on history, on the “frontier discourse” its author holds as a constant dynamic in American filmmaking. In other words, King focuses on linking contemporary blockbusters to historical forms, while I am invested in connecting contemporary blockbusters with current techno-cultural operations. Further, while the past King refers to is essentially framed in terms of filmic practices, I am interested in linking the films I discuss to a broader social and political horizon. My work will not examine the recent event film as either a continuation or refutation of earlier cinematic models, but rather explore its unique formal elements as mediations of socio-political realities belonging to this particular cultural moment.

Nearer to this approach, and digging more deeply into close textual analysis, is Sean Cubitt’s extraordinary 2004 study *The Cinema Effect*. Particularly relevant to this research are his chapters on Neo-Baroque Cinema and Technological Film. Here, Cubitt closely analyses big budget effects films

such as *Independence Day* (Emmerich 1997) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999) through a fundamentally allegorical lens, tracking how these films correspond to the political world. Cubitt describes the "technological" Hollywood product of the early 2000s as "a windowless monad, a simple structure unafflicted by connections to the rest of the world, entirely inward" (242), arguing that "the digital corresponds so closely to the emergent loss of an ideological structure to social meaning because it no longer pretends to represent the world" (250). While this thesis similarly focuses on the blockbuster's allegorical relation to the world, it nonetheless acknowledges a meaningful formal development which has occurred since the publication of *The Cinema Effect*. The post-2005 event film often appears frantic, in fact, to establish "connections to the rest of the world," however tenuous or half-baked; a delayed reaction, perhaps, against just that "emergent loss" of ideological structures and social meaning Cubitt characterises as part and parcel of the digital age. My research, while primarily interested in allegorical analysis, also considers the recent blockbuster's recurrent attempts to explicitly represent the world beyond. The conceptual limitations and inarticulacy of these attempts further serve to illuminate the changing conceptions of history, politics and interpersonal relations that are a by-product of the endless, omnidirectional "information flows" of digital capitalism.

This is not to say that some critics have entirely failed to link film form to specific digital technologies. Writers like Lorrie Palmer, for instance, evince a strong interest in the tech itself—"another man, armed with a Sony HDC-F950 camera, his feet encased in Rollerblades... aims the camera upward at the runner

and rockets past him at speeds as high as thirty miles per hour” (2012, 2)—while others, such as Stephen Prince (2012) and Bruce Bennett (2015), are more concerned with the aesthetic effects enabled by those tools. Most of this work, however, continues to neglect the relationship of film form to the broader context of informational capitalism. For instance, while Prince’s *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (2012) usefully explores the “unprecedented ability” digital tools provide filmmakers “for anchoring [a] scene in a perceptual reality that the viewer will find credible” (32), he fails to interrogate those realities in terms of the shifting and increasingly fluid new *spatialities* (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011) which are a key aspect of our current techno-cultural experience. Further, such work fails to situate digital filmmaking tools themselves in the context of a broader set of technological innovations that are implicated in informational capitalism. Where critics like Prince emphasise the impact of digital technology on cinematic form primarily at the production level, I will examine how the formal construction of the recent blockbuster film mediates, and is mediated by, those ubiquitous digital applications which, since 2005, have been reshaping and remapping the world at large.

The approach taken in this thesis is strongly indebted to the work of Lisa Purse, particularly her books *Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011) and *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* (2013). Purse pursues an often minutely-detailed exploration of both discrete sequences and whole movies, an encompassing and comprehensive perspective which takes into account a film’s “narrative operations, the terms on which they choose to dramatise action, [and] the



stylistic choices evident in their audio-visual presentation” (2013, 11). She also evinces a sustained interest in how a recurring special effect motif, or "topos", can be "analysed in terms of its cultural valence, its media-cultural histories, and in the ways it might illuminate the context in which it is embedded" (2015).

However, while a cursory glance at the contents page of *Digital*

*Imaging*—revealing such terms such as “interpretation”, “representation” and “historicising”—may suggest that an actively allegorical line of enquiry is being pursued, Purse's work is typically less interested in extra-filmic developments in digitality as it is in linking new production technologies to changes in film form.

This particular text also tends to concentrate upon films which make explicit commentary on contemporary social issues, structured around a reasonably developed and coherent thesis. My own work, by contrast, is less interested in what, say, Steven Spielberg (in *Minority Report*, 2002) might think about digital surveillance in criminal investigations, or Lana and Lily Wachowski (in *The Matrix*, 1999) have to offer about the role of humanity in an increasingly mechanised society. Rather, it is in the comparatively inchoate bombast and bluster of the action franchise, the recurring use of visual tropes across series and sequels, that I intend to parse out most of my allegorical reflections and echoes. I believe that pursuing such an enquiry may well tell us more—or different—things about collective mindsets in conditions of advanced digital capitalism than that enabled by a focus on movies which already know they have “something to say.”

Kristen Whissel’s *Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Contemporary Cinema* (2014) is in many ways a synthesis of the textual approach to blockbuster

studies outlined above with—to a limited degree—the literature on advanced capitalism I am about to discuss. “Spectacular visual effects,” as Whissel observes, “articulate a range of complex concepts and thematic concerns that are central both to the narratives of the films in which they appear and to the broader historical contexts in which the films were produced and exhibited” (4). In arguing this, her writing combines the socio-political interests of Tasker with a commitment to concentrated textual analysis, if on a less intense basis, as engaged in by Purse. She also follows Cubitt in reaching out from the cinematic text to find metaphorical parallels and analogues in the world beyond. Crucially, Whissel adds an important new conceptual layer to this framework by developing the concept of the effects *emblem*. She uses this term to refer to striking image formations which recur throughout the contemporary event movie, functioning as “allegorical assemblages”(8) which only achieve fullest meaning through their contextual relationship to surrounding text and with the viewer’s own experiential externalities. Whissel’s approach is most congenial to the allegorical links I propose to make in this research, locating and unpacking formal tropes which reflect the “major conceits, themes, anxieties, and desires both of the films in which [they] appear and of the historical moments in which they [are] produced and exhibited” (171). However, unlike Whissel, I will not exclusively focus on the use of digital effects, or on recurring compositions and camera movements, to locate my emblems. I also take into account a broader range of aesthetic and structural devices which can be found repeated in the blockbuster franchises under review, such as a new recourse to literal real-world representations, and the abolishment of biological necessities like

food and sleep from the recent event film. Importantly, too, where Whissel examines her emblems through a largely generalized socio-political lens, I will be locating mine on the specific horizon of digital capitalism—the curve of which I will map out in the review of that body of literature which follows.

Discussion of capitalism, in any of its stages, tends to concentrate on economic relationships and structures; means of production, the inequalities between labour and capital, etc. Writing on digital or informational capitalism is no exception. "As it comes under the sway of an expansionary market logic," wrote Dan Schiller in 1999, "the Internet is catalyzing an epochal political-economic transition toward what I call digital capitalism—and toward changes that, for much of the population, are unpropitious" (xvii). This unpropitiousness can certainly be tracked in terms of globalised wealth inequality facilitated by digitality's "*decentralized network of networks*" (Schiller xvi), or the exploitation of employees—"playborers", using Christian Fuchs' portmanteau (2014, 78)—by massive tech firms like Google. Though these political-economic concerns underlie much of the work to follow, particularly in the first chapter, I will employ the term "digital capitalism" to refer to a broader context in which digital technology has reshaped the operations of capitalism, and concomitantly reshaped human relationships, communication and behaviour. What can be tracked through these recent developments, and found reflected in the blockbuster entries under review, are epochal changes to the way individuals in advanced Western capitalist nations relate to themselves, to each other, and to larger systems of politico-economic control. Former conceptions of personal

privacy, temporality and biological necessity, amidst many other fading notions, have been reconfigured by those operations Shosanna Zuboff (2015) terms Big Other and Jonathan Crary (2013) refers to as the 24/7 environment. It is this behavioural and social level at which most of my analysis will occur.

The work on digital capitalism that informs this research can be broken down into two broad categories: writing on the economic, technological, infrastructural and ideological conditions of globalised informational capitalism, and more focused studies on specific changes to social behaviours and the conjunction between these and capital. Taken together, this growing body of literature charts the politico-economic development of informational capitalism, and the extensive infiltration of digital technology into all aspects of social, professional and political life. In the review which follows, I will outline key theoretical frameworks which this thesis will then apply to the contemporary blockbuster, while previewing some of the ways in which these frameworks will be applied. This approach is a modification of my summary of writing on the blockbuster above, in which I outlined the relevant contributions of previous authors and identified areas in which I aim to extend upon their work. There, I argued that the field of film studies has not paid sufficient attention to how formal changes in the recent blockbuster may be allegorically expressive of the conditions of digital capitalism. Here, I put into conversation writing on the technologies, behaviours and control systems of digitality with the explosive, populist cultural text of the recent event film. Essentially, the following review will outline the external realities of social and economic systems in the digital

age, as posited by this literature, and suggest where connections may be drawn to the form of the movies under consideration.

Important to understanding the infrastructural underpinnings of digital capitalism is the rapidly growing field of “software studies” (Fuller 2008; Kitchin and Dodge 2011; Manovich 2011; Wardrip-Fruin 2012; Franklin 2015; Bratton 2016). As opposed to concentrating on hardware or the interface of the digital device, software studies “focuses on the etiology of code and how code makes digital technologies what they are and shapes what they do” (Kitchin and Dodge 2011, 13). This body of work so tracks the myriad ways in which coded technologies have become embedded in the daily life of advanced capitalist countries over the past three decades, creating what Mark Kitchin and Rob Dodge term new spatialities, “subtly evolving layers of context and practices that fold together people and things and actively shape social relations” (2011, 14). Further, they argue that while software is now near ubiquitous, the speed of its development, the fact that it is generally “hidden, invisible inside the machine” (2011, 4), and that it may appear simply as “an extension of previous systems to which [people] are already conditioned” (20) have made its presence and impact easy to ignore. As Nigel Thrift and Shaun French point out, “even though software has infused into the very fabric of everyday life—just like the automobile—it brings no such level of questioning in its wake” (2002, 313). Further obfuscating the scale and depth of software’s impact and ubiquity is that it both alters the operations of daily living, and itself adapts to profitably suit those changing conditions. As Rob Van Kranenberg notes, “in a mediated environment, it is no longer clear what is being mediated, and what mediates.”

(2008, 12). I suggest that a deep if largely unarticulated collective anxiety about this mutability, the omnipresence of digital encoding and our growing dependence upon it, can be found interpellated in the narratives and formal elements of the films under review.<sup>10</sup> When today's action blockbuster hero bounces from one exotic locale to another in a cut, they are often chasing—as in the latter *Bourne*, *Mission* and *Fast* films—some vaguely defined piece of coding capable of altering “the conditions through which society, space, and time, and thus spatiality, are produced” (Kitchin and Dodge 2011, 13). These characters exist, as we do, in a world of constant mutation and reformulation, the once seemingly solid fabric of everyday life increasingly re-woven into an intangible tapestry of zeroes and ones.

This thesis will also draw upon work on what Manuel Castells (2004) terms the “information society.” Where writing in the field of software studies centres around the etiology of code, exploring its effects primarily on an infrastructural level, this work is of a less materialist bent. For one thing, it explores how the changing character of information and communication has impacted upon the make-up and organisation of social groupings (May 2002, Feather 2008, Mansell et al 2009, Webster 2014). The sociologist Frank Webster, for instance—informed by the work of Castells and John Urry (2005)—tracks the development of new *collectivities* enabled by widespread digital connectivity, discussing the rise of “new mobilities” in which “ideas and identities [are] transmitted and exchanged across groups and distance” (2014, 137). Webster

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, the familiar trope of the lost signal or glitching screen at a crucial moment in the drama might be read to reflect that sense of near-panic which occurs when Facebook's servers go down for an hour or two.

views these mobilities as allowing individuals to form groups, and forge collective voices, not circumscribed by the traditional geopolitical boundaries of the pre-digital era. To a certain extent, the recent blockbuster appears to share this spirit of optimism; the digital device bringing together geographically distant allies in *Jason Bourne*, *Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation* (McQuarrie 2015) and *The Fate of the Furious* (Gray 2017). However, these films also have an affinity with Shoshana Zuboff's darker view of the societal, political and personal ramifications of informational capitalism, as modulated by the development of digital technologies.<sup>11</sup> Zuboff describes a new politico-economic order circumscribed by "pervasive computer mediation, [through which] events, objects, processes, and people become visible, knowable, and shareable in a new way. The world is reborn as data" (2015, 77). The cinematic rogue agent, his or her form translated into pixels on a monitor screen, tracked and captured in the digital image, can be read as metaphorically "reborn as data". So too can the amnesiac Jason Bourne, whose sense of self can only be recovered by locating the right manila folder, digital file or piece of personal testimony. "Visible, knowable, and shareable in a new way," in such films we see not only the world reconfigured as information by digital capitalism, but the life of the individual within it.

Zuboff is one of several theorists (Constantiou and Kallinikos 2015; Hallinan and Striphas 2016; Couldry and Mejias 2018) whose work on the extractive and invasive operations of big data will be of great relevance for the

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<sup>11</sup> Zuboff's formative work from the late eighties onward introduced such concepts as "surveillance capitalism" and the "information civilisation," and is a key influence on much of the subsequent work in this area I will soon discuss.

work to follow. Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2018), for instance, have posited the conversion of people into *capta* as a form of “data colonialism”, through which the powerful may pillage personal information for their own enrichment and continued dominance. They view this *datafication* as an essentially authoritarian process which “categorises subjects and builds societies towards total algorithmic control” (17). While the text of the modern blockbuster often appears to share Couldry and Mejias’ “reject[ion of] the idea that the continuous collection of data from human beings is natural, let alone rational” (18) it is simultaneously, if somewhat guardedly, prone to defending state surveillance and information capture so long as it occurs at “the right hands”. These films present datafication as at once a *fait accompli* and something to be violently resisted; in a similar contradiction, excessive corporate and state power are viewed critically but rarely comprehensively challenged. It is certainly justifiable, therefore, to argue that such films’ interpellation of real-world tensions serve in some part to normalise the social-political processes of informational capitalism.

From a Marxist perspective, of course, that quality of ambivalence is integral to the success and longevity of those operations—a fact that points us to another body of work relevant to the nexus of digital technologies and capitalism, namely, work on “Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism” (ed. Fuchs and Mosco 2016). While this field of criticism is driven by figures as diverse as Terry Eagleton (2011), Andreas Wittel (2012) and Vincent Mosco (2016), this thesis will rely primarily on the work of Christian Fuchs. Fuchs synthesizes and updates the arguments of influential twentieth century critics, such as Horkheimer,



Adorno and Foucault, to explore the specific conditions of digital capitalism through a Marxist lens. Many of the socio-political tensions which Fuchs describes can be found expressed in the narrative and formal devices of the recent blockbuster. He notes, for instance, that “modernity, on the one hand, advances the ideal of a right to privacy, but on the other hand, it must continuously advance surveillance that threatens to undermine privacy rights” (2014, 161). As I will show in Chapter One, these films are often similarly torn between celebrating the agency of the individual and defending the state’s right to monitor, track and dispatch bad actors who threaten capitalist ideologies and economic systems. Similarly, they appear to share Fuchs’ skepticism towards an attitude of “internet solutionism,” which he argues is better read as “a form of Internet fetishism: it sees an artefact as a solution to human-made problems” (135). The recent blockbuster consistently questions the efficacy of the technological artefact as a solution to such “human-made problems” as institutional corruption, personal avarice and ideological conflict. The chief antagonist of *The Fate of the Furious*, for instance, believes a digitally enabled coup will allow the establishment of a new and better status quo. Her plans are undone, of course, by our heroes’ commitment to the “old values” of friendship, self-sacrifice and personal fortitude, plus a barricade of decidedly analogue supercars. As in so many of these films’ concluding action sequences, the world is saved without a smartphone in sight.

Nevertheless, connectivity—the *signal*—has in the past two decades become a vital factor in almost every aspect of private and public life. As such, literature on digitality’s reshaping of socio-political systems, not according to

latitudes and longitudes but along waves of information, is of significant value here (Luhmann 1997; Urry 2000; Lash 2002). Particularly relevant is Scott Lash's conception of "information flows" (2002), access to which he sees as dictating success and failure, online freedom or analog serfdom, in the context of current digital capitalism. "The implications of all this," he writes, "is a new, non-linear regime of power" (6); a system in which "no longer is social class determined by access to the mode of production, but by access to the 'mode of information'" (Poster 1990, 58). If we read *class* here, at least in part, as synonymous with *agency*, then Lash's "wild/tame" longitudes and "live/dead" latitudes take on a very literal meaning within the fictional confines of the blockbuster narrative. For the spy or action hero, whose survival and success depend on simultaneously being *nowhere*—in being untrackable—and *everywhere*—in terms of their ability to track others—the difference between life and death for our hero or heroine often rests on their access to or alienation from sources of information. The politico-economic forces of digital capitalism separate out the "haves" and the "have nots" along very similar lines. In professional, political and private life, access is all.

Another pertinent account of the reshaping of physical and social spaces by new technologies by digital operations can be found in work on the "smart city", such as that of Nicos Komninos (2002), Scott McQuire (2008) and Robert G Hollands (2008, 2015). In *The Media City* (2008). This literature explores at length the ways in which urban spaces have been reconfigured by digitalisation, and how the experience of everyday city living has changed as a result. While connected to the writing on software studies described above, McQuire's work

in particular goes beyond the infrastructural to consider the psychological and emotional effects of these developments. Profound isolation, he argues, may be waiting just on the other side of online connectivity: “If the phone or internet goes down... social interaction can no longer be replaced by walking out on the street, or travelling to a common public place where you might expect to find members of your ‘personal network’” (107). McQuire posits that interpersonal *connection*, outside of the home or workplace, is no longer a resource the city can offer. As explored in Chapter One, this new reality can be seen reflected in the bustling anonymity of the crowded squares, train stations and shopping malls through which our characters chase each other in the recent action film. All places of assembly, whether in London or Moscow, appear very much like another when only furtively glanced at while muttering into a cellphone or wifi-connected headset, as these characters are prone to do. Any sense of a location's “cultural identity,” too, gets muted and blurred by the films’ rapid edits and close tracking shots, their frequent intercutting of the *scene-on-the-ground* with the same action, distanced and desaturated, on a surveilling monitor somewhere else. The only connections which matter—indeed, which meaningfully exist—are those made through an earpiece or screen.

A large tract of writing on the digital concerns exactly this techno-cultural phenomenon: the behavioural and sociological effects of “mobile media,” the smartphone in particular. As Mizuko Ito and Daisuke Okabe note in *Personal, portable, pedestrian: mobile phones in Japanese life* (2006, ed. Ito, Okabe and Matsuda): “mobile phones create new kinds of bounded places... that merge technical standards and social norms” (260). The term “mobile” is key here, as is

the physical presence of the personal, portable digital device. The literal weight of a phone or tablet in a coat pocket, the psychological and societal obligation to keep connected at all times and in any location; the digital "tethering device" (Turkle 2008) can be felt to constitute both a comfort and curse. This research will take frequent recourse to critical work on that subject—including that of Jonathan Katz and Mark Aakhus (2002), Sherry Turkle (2008), Tizana Terranova (2008), Larissa Hjorth and Sun Sun Lim (2012), Susanna Paasonen (2016) and Eva Thulin (2018)—especially in the second and third chapters. The parallels between their analysis and the form of the recent blockbuster are often striking. As digital connectivity may lead to either capture or salvation in the action-adventure narrative, for instance, it is not difficult to discern a reflection of similar tensions in the culture at large, "an unresolved clash between the individual quest for connected nearness and continuity and the inherent traps and pressures of perpetual contact" (Thulin 2018, 477).

The work of Sherry Turkle and Susanna Paasonen, in particular, will provide key critical frameworks for my second chapter and sections of the third. Both authors explore contradictions inherent to that which Mark Deuze (2012) calls "a life lived in media," an experience of the world increasingly mediated by the digital device. One of these contradictions, as Turkle observes, is that "we insist that our world is increasingly complex[,] yet we have created a communications culture that has decreased the time available for us to sit and think uninterrupted[ly]" (132). As Shoshana Zuboff (2015) and Tiziana Terranova (2012) note, these constant distractions and diversions are a boon to the global economic operations of big data, creating what Terranova terms an "attention

economy" (2). As I shall discuss in Chapter Two, the recent blockbuster's predilection for quick bursts of dense visual data mirrors this techno-cultural phenomenon, charging viewers with converting dizzying CGI diasporas, almost instantaneously, into coherent narrative and/or thematic meaning. While this often proves a futile and near-impossible task, audiences nonetheless continue to accept—if not demand—such exhausting CGI blitzkriegs at regular intervals. "By consuming attention and making it scarce," notes Terranova, "the wealth of information creates poverty that in its turn produces the conditions for a new market to emerge" (4). Locating another, not dissimilar paradox, Paasonen describes the "affective economy" of social media as being "centrally one of diverting pleasures but not necessarily one of sheer fun. Pleasures, as intensities of feeling, may be elusive, strained and dark, ambiguous and paradoxical—and this may be where much of their appeal lies." This too shall be considered in the second chapter, along with another crucial observation of Paasonen's; that "the temporalities of social media constantly move and stretch from the current moment to the future and the more or less recent past" (9). Indeed, the chief investigation of Chapter Two will be into how recent blockbuster has absorbed, and on occasion tries to redress, the cultural impact of new *micro-micro* temporalities enabled and encouraged by omnipresent mobile media.

Finally, a dedicated analysis of how personal and professional lives have become increasingly entwined in digital capitalist societies can be found in the work of Jonathan Crary, Sarah Sharma and Melissa Gregg, and these three scholars provide the theoretical keystones for my third chapter. Gregg's *Work's Intimacy* (2011), for instance, speaks of "an era of presence bleed, [in which] the

possibility of asserting absence from the workplace becomes a matter of intense concern" (14), while, through a compelling series of extended case studies, Sharma's *In the meantime: Temporality and cultural politics* (2014) investigates how work life is now mediated by the new "temporal architectures" (51) of late modernity: "As subjects of value within global capital," Sharma notes, "the time of the frequent business traveler is an important object of biopolitical regulation" (40). As I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, this is true too of the highly-trained special agents, computer experts or anti-terrorist enforcers—constantly under watch, "on-the-go", running out of time—which populate the modern action movie. Also relevant here is Jonathan Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2014), which examines what he sees as a concerted attack on the state of sleep itself, the one condition in which human beings are not of any financial or productive value. He argues that even this one remaining bastion of biological normality is being removed from us through the "relentless incursion of the non-time of 24/7 into every aspect of social or personal life" (30). Crary's extended description of a world in which one feels both constantly isolated and never alone, in which no basic human necessity cannot be monetised and co-opted by capitalist interest, resonates deeply when applied to the formal devices and narrative structures of the recent event film. As I will describe in the third chapter, periods of natural rest, relaxation and reflection are almost entirely absent, suggesting the inherent "incompatibility of 24/7 capitalism with any social behaviors that have a rhythmic pattern of action and pause" (124). There is no real "happy ending", no lasting domestic bliss, for the heroes of these franchises: Tom Cruise's Ethan Hunt must always be running, Matt Damon's

Jason Bourne perpetually hiding, and Vin Diesel's Dominic Toretto constantly boosting cars.

It should be noted that the review above of the literature which informs my research is not exhaustive. A number of other critics will be cited in specific contexts in the course of the chapters to follow. However, those summarised do provide the core critical frameworks and analytical lenses which I will apply to the cinematic franchises under analysis, within a particular and deeply relevant techno-cultural context. Placing writing on contemporary blockbuster film into conversation with that on informational capitalism, exploring what Scott McQuire terms "the increasing convergence of computing and telecommunications with older media such as photography, cinema and television" (2008, 8), I will attempt to "unmask"—as Jameson (1981) suggests—the widely-derided and oft-dismissed cultural artefact of the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster as its own complex, and highly relevant, "socially symbolic act."

## ONE

### HELLO TO GOD'S EYE

*"Say hello to God's Eye... Now, this little bastard hacks into anything that's on the digital network. That means every cellphone, satellite, ATM machine and computer. Simultaneously. It's got a microphone or a lens, God's Eye can find you... Let me put it to you this way. It took us nearly a decade to find Osama Bin Laden. With this, we'd have located him anywhere on the planet, in a couple of hours. Now that's a serious piece of machinery, [and] could be catastrophic in the wrong hands."*

- Mr Nobody (Kurt Russell), *Furious 7*, 2015

*"Google is at the same time the best and the worst that has ever happened on the Internet. Google is evil like the figure of Satan and good like the figure of God. It is the dialectical Good Evil. Google is part of the best Internet practices because its services can enhance and support the everyday life of humans... The problem is that, in providing its services, Google necessarily has to exploit users and engage in the surveillance and commodification of user-oriented data... Google is a sorcerer of capitalism. It calls up a spell that questions capitalism itself."*

- Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: An Introduction to Critical Theory*, 2014



## SC 1

### **"Spying on 30 million people isn't part of my job description" Big Brother, Big Other, and the beginning of a long *Dark Knight***

Near the end of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), saintly boffin Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) enters his name into a great bank of computer monitors, turns, smiles wistfully and walks slowly toward camera as a mosaic of blue screens behind him crackle, spark and turn black (Fig 2). It is one of the director's most perversely lyrical compositions, and one which speaks to a finality that itself now seems somewhat perverse. Fox has just destroyed a surveillance outpost designed by Bruce Wayne/Batman (Christian Bale) to catch the Joker (Heath Ledger) and end his reign of terror over Gotham City, tapping into every cellphone in the city to do so. The completion of that task heralds a return to the old-school decency represented by Fox, to a baseline ethical order which had to be temporarily suspended in order to be lastingly preserved. Our heroes' goal attained, there is no longer any use for the weapon itself - and so, therefore, without any thought for future application, development or profit, the machine stops. Wayne's wall of screens, blinking out rectangle-by-rectangle, is dead; none of this will be mentioned again. Although some critics have taken the position that Fox's destruction of the device only superficially "repudiates the violations of civil liberties perpetrated for [Batman's] cause", citing among other complicating factors the scene's "morose, forbidding Hans Zimmer score"<sup>12</sup> (Cobb 2018, 23), Freeman's beatific expression and the sheer beauty of the

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<sup>12</sup> Rather overlooking the fact Hans Zimmer has exactly one compositional mode in *The Dark Knight* trilogy, which is "morose and forbidding."



Fig 2. "Beautiful... Unethical... Dangerous." Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) makes his exit. Christopher Nolan, *The Dark Knight*, 2008, captured by the author from DVD.

exploding screens behind him support a more literal reading: the machine has served its function and can now be permanently retired.<sup>13</sup>

It is this notion which seems most anachronistic viewing the film today. The inextricable linking of a new and powerful technology with one specific purpose, and the idea that commerce, as distinct from "the state", might allow such valuable coding to be destroyed following its first round of successful beta testing. The inherent commercial and political potentialities of Wayne's device, its capacity to operate profitably within "a new form of information capitalism [which] aims to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control" (Zuboff 2015, 75), is summarily dismissed. In fact, such a thought never even seems to occur. *The Dark Knight* is so consumed with

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<sup>13</sup> We should note that Bale's Batman never tries to use such technology again. When the good guys are desperately searching out the revolutionary Bane (an even more destructive and dangerous adversary than the Joker) in *The Dark Knight Rises*, for instance, Bruce never turns to Lucius to suggest that present circumstances might justify breaking out the ol' sonar device for one last caper.

mounting its defence of a governmental "Big Brother" that it fails almost entirely to recognise the then-nascent rise of that "new universal architecture" which Shoshanna Zuboff, borrowing from Lacan, has dubbed *Big Other*: "a ubiquitous networked institutional regime that records, modifies, and commodifies everyday experience from toasters to bodies, communication to thought, all with a view to establishing new pathways to monetization and profit" (2015, 82). For all its power to pry, to inveigle itself into millions of personal devices, Batman's sonar machine is strangely detached from any larger *network*, literally or ideologically, apart from serving as a vehicle for some superficial wrestling with certain ramifications of the Patriot Act. At the time, its destruction at the end of the film could easily be accepted as part-and-parcel of the narrative conventions of the stand-alone fantasy blockbuster, albeit one with a heavier than usual amount of self-serious social commentary. Today, it evokes some mad parallel universe in which Mark Zuckerberg found out the Russian Government had used his social media platform to subvert the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and responded by immediately shutting down Facebook.<sup>14</sup>

In both a formal and symbolic sense, however, Nolan's glowing blue wall of data has proved lastingly influential. Although the "wall of screens" was a familiar presence in film long before 2008,<sup>15</sup> it is the visual design of this iteration—a vast bank of individual video windows, wider than it is tall, each flickering display constantly cutting between different feeds— which has largely

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<sup>14</sup> Less facetiously, it remains difficult to find a similarly decisive technological denouement for many of the tech-heavy blockbusters which followed in *The Dark Knight's* wake. Even when such invasive digital innovations are not explicitly given continuation between franchise entries, they are very rarely destroyed entirely; the individual bad actor may perish, but their coding lives on.

<sup>15</sup> Most obviously in the *Bond* series, such as *GoldenEye* (Campbell 1995) or *Die Another Day* (Tamahori 2002); other examples include *The Avengers* (Chechik 1998), *The Recruit* (Donaldson 2003) and *Syriana* (Gaghan 2005).

provided a template for those that followed. These walls can be found flickering in the "gritty, real, contemporary" landscapes of the latter *Bourne* films, the high-octane heists of *Furious 7* (Wan 2015) and *Fate of the Furious* (Gray 2017), and the CIA Ops Centres of *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation* and *Fall Out* (McQuarrie 2015/2018). In terms of thematic function, the motif has also outlived its rather retrograde framing in *The Dark Knight*, where it enabled merely a limited commentary on the politics of the War on Terror, to assume a much richer and more encompassing significance, capturing the growing pervasiveness of contemporary digital surveillance. While Wayne's machine tapped only into private cellphones<sup>16</sup>—which the film presents as being quite terrifying enough—many of its successors are able to draw data from practically any digital device, transforming it instantaneously into pixels on the wall of screens. As dozens of display windows cut frenetically between live video feeds, archive footage, still images and satellite photography, what this evokes is the vast and undifferentiated data harvesting of *Big Other*, a "deeply intentional and highly consequential new logic of accumulation" (2015, 75) that Zuboff has dubbed *surveillance capitalism*. The form and framing of the post-*Dark Knight* "wall" reflects a world increasingly in thrall to those screens beyond the screen. It speaks, also, to a culture newly cowed by a developing awareness of digitality's power to track, monitor and record even the most mundane activity and to—if not necessarily actively use it against us—appropriate and exploit "life itself as

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<sup>16</sup> And not even into their inbuilt cameras or stored data; the images displayed on Batman's monitors are the result of so-called "sonic triangulation" only possible when their owners are actively on a voice call.

raw material" (Couldry and Mejias 2018, 349) in order to enrich the surveiller and enshrine their systems of control.

Accordingly, this chapter will argue that the longstanding cinematic trope of the wall of screens, previously used to visualise traditional one-way surveillance activities, has been repurposed during the past decade to emblemise instead the rise of ubiquitous surveillance capitalism and connected dataveillance practices. Further, that its deployment in the films under analysis reflects a developing awareness of the extent to which we have become complicit in our own exploitation. Much of the content these more recent walls display is a form of "found footage", such as social media profile pictures and hacked cellphone videos, evoking the "always on, always on you" (Turkle 2008) contemporary culture of voluntary "mass self-surveillance" (Fuchs, 2011) which underpins the functioning of Big Data. From *The Dark Knight's* redemptive destruction of its sonar machine, to the figurative shrug with which *Furious 7* (Wan 2015) and *Fate of the Furious* (Gray 2017) greet their fantastically invasive spy-tech software, we can see reflected in the changing form of the action blockbuster's wall of screens a shifting collective attitude toward the tools and societal impacts of digitality. "If the rhetoric of 'annihilation' generally corresponds to the initial roll-out of a new technology," Scott McQuire observes, "and 'assimilation' to the moment in which that technology has entered the dominant social habitus to such an extent that it can ground new forms of abstract knowledge and social practice, [then] what separates these two poles is the passage of negotiation" (2008, x). Through a close analysis of the differing ways in which recent blockbusters—primarily, two entries from the *Bourne*

series and this pair of latter instalments in the *Fast & Furious* franchise—frame and utilise their respective walls of screens, I will chart how these films can be seen to mirror a cultural “passage of negotiation”— from profound anxiety to qualified acceptance—over the increasing ubiquity of digital applications, and the invasive data capture which we have come to recognise as an inevitable consequence of their usage.

In the course of my exploration of the wall of screens as mediating this shift in the nature of surveillance, I will also be complicating existing accounts of the films themselves. The great majority of writing on the *Fast & Furious* series, for instance, has almost exclusively focused on its representations of race, particularly regarding Latino characterisations (Beltrán 2013; Davè 2017), without acknowledging the increasing infiltration of high-tech spy movie trappings—prominently, “the wall” itself—into a franchise best known for and promoted upon its high octane frippery. Likewise, critical work on the *Bourne* franchise has tended to concentrate on its ongoing commentary on the capacity of covert intelligence agencies to subvert or endanger geopolitical relations (Epps 2008; Dodds 2017), the surveiller/surveilled relationship most consistently interpreted against the horizon of “an aesthetic of geopolitics... produced through the incorporation of global imaging and information systems into cinematic continuity devices” (Zimmer 2015). I will also extend upon existing literature on the role of surveillance in cinema—such as that of Dietmar Zammerer (2004/2012), Garrett Stewart (2012/2015) and Catherine Zimmer (2015)—by arguing that the recent blockbuster deploys the image-formation of the wall of screens in novel and revealing ways which could only occur within

our specific contemporary techno-cultural context; one in which the threat of a panopticonic observer has been largely superseded by that of constant and comprehensive self-surveillance. At a time in which daily life is ever more extensively mediated by digital applications, I argue that the blockbuster “wall” has come to symbolise a new and existentially troubling “information-based world system” (Zimmer 2015, 118) in which nearly all activity can be captured, converted, co-opted and commodified—a “new *technopticon*” within which “privacy is long gone” and “all one can ever really hope to do is block access” (Stewart 2012, 12). The challenges faced by Jason Bourne in the two films explored here, to access and use data without in turn becoming it, parallel those we meet in attempting to exploit the conveniences and connectivity of digitality without falling prey to *big data*'s “extractive operations [which] turn ordinary life into the daily renewal of a 21st-century Faustian pact” (Zuboff 2015, 83). Further, one can identify similar concerns creeping out even amidst the burning rubber, macho posturing and cartoonish extremes of the *Fast & Furious* franchise; our “collective thinking and collective fantasies” over Big Brother and Big Other, ubiquitous digital mediation and the self-surrendering of life’s raw material, crashing by in pixelated waves on that sinister and all-seeing “empowered eye” (Turner 1998, 102), the contemporary blockbuster’s recurrent and ever-shifting wall of screens.

## SC 2A

### **"Look at us. Look at what they make you give"**

#### ***The Bourne Ultimatum*, Google, and the impossibility of escape**

The Paul Greengrass-directed entries of the *Bourne* franchise, perhaps more than any of the other films discussed in these pages, exhibit a consistent level of engagement with contemporary issues unfolding in the world at the time of their production.<sup>17</sup> Where they have most obviously invited—and received—critical interrogation in terms of their deliberately ambivalent commentary upon the operations and ethics of state surveillance, my analysis will explore how these films mediate anxieties about emerging forms of pervasive and commodified digital data capture. Through a close textual reading of the image-formation of the CIA's wall of screens in these films, as it evolved across the near-decade separating *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) and *Jason Bourne* (2016), we can observe the collective sense of a changing global environment in which "events, objects, processes, and people [have] become visible, knowable, and shareable in a new way" (Zuboff 2015, 77). In the analysis to follow I will concentrate on two sequences, made eight years apart, both of which centre on the wall of screens. They begin at about the same point in each film (10:37 and 15:59 respectively) and share the same basic structure and plot function, intercutting between Bourne and an ally making their way through crowded spaces in a European city, and this same action being viewed by intelligence operatives on their digital bank of monitors in the United States. An

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<sup>17</sup> The titular character being conceived to resemble, Greengrass has said, "a real man in a strong contemporary landscape" and the narratives in which he operates to "feel like they could be ripped out of tomorrow's newspapers" (Carnevale, 2007).



"asset"—an off-the-books CIA assassin—is mobilised to despatch Bourne, his ally, or both, and each sequence ends with the death of Bourne's intended informant. These narrative equivalencies are not in themselves revealing, such recycling of plot beats and setpieces being par-for-the-course in franchise action cinema (Cubitt 2004). The similar placement and construction of the two sequences nonetheless provide an apposite framework through which to compare and contrast their formal execution, with particular regard to the visual design and capabilities of the wall of screens, and how this evolving aesthetic corresponds to shifting social attitudes over data capture and digital connectivities in the world outside the fiction.

In *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), released fourteen months before *The Dark Knight* and not long following the techno-cultural moment of "Web 2.0" in 2004–2005, information collection is presented as very much a manual endeavor, a human job-of-work. The functionality of these operations firmly ground such scenes in a plausible and traditional "Big Brother" model of governmental surveillance, as director Greengrass confirmed at the time of the film's release: "The Bourne world is the world that's outside our door... If you opened your door in New York or Paris or London or whatever you got to believe that whatever story it is that Bourne's engaged in could be happening there" (Weintraub 2007). Accordingly, our first view of *Ultimatum*'s main wall of screens is not presented with any great flash or sense of spectacle. Eleven minutes into the film, Deputy Director Noah Vosen (David Strathairn) enters the New York Ops Centre, striding past a series of glass panels with blinds half-open



Fig 3. Paul Greengrass, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, 2007, captured by the author from DVD.

to an open plan office floor behind him. There is nothing particularly mysterious or threateningly high-tech about the space itself, which is rather cramped and visibly connected to a larger and better illuminated world beyond (Fig 3). The sources of visual data displayed on this wall of screens are similarly somewhat prosaic and uninspiring—indeed, the film goes to significant lengths to explicitly catalogue their provenance and limitations. These include a single CIA operative, with a handheld camera, positioned outside the Guardian newspaper building in London and focussed on the journalist Jonathan Ross (Paddy Considine) inside, and later two further agents filming him on the street outside Waterloo Station. Within the terminal, the CIA tap into apparently dozens of CCTV cameras to keep "eyes" on Ross and, later, Bourne; nonetheless, the location is said to constitute a "surveillance nightmare... [It's] the busiest train station in London." Throughout the sequence, in fact, the CIA's spying is thwarted either by everyday activity—a bus pulls in front of Ross, allowing him to evade the cameras on the ground—or by "dead zones" (Lash 2002) in which there is no pre-existing surveillance infrastructure: "What the hell was that?" exclaims Vosen, when an

unseen Bourne fells two agents in an unmonitored stairwell. If anything, the thrust of the sequence chiefly serves to establish the limitations of the CIA's powers to see and act, based upon the quality and quantity of visual information available to its wall of screens.

Narratively and thematically, neither the film nor its use of the wall of screens appear to offer much explicit or implicit critical commentary on the invasive penetration of dataveillance technologies into personal and private spaces, represented respectively by Bourne's difficult-to-tap burner phones and the bustling railway station. The film's antagonist is revealed to be Vosen—motivated both by professional jealousy and a fear of physical retribution from Bourne if his role in the latter's "origin story" is discovered—and it is the potential for such individual malfeasance to pervert the otherwise benign activities of state-sanctioned intelligence operations against which *Ultimatum* levels its primary, and limited, surface-level critique. On a deeper level, however, the film's visual depiction of these powers, writ large upon the wall of screens, can be read to reflect a building societal anxiety in advanced Western countries which extends beyond internal politics or the arcane mechanisms of national security. The visual content projected on Vosen's wall, interpreted against the horizon of an evolving digital culture, can be read to evoke a sense of collective apprehension over the rapid development of new technologies and the increasing accuracy with which they could locate our bodies and predict our needs. As a cultural artefact of the immediately post-Web 2.0 period, *The Bourne Ultimatum's* use of the wall of screens suggests a developing unease over the implicit trade-off required for such services to function—the flow of information



Fig 4. Paul Greengrass, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, 2007, captured by the author from DVD.

necessarily going both ways—and a growing anxiety over just what was being given up in exchange for immediate restaurant reviews and street directions.

Renderings of this new awareness can be discerned in the film's usage of specific visual signifiers upon its various walls of screens, in particular a recurring emphasis on satellite imaging. The main wall in the New York Ops Centre—consisting of three large data windows, apparently projected onto the wall as opposed to being backlit from within an LED screen—are first shown displaying a graphical map, a stretch of satellite photography, and a block of what appear to be nine separate live video feeds (Fig 4). These images closely resemble those of Google Earth, a programme originally designed by Keyhole Inc in 1999, cofunded by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) and CIA in 2003, purchased by Google in 2004 and released to the public the following year.<sup>18</sup> There is a qualitative difference between the way satellite mapping is used here and in earlier conspiracy pictures; for one thing, the imagery is almost entirely diegetic. The data the screens display, indistinctly in the background

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<sup>18</sup> <https://wikileaks.org/google-is-not-what-it-seems/>

and often obscured by passing figures, is exclusively for *in-universe* consultation; they get no close-ups or glamour shots. The graphics are used not to convey any plot information to the audience,<sup>19</sup> but rather as set dressing, to establish tone and mood, "anchoring the scene in a perceptual reality that the viewer will find credible" (Prince 2012, 32). Indeed, an assumption of audience familiarity with these kinds of images appears to underlie the film's heavy emphasis on maps and aerial photography to populate its electronic displays.<sup>20</sup> In employing such imagery, the film draws a visual parallel between targeted surveillance—as undertaken by the state—and the digital mapping and imaging application now in wide public usage thanks to Google's largesse. While it would be difficult to contend that *Ultimatum* expresses any explicit criticism of Google Earth or its parent company, by placing this imagery under the control of the villainous Vosen, the film nonetheless indicates an underlying suspicion of such software with which the contemporary audience could be expected to identify.

Similar subtextual connections, between the surveilling operations of the state and the emergent dataveillance practices of tech companies like Google, can be found in the wall of screen's depiction of co-opted CCTV camera footage during the film's subsequent Waterloo Station chase sequence. Indeed, it is striking just how matter-of-factly the station's internal security systems are accessed and repurposed by an external force here. The sheer scope of Vosen's operation, its ease and invisibility, strongly recalls what Zuboff terms *big data's*

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<sup>19</sup> As in *Die Another Day* (Tamahori 2001) or *The Manchurian Candidate* (Demme 2005).

<sup>20</sup> For instance, such imagery would have been widely recognisable through its frequent appearances in TV and print coverage of the Afghanistan conflict and the lengthy manhunt for Osama Bin Laden.



Fig 5. "Found footage" of Waterloo Station. Paul Greengrass, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, 2007, captured by the author from DVD.

"heterogeneous and trans-semiotic character"—sources of information interwoven into domestic technologies and public systems, to be found (or not found) anywhere, "flow[ing] from private and public surveillance cameras, including everything from smartphones to satellites" (2015, 78). While Bourne guides Ross around Waterloo by phone, hunted at every turn by operatives on the ground, Vosen's wall cuts between dozens of CCTV feeds (and, outside the diegesis, countless pieces of second unit location photography), his intercepted cameras capturing not only the images of the CIA targets but also those of hundreds of other travellers making use of Waterloo as part of their daily routine. None of those so captured are aware of their new on-screen role in a high-stakes spy drama, recalling Sherry Turkle's 2008 description of mobile media's reconfiguration of public and neighborhood spaces to "become liminal, not entirely public, not entirely private" (122). *Not entirely public* and *not entirely private*, the commuters' activities and behaviours are projected on the wall of screens, but neither Vosen nor the film are interested in the particulars. The

individual is visually and narratively subsumed into an obfuscating mass; becoming, in effect, the stuff of *big data*, “not collected intentionally” but “haphazard, hugely heterogeneous, and, not infrequently, trivial, messy and agnostic” (Constantiou and Kallinikos 2015, 47). The commuters constitute a vast body of living information to be sorted, sifted through and parsed out in *Big Other*’s pursuit of its own self-interest, here embodied respectively in the character of Vosen and the elusive image of Jason Bourne.

Indeed, the Deputy Director’s blithe attitude when barking out the command to remotely access Waterloo’s security systems and display their output on his wall of screens—a device which director and co-writer Greengrass initially thought “preposterous” before further research revealed otherwise<sup>21</sup>—bears a strong similarity to Google’s *modus operandi* when recording and exploiting private and public information for commercial ends. As has often been noted (Fuchs 2014; Zuboff 2015; Lash 2002 et al), Google’s general approach is one of begging forgiveness after the fact rather than asking permission before it; their legal defense when challenged in the courts over intrusive photography of homes and private spaces largely “hing[ing] on the fact that Google Maps takes pictures of things so highly public that there is no privacy right to begin with” (Strachan 2011, 11). Not only is this the attitude evinced by the CIA in the film, it was also that taken by its makers in producing the sequence—unable to close the station, they simply shot around a typical day’s activity.<sup>22</sup> Most of the on-screen

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<sup>21</sup> Director Paul Greengrass: “I also remember thinking when we did the sequence at Waterloo how excellent it would be if [the CIA] could tap into the camera network. But we said they couldn’t do that because it would be preposterous – and then we checked and realised that they could.” (Carnevele 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Greengrass: “Hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people are going through [Waterloo] every hour. You can’t lock it down. They wouldn’t let you and you can’t do it.” (Roberts 2007).

commuters are not paid extras; many of them in fact were possibly unaware of a film unit's presence in their midst. Within the fiction, these oblivious travellers are a complicating factor for Vosen and his operatives. Outside it, they represent an "opportunity, not a problem" (Weintraub 2007) for the director, a way to add verisimilitude and aesthetic excitement to his commercial product. In this scene, then, the CIA, Google and *Ultimatum* itself—by treating its human scenery effectively as those “resources [which are] consumed by capital for free” (Fuchs 2010, 186) within the structures of informational capitalism—all appear to share the same pragmatic ethos of exploitation: “If it exists, we’ll use it.” This is the troubling and somewhat prophetic picture painted, perhaps unintentionally, by *The Bourne Ultimatum*'s Waterloo set piece: that under the new rules of digitality, any appearance might legitimately constitute a public appearance, and unseen devices may at any time transform the private citizen into a bit-player upon the wall of screens.

Further, as a particularly odd and revealing moment mid-way through the sequence suggests, that wall may not necessarily be located and viewed within the traditional confines of a governmental agency (or, indeed the cinematic multiplex). As Bourne enters Waterloo and makes his way to a station retailer to buy a burner phone with which to contact Ross, the film camera pans up to show a CCTV camera swivelling as he walks past. We then get a unique static shot of Bourne, from a fairly high angle, at the shop counter, evoking the kind of footage such a device would normally capture. He buys the phone and, before leaving, glances suspiciously in the direction of the recording device.





Fig 6. A CCTV camera follows Jason Bourne...



Fig 7. Bourne (Matt Damon) is seen from above...



Fig 8. Bourne glances back at the machine.

All images on this page: Paul Greengrass, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, 2007, captured by the author from DVD.

The usual implication would be that Jason has just been located by his CIA adversaries, but the device's movement appears to be entirely coincidental from a plot perspective. No cut occurs to footage of Bourne on the wall of screens, and indeed Vosen is surprised by his appearance in the action a few minutes later. For a moment, the electronic eye appears to possess its own autonomous power. Reference to the film's shooting script not only fails to clarify the intended effect of this shot series, but if anything serves to further muddy the interpretive waters:

**63A EXT. DAY. ENTRANCE -- WATERLOO STATION**

**63A**

*BOURNE buys a cell phone. Activates the SIM card on the new phone. Dumps the pay-as-you-go package in a bin. Rounds a corner. Out of sight.*

**63B OMITTED**

As can be noted in this excerpt, no mention of the pivoting camera is present. And, although the mysterious omission of the following scene might imply an explanation was originally scripted to follow, in scene 64H of the same iteration of the screenplay Vosen "watches, transfixed" as the rogue assassin first appears on his video array: "Jesus Christ, that's Jason Bourne." Whether the set-up for a plot beat which had its punchline deleted during scripting, or—as seems more likely, from the evidence of the script—a spur-of-the-moment creative decision made either on location or within the editing suite, the anomalously tracking camera suggests that something buried in the collective unconscious has broken briefly to the surface.

Where the wall's deployment of Google Earth-like imagery recalls just how much could newly be seen by the digital eye, and its projection of co-opted security camera footage evokes an increasingly indistinct line between *public* and *private* spaces, this enigmatic exchange of glances between Bourne and the CCTV camera suggests a new and uncertain relationship with big data itself—an observing force without form, face or national allegiance. The wall of screens, that familiar if sinister symbol of state surveillance and geopolitical control, is suddenly missed. As Bourne squints up at a pivoting lens above the station concession stand, he appears to assume that he is being targeted by a known enemy, using technology in a way he understands; indeed, that he is looking back at his watcher through the established mechanism of the wall of screens. The film refuses to give any such assurance, and in doing so briefly acknowledges a new world in which the rules of seeing are beginning to change. *Big data* does not depend on an active "surveiller", as its surveillance operations are automatic; it has no need to track us, as we track ourselves; and it requires no explicit permission to exploit these findings beyond a quick "OK" click on a labyrinthine digital user agreement, or the tacit consent provided simply by entering a public space. No longer does a person voluntarily join the game and subsequently face the consequences; instead, the challenge for the individual is to find a way to operate independently within a cultural and technological machinery which fundamentally disallows any such separation. In a brave new world mapped out by Google and on-sold to the highest bidder, there can be no real battle for personal privacy—at least so long as, to quote again Lindsey Strachan, "no such privacy right exists to begin with."

## SC 2B

### **"Things are changing at the agency"**

#### **Jason Bourne, Edward Snowden and our place in the interface**

If Vosen's 2007 wall of screens can be read to emblematis the developing technologies of *dataveillance* in a nascent stage—today's culture of constant self-surveillance merely a glimmer in Google's eye—then what a difference (almost) a decade makes. *The Bourne Ultimatum's* wall, informed by a traditional vision of "Big Brother" surveillance methods, is largely characterised by what it can and cannot show; limitations which reassuringly suggest that digitality's powers, while unsettling, nonetheless operate within clear technological parameters. The inverse is true of the iteration featured, eight years later, in *Jason Bourne*—here, as with the God's Eye programme introduced in the previous year's *Furious 7* (Wan 2015), we are presented with a surveillance technology so advanced as to be effectively indistinguishable from magic. Not only can the CIA's eyes be seemingly anywhere, at any time, but the diegetic images captured and displayed in its new-and-improved Ops Centre possess little difference in terms of angle or proximity to the non-diegetic pictures recorded by the film crew on location. In fact, these two spaces are often bridged by use of the very same piece of footage, recontextualised in the cut, shown first as we might see it "in real life" and then miniaturised, desaturated and defaced by graphical overlays on the viewing screen. Digital surveillance is no longer presented as an unreliable and hardscrabble enterprise, as it was in 2007. Oceans may be crossed in HD resolution, and the world is no longer

viewed from above, a grainy stretch of distant terrain, but rather prowled through at the ground level. There is little joy to be found in this representation, however, no sense of excitement over the miracles the CIA's tech can so easily accomplish. If anything, the atmosphere created by these scenes is dourly fascistic.

The surveilling wall of screens, as it is deployed in *Jason Bourne*, recalls Scott McQuire's observation that the "image of the digital 'flow' as the harbinger of new freedom is everywhere contradicted by the pervasive use of digital technologies for enhanced forms of instrumental mastery over space" (2008, x). As the CIA tracks defector Nicky Parsons (Julia Stiles) on her way through Athens to an assignation with Bourne, navigating her way through an anti-government riot in Syntagma Square, they do not seek to bestow upon nor advance any "new freedoms" for the protesters, her inadvertent co-stars on the wall of screens. The CIA's almost omniscient surveillance technology, augmented by human operatives and weaponry on the ground, is only concerned with the violent struggle playing out on its screens insofar—as with *Ultimatum's* troublesome Waterloo commuters—as it pertains to capturing a clear shot of their target. What's more, the viewer seems expected to share this lack of emotional engagement with the brutal conflict ravaging Syntagma Square; in its recurring retranslation from full-frame colour photography into cold, blue-toned picture windows on the wall of screens, the riot is removed from us, deemphasised and depersonalised.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A further experiential parallel might be drawn to the emotionally distancing effect of social media, which compresses the profound tragedies and joys of human life into a 240 character tweet or low-resolution video clip buried in the endless digital noise of a Facebook feed.



Fig 9. A CIA ground operative records the riots in Syntagma Square.



Fig 10. Non-diegetic footage of protestors attacking a police cordon.



Fig 11. The same shot and action, retranslated into pixels on the wall of screens.

All images on this page: Paul Greengrass, *Jason Bourne*, 2016, captured by the author from DVD.



Like the CIA, we wait impatiently for Parson and Bourne's appearance on the wall, the larger human drama framed as being narratively unimportant and therefore undeserving of our close attention or empathy. This closely corresponds to the quality of "formal indifference" ascribed by Zuboff to the operations of big data: Google, she observes, does not particularly care just how users employ its services, "as long as they say it and do it in ways that Google can capture and convert into data" (2015, 79). A similar attitude is suggested by the use of the wall of screens—by the CIA, by the film's makers—in the sequence, reducing life's raw material into a mosaic of constantly cutting picture windows, their contents briefly glimpsed and quickly forgotten. The CIA is solely concerned that it can see where, what and whom it wants, to capture the data it desires, and so remains *formally indifferent* to the visceral human and political drama which fills the margins of its digital displays.

Such aggressive, committed indifference is also the predominant attitude of *Jason Bourne's*—and Jason Bourne's—chief adversary and master of its wall of screens, CIA Director Robert Dewey (Tommy Lee Jones). Although the film is largely structured around Dewey's increasingly violent and convoluted attempts to retain his agency's "backdoor access" to the latest iteration of a popular social media platform, "Deep Dream", Jones' performance suggests a man so assured in his personal and professional power that he often appears to be half asleep. That this preternatural self-confidence does not read, for the most part, as simply overweening arrogance is to a large degree because we have witnessed, early on in the film, the almost God-like technological powers at Dewey's disposal. Through his wall and its human manipulators, whom he directs, Dewey has

come to possess McQuire's "instrumental mastery over space", near-total control over the latitudes and longitudes of data. His operations are not circumscribed by the "economic spaces" of *live* and *dead* zones, nor the "identity spaces" of *wild* and *tame* zones that largely determine class, power and influence in conditions of advanced informational capitalism (Lash 2002), and his calm demeanour and deliberately paced speech suggest he feels in no way buffeted about by the rapid global information flows through which his agency navigates. Here, in the electronic temple the American taxpayer has built for him, Jones' scowling face—bathed in blue light, glasses reflecting the endless flow of information covering the walls—is literally above data. With some justification, Dewey appears to view himself as the natural end point of information; he represents the might of the state and the power of Google combined.

Which raises the question, then: why is he so het-up about getting his hooks into what is, essentially, the newest update of Facebook Messenger? Deep Dream can be easily intuited as a stand-in for Facebook, while its founder, Aaron Kalloor (Riz Ahmed), is a Mark Zuckerberg analogue—at least in terms of his public persona as it stood in 2015.<sup>24</sup> Kalloor accepted money from Dewey in the project's start-up stages—a belated reference, perhaps, to the actual role of the CIA in the development and proliferation of Google's satellite mapping software—but has since become uncomfortable about providing further access to the service in its latest iteration. Considering that this conflict is *Jason*

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<sup>24</sup> In a piece of characterisation which now seems almost perversely anachronistic, Kalloor is scripted and played as basically a principled creature, ready to risk the collapse of his company by publicly revealing the truth of his dealings with Dewey. The irony is that, as Fuchs observed two years prior to the film's release, exactly the kinds of "surveillance, aggregation, identification, intransparency and appropriation of personal data and usage data" (2014, 169) upon which the film levels its critique of Dewey are themselves essential components of Facebook's business model.





Fig 12. Paul Greengrass, *Jason Bourne*, 2016, captured by the author from DVD.

*Bourne's* major narrative driver, the film is frustratingly unclear about quite what the CIA actually does with the data they derive from Deep Dream. During the Syntagma Square sequence, for instance, the Deputy Head of Cyber Ops Heather Lee (Alice Vikander) orders her technicians to "isolate all social media posts in the Square" and display them on the wall of screens (Fig 12). "Yes, ma'am," nods a subordinate, and the film cuts to a close-up of a desktop monitor. A series of faces flash on and off the screen, lines carving out their features to suggest, one assumes, the running of facial recognition software. Perhaps these are meant to be Facebook-esque profile pictures, but the face-forward framing, blank backgrounds and dour expressions much more closely resemble prison mugshots. No actionable intel is gathered from the operation, and it is the only time in the film we see the CIA explicitly engage with social media data capture in the course of an actual surveillance operation. Contextually, this makes Dewey's extreme attempts to retain his grip on Deep Dream all the stranger. The film-makers apparently recognise that social media is something *important*, an increasingly powerful mediator of social and geopolitical relations the film

cannot ignore, but struggle to place it within the framework of their fairly conventional conspiracy thriller—or, visually, to convincingly integrate its imagery onto the wall of screens.

The wall, which takes up the burden of the film's engagement with the world outside the fiction, is here unfit for purpose; it is just too vast and fantastic to effectively incorporate the small-scale visual forms of social media. Likewise, while *Jason Bourne's* script—by Greengrass and Christopher Rouse—may attempt to engage with "a more nuanced world, with different kinds of unaccountable powers out there who weren't there in 2007" (Eayan 2016), it offers not much more than a vague reflection of such socio-political and technological developments, providing little in the way of cohesive critique. Part of the disjuncture of *Jason Bourne* is that while superficially centring on the recent rise of social media and its potential misuse, subtextually the film appears to be about something else entirely. Just what is hinted at when Dewey petitions Kalloor to continue their arrangement by arguing that "our enemies have become much more sophisticated. Gathering metadata is no longer adequate." This reference to "metadata" draws an implicit connection to Edward Snowden's 2013 revelations over the invasive capture of personal information commonly and clandestinely perpetrated by the National Security Agency (NSA), and taps into a then-fresh uncertainty about the nature of *information* itself. Through Snowden, terms like "data-mining" and "metadata" had newly entered the public lexicon, and with them an awareness of just how much could be given away, should others wish to take it. While *Jason Bourne* is rarely explicit in making

these connections<sup>25</sup>, the visual texture of the film nonetheless speaks to an outside world increasingly filled with, in fact obsessed by, digital data and the devices on which it appears.

Although primary emphasis (in the film and in this analysis) is given to Dewey's vast wall of screens in the New York Ops Centre, *Jason Bourne* departs from the earlier *Bourne Ultimatum* in studding the great majority of its set designs with displays of different sizes and capacities, reflecting the increasing prevalence and influence in and of digital devices out in the real world. It is as if Vosen's comparatively primitive wall has not only grown up to become Dewey's far more penetrating and powerful model, but has almost infinitely respawned, splintering itself out into every corner of Bourne's cinematic universe. It is rare to find a location in which at least one glowing monitor is not prominently featured and, on a narrative level, there are few sequences in which a digital device does not prove central to the action. In fact, the placement of a character in relation to a monitor or display, as well as their interaction with it, tends to suggest their place in a larger moral schema. The entirely altruistic and independent Nicky Parsons, for instance, is seen early on at a standalone laptop, its functional interface harking back to pre-2005 operating systems, a far cry from the Ops Centre's digital sorcery. When she expires on the streets of Athens, shot as was the journalist Ross by a CIA "asset" while meeting Bourne, Parsons dies a martyr's death—nonetheless, this somewhat perfunctory demise of one of the franchise's few recurring characters suggests that her straightforward decency is no longer supportable within Greengrass' conception

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<sup>25</sup> Kallour does namecheck Snowden at one point, but it's a fairly throwaway remark.

of a new, "more nuanced world." Conversely, the tech mogul Kalloor, a significantly more conflicted character, survives his own assassination attempt by Dewey and exits the film on a note of vindication. If Parson's passing parallels that of a pre-Snowden view of what data is and can be used for, Kalloor's continuation may be intended to represent a "best case scenario" for information's future.

Locating Jason Bourne and Heather Lee within this schematic is a more complicated affair, these characters being visually connected both with the wall of screens and a number of narratively important smaller digital devices. Throughout the series, Bourne is largely defined by his absence from the wall, being seen primarily in non-diegetic footage which the audience is privy to and his would-be surveillers are not. In *Jason Bourne*, this formula is complicated by the character's new willingness to voluntarily engage with encoded information. His initial motivation for doing so is essentially one of self-interest, to solve a long-standing family mystery, and the direct consequence of this action is his figurative entrapment on the wall of screens and physical near-capture by a CIA black ops team. Forty five minutes into the film, Bourne downloads some secret files from a laptop in Berlin, and in so doing triggers hidden malware which alerts the CIA to his location. Almost immediately, he is focused on by an outside CCTV camera, transformed into pixels on the wall of screens, and agents sent to despatch him. In uncovering the secrets he's been searching for, Bourne is himself revealed; he has found that digitality's gifts come at a price. It is only through Heather Lee's unexpected intervention (again, via wi-fi connected device, this time a smartphone) that he makes a last-second escape, thereafter

remaining in sporadic contact with Lee for the remainder of the action—and safely off the wall of screens. In effect, the film sees Bourne move through all three of Herman Tavani's (2008) definitions of what may constitute privacy in the current context of informational capitalism. He begins with a policy of "restricted access"—off the grid, off the books, a literal and metaphorical fugitive from the surveillance state—but finds this position impossible to sustain; by meeting Parsons in Athens to take delivery of her electronic information, she is assassinated and he is located on Dewey's wall. After the Berlin sequence, through his selective communications with Lee, Bourne adopts instead a "control theory" of privacy, concisely described by Alan Westin as "the claim of individuals, groups or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others" (1967, 7). His final progression into Tavanni's third category I will come to shortly.

In contrast to Bourne, a character chiefly defined by how successfully he can avoid being seen, Heather Lee— his sometime ally and morally ambiguous mirror image—is closely visually associated with the technologies of seeing, in particular the wall of screens. During *Jason Bourne's* first two acts, she is typically framed behind a monitor or silhouetted against the wall, depicted as occupying a space just adjacent to digitality, neither its master—as her superior Dewey feels himself to be—nor capable of operating independently from it, as does Bourne. If the film positions both Dewey and Bourne as, in some senses, "throwbacks" to an earlier period in cinematic, cultural and technological terms,



Fig 13. Heather Lee (Alice Vikander) calls up images on the wall of screens.  
Paul Greengrass, *Jason Bourne*, 2016, captured by the author from DVD.

Lee embodies a distinctly contemporary ethos. Of the three principals, she is the only one totally of the digital age, wired-in and of the moment, believing that technology may be used to mitigate the bloodshed and messy human entanglements of her profession. This confidence in technology, the assurance with which she manually operates the wall of screens and other digital devices, is qualified in the latter half of the film by her recurrent attempts to keep the untidy, recalcitrant Bourne alive and off the wall. Lee develops a growing respect for Jason's analogue methods<sup>26</sup> and pre-digital decency, and indeed the film's most interesting dramatic tension is over which way she'll flip when forced into a moment of decision. In the event, while Lee does ultimately save Bourne's life by shooting Dewey, she soon after offers herself up as replacement CIA Director on the promise of either bringing Bourne back into the agency, or killing him if he refuses. Lee is finally revealed to be not so much a wifi-ready version of Bourne as a streamlined, more modern iteration of Dewey.

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<sup>26</sup> Running, punching, disguising himself in a rakish baseball cap.

Indeed, as the character most directly associated with the operations of the CIA's vast wall of screens—manipulating it to find Bourne in Athens, later using her technical *nous* to help him evade it in Berlin—it is pleasingly ironic that Lee's comeuppance is facilitated by the smallest non-cellphone screen shown in the film, hoist on her own digital petard. Returning from a lakeside meeting with Bourne during which she entreats him to return to the fold, Lee finds a compact video device sitting on the passenger seat of her car. Opening the file, she sees images of her vehicle driving to the rendezvous, and hears an audio recording of herself saying that if Jason isn't willing to play ball, "he'll have to be put down." This rather petty moment of triumph on our hero's part is made possible by his adoption of Tavanni's third and final theory of privacy— that of restricted access/limited control (RALC). He has found a way both to restrict external access to his physical movements and inner motivations, while managing his engagement with the surveilling state via "a system of limited controls for individuals" (2008, 144). Further, Jason has successfully mastered those controls he does possess to transform the watcher into the watched, while retaining his own ambivalent and distanced position on the periphery of the informational exchange. While Heather drives away alive and well, her prospects for professional advancement (and a key role in any sequel) reasonably bright, she has nonetheless been starkly reminded of the transactional nature of any relationship with big data—that "Faustian pact" which Zuboff describes as a central tenet of surveillance capitalism—and that the technologies of seeing may easily be turned back on the observer. Lee exits the film under an existential cloud, whereas the last we see of Bourne, in a high aerial shot, is his

disappearance into the trees of a Washington D.C. nature reserve, for the moment at least free and clear of retranslation into a digital avatar trapped upon the wall of screens.

It is worth noting, in fact, that the wall enjoys its last substantive appearance during the sequence in which our titular hero escapes capture in Berlin, when he learns his lesson about data's inherent omni-directionality, a little before the halfway mark of the film. Through its final act, which centres on the Las Vegas tech convention at which Kallor is scheduled to be killed, Dewey is separated from his wall of screens—the symbolic source of his power—and becomes increasingly ineffective. His attempted assassination of Kallor is summarily scuppered, and Dewey abruptly meets his own maker not long afterward. Denuded of his second-hand technical mastery, the soon-to-be former CIA Director becomes just an old man with a handgun in a hotel room, suddenly revealed as (in multiple senses) a man out of time, the decaying relic of an earlier era. "Dewey's problem," Greengrass and Rouse have Lee observe *en route* to her concluding pow wow with Bourne, "was he belonged to the past." The film doesn't bother to expand upon this remark; conversely, in fact, much of the preceding material suggests that Dewey was comfortably in command of his agency, and more than a match for the milquetoast Kallor if Bourne hadn't gotten involved.

I suggest that the key to resolving this apparent contradiction lies in the particular image formation of *Jason Bourne's* wall of screens, how the film positions Jones in relation to it, and the location in which the wall is set. Where *Ultimatum's* wall is clearly conceived with an eye to plausibility, something



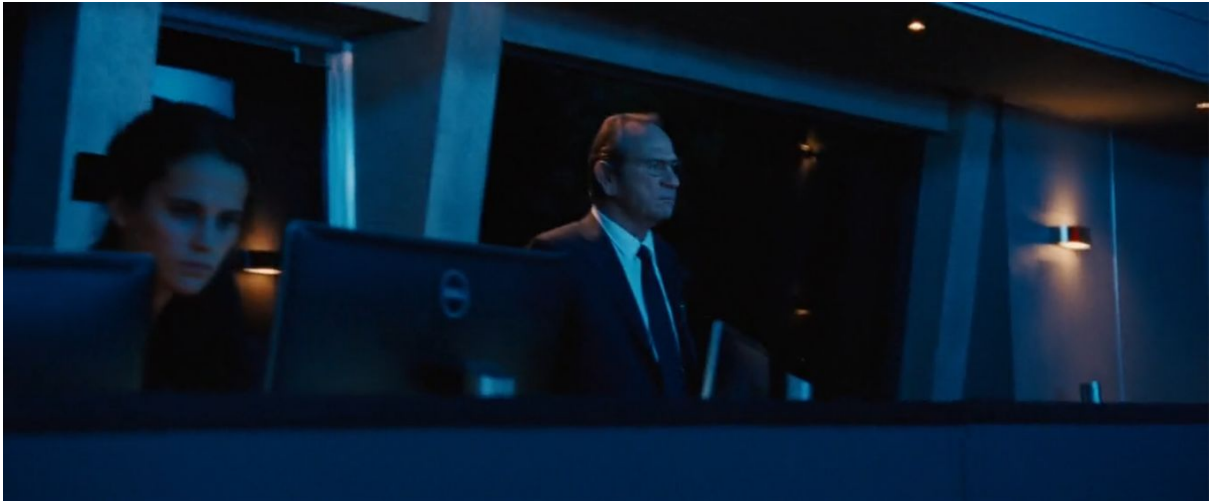


Fig 14. Director Robert Dewey (Tommy Lee Jones) glowers down at his subordinates in the CIA Ops Centre. Paul Greengrass, *Jason Bourne*, 2016, captured by author from DVD.

which may indeed exist in “the world that’s outside our door”, Dewey’s Ops Centre is a far more spectacular and symbolic affair, less indebted to a contemporary technological reality than a kind of Hollywood folk memory. With their blue lighting, claustrophobic framing, flickering satellite feeds and rectangular displays, what these scenes recall—intentionally or not—is the military submarine of the post-Cold War thriller. For all the kaleidoscopic digital data dancing across the widescreen expanse of the wall of screens, the look of the Ops Centre is a cinematic throwback; likewise, so is Jones.<sup>27</sup> Glaring down from his privileged position on the mezzanine, Dewey sees himself as the vessel’s commanding officer, and his wall of screens—most of them revealing nothing of import, threatening only in their multitude—resemble the blinking radar displays of films like *The Hunt for Red October* (McTiernan 1990) and *Crimson Tide* (Scott 1995). He is rarely shown touching a mouse or keyboard, and relies on a less

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<sup>27</sup> Even the casting of the venerable Jones, whose star rose in the eighties and early nineties in part due to his roles in reds-on-the-sea-bed thrillers like *The Package* (Davis 1989) and *Under Siege* (Davis 1993), has its own historical connotations.

powerful, subordinate technical order to do his digging for him; all those nameless operators manning their stations on a lower level of the Ops Centre. In seeing himself as above them, as above data, Dewey draws a false equivalence to being innately separate from information—the last man standing in a world otherwise composed of ones and zeroes. The socio-political and economic currency of information may depend upon the collection of amassed, undifferentiated data, but extracting its value requires statistical mastery over the sifting algorithm; this Dewey does not have, and demonstrates no interest in developing. If Lee is right in posthumously condemning Dewey as “of the past”, it is because he has persisted in the belief that bigger is, in and of itself, better. Victory in the nuclear conflict meant having the most of something but never using it. *Big data* is a weapon of a whole other order.

Dewey’s inability to recognise this fact may also be read subtextually in Greengrass’s decision to shoot these scenes in such an atavistic style; the wall here is an image of almost fetishistic techno-futurism housed within a visual framework comfortingly reminiscent of the celluloid past. It is as if the world inhabited by the filmmakers had become so fast-moving and incomprehensible, technologically and culturally, that they could only express it by evoking a historical moment of existential crisis—that of the Cold War and its potentially apocalyptic outcome. This juxtaposition highlights a striking difference between *Jason Bourne*’s treatment of the wall of screens, as conceived within the full flowering of the self-surveillance era, and that of the earlier *Bourne Ultimatum*. There, the device is used to suggest a developing cultural dependency upon digital technologies in resolutely prosaic and contemporary visual terms.



Fig 15. The same shot of Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) used twice, thirty five seconds apart, first in non-diegetic footage (right) and then upon the wall of screens (left). Paul Greengrass, *Jason Bourne*, 2016, captured from DVD. Composite by the author.

Eight years later, in a context of socio-technological development so rapid and opaque as to feel overwhelming, the past is called in to provide symbolic context while the wall's powers are presented as almost limitless, capable even of transcending the laws of time. During that early Athens chase sequence, in one striking example, Bourne is seen in non-diegetic footage turning towards and recognising the CIA operatives on his trail. Thirty five seconds later, but still in real time, this action is repeated from an identical angle—indeed, it appears to be the same performance by Damon—on the wall of screens, as if the wall itself has decided the moment has come to let his trackers in on the secret of Bourne's arrival. Dewey may believe he is calling the shots, that things have not really changed so much since the good ol' days of Ruski spies and hijacked nuclear warheads, but the machine knows otherwise.

On a production level, too, the jarring repetition of this shot by Greengrass and his editors—recalling Bourne's mysterious interaction with the

CCTV camera in *Ultimatum*—seems revealing; it as if the operational parameters of this 2016 wall defy even the understanding and traditional cutting logic of its creators. Perhaps, in fact, that's why *Jason Bourne's* scripted action is so imprecise about just where Dewey falls short, why exactly the man “belongs to the past.” The dawning reality he can't quite fathom is much the same as that which the film's audience, and its creators, were only just then discovering, courtesy of Snowden: the accepted boundary lines between man and machine, tools and their users, watcher and watched had become inexorably blurred. Within the developing logic of digitality, individuals could no longer hold themselves as separate from data—simply by accessing information, using it, or contributing to it, we offer ourselves up to becoming information ourselves. Just like those fictional protesters in Syntagma Square, transfigured between frames from flesh-and-blood people to phantoms on a screen, or the unknowing real-life commuters populating *Ultimatum's* Waterloo interlude, today we may find it impossible to prevent ourselves from being retranslated, retransmitted, co-opted or commodified in the course of our everyday activities. Simply to operate within the conditions of advanced digital capitalism, we must acquiesce to being, as Zuboff puts it, “reborn as data” (77). Of course Robert Dewey was doomed to die in a hotel suite high above a tech conference. He simply wasn't chill enough to become part of the machine.

### SC 3

**"You invited me here to show me a tracking device?"**

***Furious 7, Fate of the Furious and the fait accompli of God's Eye***

Returning to Scott McQuire's description, quoted in the introduction to this chapter, of how a new technology is assimilated into the "dominant social habitus" (2008, x), where the literal "annihilation" of *The Dark Knight's* wall of screens<sup>28</sup> evokes early apprehension over phone-tapping and digital data capture, we can observe in the two *Bourne* films discussed above the "passage of negotiation" that followed, emblematised by the visual evolution and narrative framing of their respective banks of displays. McQuire's final phase, "assimilation"—a qualified acquiescence to digital ubiquity and resultant self-surveillance culture—can be seen reflected in the treatment of the wall in *Furious 7* (Wan 2015) and *Fate of the Furious* (Gray 2017), which I will now put under a more succinct analysis. For one thing, the wall of screens featured in *Furious 7* is not the exclusive province of the shady Government agency; the "God's Eye" software for which it (in part) acts as an interface was conceived and designed by an independent "hacker", and its power is chiefly threatening only in so far as it may be abused by malevolent external forces. This approach heralds a softening of the blockbuster's heretofore pronounced attitude of skepticism toward the surveilling state—notably manifested in the early *Bourne* films and the same year's *Spectre* (Mendes) and *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation* (McQuarrie)—but it also suggests that the concept of the all-seeing digital eye

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<sup>28</sup> As Lucius Fox describes it: "Beautiful... Unethical... Dangerous."

was beginning to no longer pack quite the same punch it once did; less terrifying a spectre, less fascinating an object.

To a significant degree, the high-octane romps of the latter *Fast* films are notably more practically-minded about digitality—about the wall itself—than their distinctly paranoid blockbuster brethren. The potency of the surveilling monitor as a symbol of totalitarian control had perhaps been diminished by the proliferation of screens throughout domestic and professional life; further, any resistance against signing up to Zuboff’s “Faustian pact” was seeming increasingly futile. By 2015, we were voluntarily and habitually documenting enough biographical trivia ourselves—on camera phones, in Facebook posts, on Instagram—to know just how public our private lives had recently become (Turkle 2008, Hjorth and Lim 2012). Comprehensively assimilated into the mundane fabric of daily life, albeit accompanied by some lingering anxiety and doubt, the operations and technologies of big data were recognised not only as being *here*, but *here to stay*. Accordingly, while the high-tech command centres featured in the latter *Fast* films are filled with screens and digital displays, they are not used to invoke fear, suspicion or awe, as in *Jason Bourne* or *The Dark Knight*. If anything, these films seem largely bored by the wall, by the technological trappings and socio-political impacts of *Big Other*, and eager to get back to what, in their conception, human beings should really be doing: alternately falling in love and thumping each other.

This dismissive attitude toward the techniques and technologies of digital surveillance is made abundantly clear in the wall of screen’s franchise debut, early on in *Furious 7*. Here, it is framed both visually and narratively as mere

backdrop to an explication of the film's true technological threat, the God's Eye programme—the terrifying invasive capabilities of which are emphatically trumpeted in the lines from Mr. Nobody which opened this chapter: "Now, this little bastard hacks into anything that's on the digital network... [T]hat's a serious piece of machinery, [and] could be catastrophic in the wrong hands." During this monologue, the screens behind him come alive with the *de rigueur* hacked digital imagery—overhead traffic management video, footage from an ATM security camera, street level CCTV recordings. The mundanity and brevity of the montage (just ten seconds in length), however, fatally undercut any sense of real threat the speech might be intended to convey.<sup>29</sup> On a structural level, the screenplay is equally uncommitted: some pieces of dialogue imply that our hero Dom Toretto (Vin Diesel) is being enlisted to procure the programme for Nobody ("If you get the God's Eye for me, I've already got authorisation for you to use it until you get Shaw"), but other lines ("Say hello to God's Eye. Now, this little bastard...") and the actual depiction of its functions on the wall of screens suggests the US Government already has it, and is simply wishing to reclaim the tech from unfriendly hands.<sup>30</sup>

That this lack of clarity over the plot's catalytic McGuffin—a piece of intangible coding given form and function only when plugged in to the wall of screens—barely registers on first viewing is entirely in keeping with *Furious 7*'s

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<sup>29</sup> Mr. Nobody's pitch, at least, spectacularly fails to impress the series' lead, who barely bats an eyelid and mumbles in a semi-somnolent baritone the line which began this concluding section: "So, you invited me here to show me a tracking device?"

<sup>30</sup> This point is never clarified in the subsequent action. The best explanation I can come up with is that the programmer produced a promo video for God's Eye, submitted it to potential clients, and this is what Nobody shows Toretto on the wall of screens. In a longer cut of the scene, we might have witnessed the caption "BUY NOW - 0800 SEE IT ALL" appear over a series of taped testimonials from satisfied despots.



Fig 16. "Now, this little bastard..." Mr. Nobody (Kurt Russell, right) explains God's Eye to an unimpressed Dom Toretto (Vin Diesel).

James Wan, *Furious 7*, 2015, captured by the author from DVD.

generally disdainful approach to the surveillance tech its makers seem to feel obligated to include. Toretto's primary interest (and the film's dramatic focus) is not on the wall of screens or God's Eye, but in getting to the inevitable dust-up between Diesel and Jason Statham's Deckard Shaw, the only man on the planet who may prove to be as bald and rugged as Toretto is. Equally perfunctory is the film's presentation of Nobody's wall of surveilling screens, being a somewhat complacent amalgam of the trope as presented seven years earlier in *The Bourne Ultimatum* and as it would be depicted in *Jason Bourne* eleven months later. Russell paces in front of three moderately-sized discrete video windows, just as David Strathairn did in *Ultimatum*, but the actual content displayed via God's Eye is far more like the kaleidoscope of constantly morphing digital imagery Tommy Lee Jones frowns down upon during *Jason Bourne*. It's all flash and sparkle, however, briefly glimpsed and with little of the symbolic richness which can be so extensively parsed out in a close textual analysis of the



aforementioned films. The wall of screens, that expansive electronic interface, has become something so essentially mundane and domestic that even the film's representative of the surveillance state can't sell it as awe-inspiring and potentially epoch-shifting to the movie's gear-head hero.<sup>31</sup> Recalling Ioanna Constantiou and Jannis Kallinikos' condemnation of big data's operations, within which "there is no way to be all embracing and comprehensive without compromising variety, richness or complexity" (2015, 24), Nobody's surveillance bunker is long on tech but short on genuine spectacle. The undifferentiated images his devices capture and project, devoid of social context and narrative meaning, are casually deployed as just so much digital noise. Just as "there is no magic in what big data accomplishes" (Constantiou and Kallinikos 2015, 24), there is little sense of mystery or wonder prompted by the surveillance technology presented here.

Prosaically perhaps, but nonetheless perceptively, *Furious 7's* treatment of Nobody's wall and its operating software appears to recognise a dwindling distinction between "a surveillance society and an information society" (Fuchs 2014, 213), in either of which all online activity may well be seen and recorded. A *surveillance society*, Fuchs writes, is one associated with "moral panics" (56) and in which an individual is deemed "'innocent until proven guilty' and a 'terrorist until proven innocent'" (55). This assumption of nefarious intent, he argues, is an ideological construction used to justify constant and invasive state observation,

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<sup>31</sup> This may be in part explained by how well-trodden a ground the aesthetic device of the digital data overlay had by then become. For over a decade, *The Matrix* (Wachowskis, 1999) had been the first and, to a large degree, last word on that particular cinematic gimmick, and even then its digital iconography was supplemented by plenty of *bravura* martial arts action.

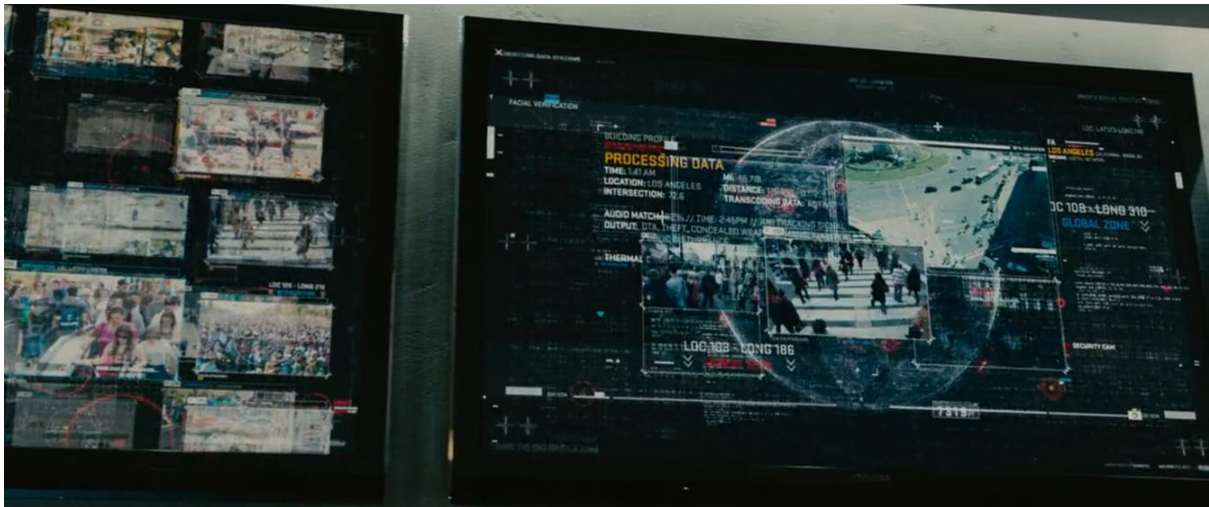


Fig 17. "God's Eye," mk I. James Wan, *Furious 7*, 2015, captured by the author from DVD.

and can be tracked back historically at least to the "reds under the bed" paranoia of 1950's McCarthyism. Fuchs posits that our current "information" or "information gathering" society, as enabled and encouraged by the operations of *Big Data*, cannot be meaningfully distinguished from this earlier construct, except as a progression in technological terms. Digitality's concomitant *self-surveillance* activities simply expand the informational database available to those willing and able to exploit it. This conflation is manifested fairly explicitly in *Furious 7*. Mr. Nobody—a representative of the "surveillance society", resourced by the state—wants God's Eye to find and monitor "terrorists" on his wall of screens: "With this, we'd have located [Osama Bin Laden] anywhere on the planet, in a couple of hours." The captured data he believes will allow this, however, is that now available through the mechanisms and personal practices of the "information society", the omnipresent wired-in devices we pass on the street and carry with us in our pockets: "It's got a microphone or a lens, God's Eye can find you." The technical difficulties faced by both Bourne and the CIA in

accessing information described earlier—the infrastructural "dead zones" of a Waterloo Station stairwell, the malware-infected encrypted files Jason opens in Berlin—are notably absent here. In *Furious 7*, a comprehensive surveilling network already exists—it is, indeed, literally and figuratively in the "public domain"—and all Mr. Nobody needs to see *everything* on his wall of screens is the right nifty piece of coding.

Similarly, the film does not linger to consider the ethics of Nobody's work, nor the invasive spying enabled by his God's Eye-empowered wall of screens; its rather blithe attitude being that since *someone* is inevitably going to be making use of this information, it may as well be "the good guys." It's only when God's Eye is captured by a dangerous mercenary, working on behalf of a non-Western terrorist cell, that *Furious 7* works up some interest in the software's potentially catastrophic capabilities.<sup>32</sup> As this suggests, it is not the invasive practices of dataveillance in general to which the film objects, but—with unintentional irony—their co-option by a profit-motivated and politically unaffiliated "other." Even the eagerly anticipated *mano a mano* brawl between Shaw and Toretto<sup>33</sup> ends up being mere preamble for the spectacular immolation of a helicopter carrying a bootleg version of God's Eye, metaphorically diminished into the form of a small and flimsy USB stick and comprehensively eliminated by a symbolic burst of twentieth century machine gun fire. What this conflagration puts paid to, however, is not the technology itself—there can be no final blinding of God's

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<sup>32</sup> A threat charmingly defeated by the decidedly analogue means of having a) Vin Diesel blasting a car off a rooftop at the bad guys' helicopter and b) Duane "The Rock" Johnson turning up to seal the deal with machine gun fire from below.

<sup>33</sup> Wonderfully presented as two middle-aged men hitting each other with large wrenches in an alleyway.



Fig 18. "God's Eye," mk II. F. Gary Gray, *The Fate of the Furious*, 2017, captured by the author from DVD.

Eye—but the bad actors who plan to exploit it for dastardly ends. *Furious 7*, unlike *The Dark Knight* seven years earlier, appears to recognise that coding, once released into the wild, is near-impossible to eliminate altogether. The best we might do is strive to keep the code in friendly hands.

Indeed, and almost uniquely, the God's Eye programme is not quietly disregarded between franchise entries but rather becomes part of the fabric of *Fast & Furious* universe, a *fait accompli* of digitality against the existence of which there appears to be little point in railing. When it returns in 2017's *Fate of the Furious*—safely ensconced once more within Mr. Nobody's wall of screens—the visual manifestation of the programme has received an era-appropriate FX upgrade. Here data doesn't just flash in front of the characters, it surrounds and envelops them, reflecting an external near-absolute saturation in digitality. Their interaction with these information flows is depicted as a deeply immersive experience, at once overwhelming and coldly

beautiful, but again the technology is not presented as inherently dangerous. A singular malcontent is responsible for the warping of this otherwise value-neutral application, here the techno-terrorist Cipher (Charlize Theron), whose ambition in co-opting the software is to reignite an East/West war.<sup>34</sup> This conflict, she believes, will be won by default by her adopted technological class, a topical stand-in for the “free internet” online agitator collective Anonymous.

Cipher may therefore be read to embody an ideology of “technological solutionism” (Fuchs quoting Morozov 2013, 5) which Fuchs says can be more accurately assessed as a form of “Internet fetishism: it sees an artefact as a solution to human-made problems” (2014, 135). Her plans are ultimately thwarted, of course—the film again concludes with an affirmation of the residual power of the analogue and the cultural primacy of the self-determined family unit<sup>35</sup>—but, unlike the exploded mercenary collective of *Fast 7*, Cipher survives the action to hack again another day. Just as the makers of the previous instalment did not permanently destroy God's Eye, the attitude of “internet fetishism” represented by Cipher is shown here as too powerful, too widespread, to be comprehensively rejected in the course of one movie. These films can therefore be read to both reflect a profound collective antipathy toward the digital applications which increasingly mediate our everyday existence, and a developing acquiescence over coded technology's ubiquity, convenience and

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<sup>34</sup> By hacking into a Russian nuclear submarine, a narratively explicit version of the throwback subtextual concerns previously observed in *Jason Bourne*.

<sup>35</sup> Toretto is shielded from the impact of an infrared homing missile, somewhat implausibly, by a vehicular blockade formed by the rest of his team. Later, with another wi-fi-enabled apocalypse averted, the *Fast* gang gather on a New York balcony to eat, drink and celebrate each other. Even Deckard Shaw is invited and thoughtfully brings along his own bottle.

inscrutability. Sure, the "old values" of friendship and family may be celebrated in each film's' denouement, but the new techno-cultural forces of digitality also persist: while the most malign aspects of big data may be fought, scorned, ignored and briefly countered, its continuing existence is irrevocable.

The same operating principle can be seen at work in both the ongoing presence of Nobody's wall of screens across franchise instalments, and the casualness with which it is upgraded and expanded to keep up with technological developments in the outside world. *The Bourne Ultimatum* went to great lengths to show the limitations of what its wall of screens could and could not show; *The Dark Knight* decisively blows up its surveilling bank of displays; and *Jason Bourne* discards Dewey's digital domain at a thematically meaningful moment. Mr. Nobody's wall of screens, conversely, not only persists, but evolves to become visually better defined and more sensorially encompassing—and none of this is presented as providing cause for any serious questioning or concern. The latter *Fast* films appear to recognise the presence of a "wall" (like the fact of Big Other, that dialectical "Good Evil" described by Fuchs at the beginning of this chapter) as being basically non-negotiable, a necessary feature of the cinematic and cultural landscape. If anything, in fact, they suggest that—*big data's* most egregious excesses countered—we may be best off accepting its existence and getting on with our lives. While the films' view of an inevitable digitality may be ambivalent, it is not one of fear, nor abject hopelessness. "In the world of surveillance capitalism," writes Zuboff, "the Faustian pact... eliminates the older entanglements of reciprocity and trust in favor of a wary resentment, frustration, active defense, and, or, desensitization" (2015, 84). These films

certainly demonstrate a wary resentment and frustration toward the practices and technologies of dataveillance, their narratives driven by acts of defense against such tech falling into the “wrong hands”, but they also conclude with the triumph of family and friendship, love and loyalty—all those “older entanglements of reciprocity and trust”—over the unfeeling and intangible coded device. The digital may be everywhere, but its powers are nothing compared to the emotional bonds of, as Toretto endlessly intones, “the family.” Perhaps God's Eye, now opened, cannot once again be closed. That doesn't mean Vin Diesel can't occasionally blast a car into it and later enjoy a nice dinner with the family.

The aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate, through exploration of the recurring motif of the wall of screens, how deeply the form of the recent franchise blockbuster has been affected by the technological devices and connected “always on, always on you” cultural logic of contemporary digital capitalism. In my analysis of these four films, I have drawn visual parallels between the images displayed on the wall of screens of an institutional “Big Brother,” and those we may recognise from that *empowered eye's* miniaturised and even more watchful brethren, the omnipresent handheld digital device. Where earlier representations of the wall of screens in what Zimmer et al call “surveillance cinema” primarily concerned themselves—whether in criticism or in celebration—with the notion of state-controlled *panopticism*, the depiction of the wall in these more recent event films thematically operate within Stewart's “new technopticon”, in which privacy itself is a thing of the past. As social media

scholar danah boyd observes in a 2010 blog post, there is in fact often “more to be gained by accepting the public default than by going out of one's way to keep things private. And here's where we see the shift. It used to take effort to be public. Today, it often takes effort to be private.” Far from being tracked at a distance by an unseen observer, the threat typically invoked by the traditional techno-thriller, today many of us have no real choice but to spy on ourselves. This is the developing reality with which the *Bourne* and *Fast* films analysed above seem to be grappling with, and in close to real time. Indeed, as anyone watching such films in a theatre might attest, the cinematic wall of monitors projected upon the movie screen is often mirrored by an array of miniature displays shining out from the rows in front; information recorded and relayed, online enquiries made and tracked, the material of life caught, converted and sold back to us in targeted ads and optimised search results. No wonder Dom Toretto is so unmoved by Nobody's surveillance outpost in *Furious 7*—many of us voluntarily put ourselves on the wall of screens a hundred times a day.



## TWO

### THE SITUATION ROOM

*“This present sense bleeds into the immediate future as anticipation of future events, updates, and fascinating nuggets of data: distraction, after all, involves both the present and things almost within reach. At the same time, sites such as Facebook facilitate and generate both personal and massive collective archives of posts, images, and comments. In other words, the temporalities of social media constantly move and stretch from the current moment to the future and the more or less recent past.”*

- Susanna Paasonen, “Fickle focus: Distraction, affect and the production of value in social media”, 2016

*“From a fellow space traveller, it's an honour meeting you.”*

*“The honour is mine.”*

- Buzz Aldrin and Optimus Prime, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011

## SC 1

**"A series of spasmodic and intermittent, but desperate, attempts at recuperation"**

### **The recent blockbuster's efforts to return to reality**

As we have seen, the mega-event blockbuster has not traditionally been known for explicit and vigorous engagement with present-day historical reality (King 2000, Prince 2012). In fact, as Sean Cubitt argues, "the most successful films succeed because they have nothing to say: no roots in the social or the material world" (2004, 243). When this present day "cinema of attractions"<sup>36</sup>—being one of spectacle over narrative—manages to achieve both critical and public approbation, it tends to be on technical grounds. Through Spielberg's deft mingling of cutting edge digital puppetry with traditional film-craft in *Jurassic Park* (1993), for instance, or Anton Furst's pop-gothic set designs in Tim Burton's *Batman* films (1989/1992).<sup>37</sup> Conceptually detached from specific historical realities, this model of effects-driven event movie—especially of the more fantastic variety—has traditionally borne only an oblique or emblematic relationship to the actual, the contextual, the *real* (Whissell 2014). As Cubitt observes, such "technological films" tend to exist in a yearless and perpetual *now*, operating within "enclosed and enclosing worlds" in which "history is no longer intrinsic to films but extrinsic... [they] abstract themselves from the

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<sup>36</sup> To use Tom Gunning's (1990) formulation, originally employed (and also apposite here) to acknowledge the formative value of silent cinema's celebration of visual affect over plotting.

<sup>37</sup> "If the storyline in [*Jurassic Park*] seemed a bit mechanical and the characters relatively lacking in psychological depth, the main objective held just fine, which was to engineer a series of narrative situations that would place the characters in jeopardy from prehistoric beasts" (Prince 2011, 25); "*Batman* may look pantomimic and dated now, but in capturing the structure and feeling of carnival at its most grotesque, it caught the spirit of its times" (Lyons 2016, 60).

temporal to grasp for the eternal" (246). Occasionally an apparently deliberate socio-political subtext may be perceived, such as over the commodification of scientific advances in *Jurassic Park*, or *The Dark Knight*'s toying with the ethics of the War on Terror discussed in the last chapter. Until fairly recently, however, such connections were made almost exclusively allegorically—and parsing out these buried metaphors is a core approach of this thesis. It is certainly *possible* to read dino-preneur John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) as a Walt Disney take-off<sup>38</sup>, or the Joker (Heath Ledger) as a symbolic representation of Osama Bin Laden or Julian Assange<sup>39</sup>, but such films make no demand that the audience do so. What Cubitt terms above their "enclosed and enclosing worlds" are carefully designed to allow the viewer to take the action at face value only if they wish; an alluring and exotic assignation during which no real names are to be used.

In the past decade, however, even the most cartoonish action blockbuster seems to have made a sharp turn on this front, referencing *actual* figures and events with a new and revealing frequency. These "shards of the real", jagged slivers of fact penetrating the formerly hermetically sealed fabric of the spectacular event movie, vary in kind. While sometimes limited to a simple name-check in dialogue, such as Kurt Russell's shout out to Osama Bin Laden in *Furious 7* (2015), they just as often take a more elaborate and explicit form, grounding the film's action in "real life" at an ostensibly iconic level.

*Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (Bay 2011), for instance, features multiple

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<sup>38</sup> William Freeman, "Mickey Mouse Goes to Jurassic Park: The Challenge of Technology for Leisure" (1991).

<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Good Manners in the Age of Wikileaks" (2011); Tom Cobb, "The Dark Knight's Tenth Anniversary" (2014).



Fig 19. "JFK" in the Uncanny Office. Michael Bay, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011, captured by the author from DVD.

flashback sequences set in the nineteen sixties, with lookalike actors playing John F Kennedy and the Apollo 11 astronauts, while the film's "present day" material includes appearances by the real Buzz Aldrin and, in still photographic form, then-President Barack Obama. Strikingly, it is not only these "makers of news" who receive explicit portrayals in the recent blockbuster, but with an even greater frequency those who comment upon current events on television, radio and online media. *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder 2016), for example, features "talking head" clips of Neil deGrasse Tyson and Charlie Rose discussing the existential and extralegal ramifications of Kal El's (Henry Cavill) arrival on Earth, while Bill O'Reilly spars with whistleblower Seymour Simmons (John Turturro) in *Dark of the Moon* (Bay 2010). In today's media-saturated, ever more immediate world, not even Superman is immune to being the target of a satirical barb from *The Daily Show*'s Jon Stewart.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> At least in the extended version of *Batman v Superman* released on home media; Stewart was cut—probably for time—from the film's theatrical release: <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/1528500/why-batman-v-superman-cut-jon-stewart-out-of-its-theatrical-version>

Thirty years ago, as Geoff King notes in *Spectacular narratives* (2000), the "primary concern" of such films was "to move viewers effortlessly from one action spectacular to another," pressing into service the "most conventional and familiar cultural frameworks... precisely because their currency renders them relatively invisible" (115). The "shards of the real" I explore in this chapter suggest a significant inversion of that operating principle; specificity and *visibility* instead appear to have become the whole point. This recent fetishisation of the "real," popular media's grasping for a sense of historical currency and cultural immediacy, has been previously noted in a range of contexts. In *The Return of the Real* (1996), Hal Foster writes from a psychoanalytic perspective against artistic abstraction, delineating a cultural condition he terms "postmodern dis/connection", and arguing that we have "become *wired* to spectacular events. This wiring connects and disconnects us simultaneously, renders us both psychotechnologically immediate to events and geopolitically remote from them" (221-222). A similar argument can be found underlying much of the recent literature on gestures toward the real in more populist media—ie. reality television, "period" films,<sup>41</sup> and current events coverage. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) is a common starting point for much of this work. In the 2005 compendium *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'reality' TV and Beyond* (ed. Geoff King), Dean Lockwood, extending upon Debord and

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<sup>41</sup> Michele Pierson observing, for instance, that while Hollywood movies may "make history an important site of subjective investment for audiences," they are typically "only selectively and unevenly concerned with staging the kinds of historical representations that ask audiences to believe that 'this really happened like this' or that 'things really looked like this in the past'" (Ed. King, 2005 143). The blockbuster cinema she references, however—such as *Gladiator* (Scott 2001), *The Mummy Returns* (Summers 2001) and *Moulin Rouge!* (Lurhmann 2001)—are explicitly concerned with the past by virtue of their setting. Exploring how the present-set franchise blockbuster makes *now* itself a "site of subjective interest" to audiences is the novel contribution of this chapter.

Baudrillard, suggests that "spectacles of the real [are] attempts to conceal the fact of reality's disappearance" (74), while Douglas Kellner argues that by "submissively consuming spectacles, one is estranged from actively producing one's life" (26). A similarly insular and self-perpetuating system of recognisable "beats" and coded behaviours has been noted at work in the Reality TV genre (West; Bonner; Flynn ed. King 2005), and in the headier forms of documentary and news programmes, particularly the increasing influence of Hollywood cutting rhythms upon current events coverage from 9/11 onwards (Rodney, ed. King 2005). Whether offering the ostensibly authentic to sharpen the impact of the patently contrived, as in Reality TV, or couching historical fact within the heightened modalities of a scripted drama, as in documentary or televised news, this literature explores how popular media has reduced the "real" to a palliative, a promotional *come on*. It has become just another form of spectacle to be passively absorbed; part of that ongoing historical moment, in Debord's phrase, "when the consumption has attained the total occupation of social life" (1967, #42).

Rarely, however, has this critical framework been committedly applied to the realm of the action franchise blockbuster. The previous literature primarily considers formal gestures; restive visual allusions to real world events, uncanny preconfigurations of how news coverage would come to look more and more like the movies. What hasn't been examined is the use of the *literally real* in the recent event film, nor how our current techno-social conditions have engendered this new tendency. Where earlier Hollywood product was content to broadly allude to historical forces, current events and political narratives, the

films discussed here demonstrate an urgent and anxious need to make their references literal. The device can best be read not iconically, as transparent signifiers of the people or events they appear to represent, but allegorically—as ciphers for a loss of the living present. While connected to that postmodern "loss of historicity" decried by Jameson—"to the matter of historical deafness, an exasperating condition (provided you are aware of it) that determines a series of spasmodic and intermittent, but desperate, attempts at recuperation" (1991, x)—these "shards of the real" possess their own unique and contemporary historical novelty. Here it is not only the past which is under threat, but the current moment itself. Our sense of present has been altered and diminished not only by the technologies of digital media, through which the whole world is oppressively and overwhelmingly available to us in close to real time, but by the economic operations of informational capitalism, in part predicated upon instilling fear in the consumer that even today's purchase will soon be outmoded and embarrassing.<sup>42</sup> It is inevitable that the wide-release Hollywood blockbuster, that most accessible and visible form of popular culture, has come to echo this collective feeling of anxiety and impermanence, suggesting a new kind of *timelessness* not so much to be revelled in as cautiously negotiated.

In this chapter, therefore, I will delineate how the recurring intrusion of "shards of the real" into the recent event film may be read to reflect a cultural

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<sup>42</sup> Take smartphone service contracts and payment plans, which typically include an upgrade clause offering a discounted price on the next iteration of the device: subverting the familiar Peter Allen lyric from *All That Jazz* (Fosse 1985), "everything new is old already."



Fig 20. Conservative author Andrew Sullivan (himself) has opinions on Superman. Zack Snyder, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, 2016, captured by author from DVD.

condition in which the present has come to feel as removed from us as the past, mere preparations for a future moment yet to arrive. In making this argument, I will first concentrate on one film in particular, Michael Bay's *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*. This picture is unique in both just how many *shards* it includes, and the diverse forms they take. I will argue that in frequently referring to and/or recreating fragments of shared history and experience, the film can be read in part as an attempt to reclaim a sense of *present-ness* by situating fantastical, future-focussed narratives within a cartoon version of actual world events. I will then flip that approach on its head, exploring the use of one specific "shard of the real" —the "as-themselves" cameo appearance from of-the-moment pundits, broadcasters and other media figures—as it crops up in a number of different recent franchise entries. This recurring device is an especially revealing example of the recent blockbuster's somewhat contradictory, but nonetheless urgent, attempts to "return to the real." The trope reflects a contemporary mania for immediacy familiar to anyone with a Facebook account, Twitter feed or



Instagram following. In these films, just as Susanna Paasonen observes of the temporal operations of social media, “a present sense bleeds into the immediate future as anticipation of future events, updates, and fascinating nuggets of data... [Temporalities which] constantly move and stretch from the current moment to the future and the more or less recent past” (2016, 9). Such restless, anxious movement is quintessentially that of the digital age. What I intend to demonstrate, however, is that for all its ahistorical confusion and breathless spectacle, the recent blockbuster evinces a deep and recurrent desire to locate itself in some kind of stable and comprehensible present. The “real” may no longer exist, as we once knew it, but these films—far more than their pre-Web 2.0 forebears—can’t help themselves but try to reach for it. They want to remember what *now* felt like.

## SC 2

***"I've seen this one. It's the one where Spock goes nuts"***

***Transformers III, an absent present, and the dark side of history***

The place is Chicago, the year is approximately two thousand eleven, and the film is *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*. Giant truck-robots battle savagely on the streets, lasers fly and buildings fall, and all humanity's freedom is at stake. At the heart of the battle is a conflict between mentor and student, new ways and old, trust and respect turned betrayal and disillusionment. Autobot leader Optimus (voiced by Peter Cullen) has discovered his former master Sentinel Prime

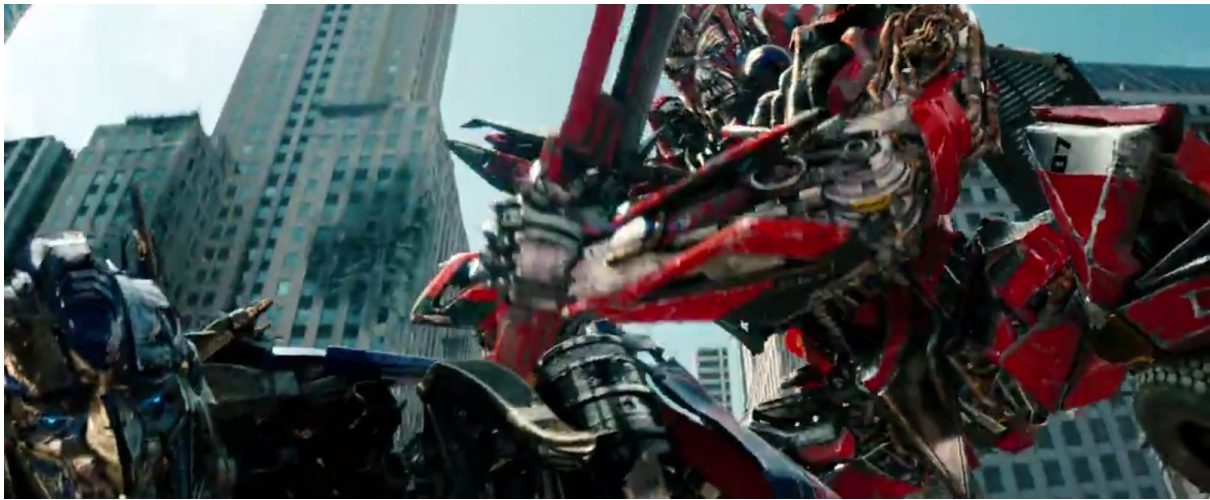


Fig 21. "The needs of the many...." Sentinel Prime (Leonard Nimoy) prepares for the killing blow. Michael Bay, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011, captured by the author from DVD.

(Leonard Nimoy) is siding with their historical enemies, the Decepticons, who plan to convert the earth into a new version of their war-ravaged homeworld Cybertron. As the future hangs in the balance, however, present and past are also taking something of a beating. Sentinel speaks in the unmistakable tones of Leonard Nimoy, a pop-cultural icon of decency and reason in his role as *Star Trek's* singular Vulcan, Mr. Spock, and there is an apparently deliberate subversive intent behind his casting.<sup>43</sup> *Dark of the Moon* views with particular skepticism the nineteen sixties' promise—of which *Star Trek* was probably TV's greatest proponent—that scientific advancement would bring about global progress in reassuringly linear terms, a brighter collective future "forged in the white heat of [scientific] revolution".<sup>44</sup> Strikingly, for instance, the plot hinges on

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<sup>43</sup> Just to foreshadow the gag, Nimoy-as-Spock actually appears in an early scene, via an archive clip from the 1968 *Star Trek* episode "Amok Time." The short extract is prominently featured—the TV screen gets a close-up and all—but it is treated without reverence: "I've seen this one, it's the one where Spock goes nuts," notes the autobot Wheelie, and the action quickly moves on.

<sup>44</sup> From Prime Minister Harold Wilson's September 1963 prophecy of a new and better Britain; see also, Kennedy's famous 1962 address on the Apollo space programme: "We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people."

the revelation that the 1969 moon landings were not, in fact, a shining moment of human achievement and ascendance, but a covered-up attempt to capture alien tech before the Soviets got to it. It is this conspiracy which leads to the destruction of great swathes of Chicago's CBD, the resurrection of Sentinel Prime and his subsequent near-successful attempt to take over the planet for the Decepticons. Of all the betrayals which occur or are mooted in the film, especially biting is that of the present by the past. Sentinel's perfidy, spoken with Spock's voice and justified in his words, is a metaphor for the broken promises of the twentieth century.<sup>45</sup>

*Dark of the Moon* does not only repudiate the shattered promises of history, however, but the very possibility of a stable present. The past may have failed us, but at least it can be eulogised and critiqued in a way the shifting, shapeless *what is* cannot: the film's current moment is one of frantic movement, endless confusion, and the constant possibility of betrayal. Narratively speaking, figures of power and influence are either in league with the Decepticons, or functionally helpless to stop them; those in the working and middle classes have become either hopeless or mad. The film doesn't attempt to provide any particular socio-political critique through these framings, however. Rather, it suggests such conditions are simply the (un)natural consequence of a world in

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<sup>45</sup> When Sentinel defends his course of action to Optimus during the battle, he does so with a direct quote from *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn* (Meyer 1982): Spock's famous utilitarian maxim, "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." This actually makes little-to-no sense in context: every indication is that there are only a few dozen Cybertronian survivors, while the earth plays host to billions of humans and other species. The film's contempt for the totems of the past is striking, this iconic line of sci-fi pop-philosophy being revealed here as one more empty platitude.

which both time and space are subject to constant elision and rearrangement.<sup>46</sup> Formally, the film's frequent action sequences are—as Lisa Purse elegantly observes of the *Transformers* series in general—"a cacophonous stream of thrusts and rolls, spinning bullets and bodies, that we cannot fully make sense of or consistently orient ourselves towards" (2015). Received in brief bursts of visual information rarely substantial enough to be unpacked and fully understood, such scenes speak to a world in the process of being reduced and remediated by the devices of digital media. As the pixelated carnage flashes by, interpolated with archive TV clips, special guest celebrity cameos and decontextualised visual references,<sup>47</sup> we find a near-perfect cinematic evocation of Mark Deuze's "life lived in media"—one "framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by pervasive and ubiquitous media" (2012, 3)—in which "the organizing categories and principles of life [being] in constant motion, uncertainty reigns" (15).

Uncertain, in constant motion, its "principles of life" organised around a struggle between malign and benevolent forms of constantly changing future-tech, this is the world of *Dark of the Moon*. Our world, in other words, taken to cartoonish extremes. The dizzying, *present-denying* speed at which the film operates accentuates its sense of temporal disorder and dislocation. In 1990, David Harvey posited "time-space compression" as a signature condition of

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<sup>46</sup> A prominently branded Lenovo PC might transform into a murderous alien robot just as quickly and effortlessly (more so, in fact) as the heroic Optimus Prime unfolds from a 1994 Peterbilt 379 semi-trailer truck.

<sup>47</sup> When Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara pulls up outside the White House in 1961, in an open-topped car, the photographic style closely resembles the much-parodied and excerpted "Zapruder footage" of Kennedy's assassination two years later. It took me multiple viewings, in fact, to realise the dark-haired, besuited fellow in the back seat of the vehicle was not meant to be JFK himself—the distant, juddery camerawork, heavily overlaid with digital grain, is so meticulously reminiscent of that film my brain automatically assumed a direct connection was being intended by the film makers.

postmodernity, new technologies and political/economic systems shrinking "the time horizons of both private and public decision-making" (147) in ways which fundamentally altered how people experience space and time. In this, he predicted a more recent crisis of attentivity (Terranova 2012), enabled and encouraged by the operations of *Big Other*, and the cognitive alienation from *present* which is a concomitant effect.<sup>48</sup> *Dark of the Moon*—in its manic movement, gleefully callous attitude to human pain and suffering, and abbreviated attention span—is an ideal pop-cultural reflection of just these developments. As Lisa Purse has argued, the films of the *Transformers* series speak "to the accelerating contradictions of our increasingly digitalised lives" (Purse 2015). One such contradiction, Sherry Turkle observes, is that "we insist that our world is increasingly complex, yet we have created a communications culture that has decreased the time available for us to sit and think uninterrupted" (ed. Katz 2008, 132). This phrase helps to clarify what is meant by "a loss of the present" in this chapter. Obviously, on a literal level, the present continues to exist; a second still lasts a second, and a day remains twenty four hours long. Experientially, however, the current moment has become ever more fleeting and unsubstantial, washed away on greater and greater tides of digital noise. Without time to contemplate or contextualise current events, the present can exist only as a precursor to the future, the current moment lost to us on endless waves of information and the digital device's "intensive flows of brief and transient notifications" (Thulin 2018, 477). *Dark of the Moon* is a vision of

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<sup>48</sup> Note that Sentinel and the Decepticons' plan is to convert the Earth into a literal "alien-nation", all present and past wiped out and discredited, merely a precursor for a future in which humanity will be lucky to remain a historical footnote.

precisely this world and technological epoch; one not so much teetering on the edge of the abyss, but already hurtling head forward into the void—any sense of “now” existing solely in the moment between departure and impact.

Our contemporary digital age, writes Jonathan Crary, is one in which "the vast majority of people [have become] estranged and disempowered because of the velocity at which new products emerge and at which arbitrary reconfigurations of entire systems take place. This intensified rhythm precludes the possibility of becoming familiar with any given arrangement" (2013, 37). *Dark of the Moon*, likely unintentionally, literalises much of this argument in celluloid. Its human hero and audience surrogate, Sam Witwicky (Shia LeBeouf), begins the film *disempowered* economically, much of the film's first act revolving around his efforts to find employment. He is also *estranged* from other people, his only ease in communication being with two wisecracking house-robots, Brains and Wheelie.<sup>49</sup> The seemingly endless parade of Transformers introduced scene-by-scene are themselves *new products*, designed to fill toy store shelves and populate spin-off video games, and their *arbitrary reconfigurations* precipitate, within the film, the reconfiguration of entire world systems. These systems are not only socio-political, but temporal as well—the intensified rhythms of digitality increasingly rendering even *now* incomprehensible and unfamiliar.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> As literal and symbolic digital avatars, the reformed Decepticons offer the comforting distance/connection of an online friendship. They even speak in disjointed one-liners, like comments under a Facebook post or on a message board: "We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship" (Turkle ed. Katz 2008, 122).

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, as Crary goes on to note, such devaluation of the present—of a *lived-in* current moment—is not an accidental effect of digital development, but a deliberate commercial strategy: "billions of dollars are spent every year researching how to reduce decision-making time, how to eliminate the useless time of reflection and contemplation" (2013, 40).

Crary here extends upon Fredric Jameson's (2003) earlier charting of those new *microtemporalities*, enabled by the “new transnational cybernetic” and its “instant information transfers” (701), which can be seen transmitted into “the narratives we consume and the stories we tell ourselves, about our history fully as much as about our individual experience” (704). Jameson's emphasis is on the spatial effects of these new operations, citing a “historical tendency” on the part of late capitalism towards “reduction to the present and the reduction to the body” (717). More recently, we find a reduction of the present, the primacy of the body supplanted by data clusters and the online avatar. There is no shortage of space in *Dark of the Moon*, its frequent wide shots carefully designed to allow for the later superimposition of robotic behemoths; what's in short supply instead is *time*. The film is, in many respects, a unique artefact of the socio-technological context in which it was made and released, its intensified rhythms profoundly influenced by what might be called the *micro-microtemporalities* of digital media. During the film's first hour, in particular, the experience is eerily similar to watching a series of “auto-play” YouTube clips<sup>51</sup>, guided by an algorithmic logic and allowing only seconds in which to cognitively process one video (or scene) before another begins.<sup>52</sup> In many ways, in fact, the constant cutting, dizzying CGI vistas and smirking referential humour of *Dark of the Moon* seem

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<sup>51</sup> If you liked “Wisecracking Robots Watch Star Trek”, you'll probably also enjoy “Optimus Prime meets Buzz Aldrin (BEST QUALITY)”.

<sup>52</sup> Many of these early scenes are essentially discrete sketches, shot and scored in an entirely different mood to those surrounding them. For instance, starting from 21:59-24:31: Sam's broadly satirical job interview at Accuretta Systems, all big close-ups, jaunty music and comedy cutting. 24:32-28:48: Optimus Prime meets Buzz Aldrin at secret governmental headquarters in Washington; much important plot exposition ensues. Green colour filter, low lighting, portentous dialogue and “dramatic” underscoring. 28:49-32:32: Sam visits Carly's workplace, a transition achieved through sweeping aerial shots and a snatch of pop music. Brightly lit, quick cuts, the *hilarious* equation of Sam's in-question sexual potency with his crappy car failing to start. 32:43-33:45: Autobots on the moon. Blue and purple colour profile, lush CGI, the return of the dramatic musical theme. Sample dialogue: “Sentinel. You're coming home, old friend.”

better suited to 2020 than 2011. The film's attenuated rhythms and abrupt tonal juxtapositions—an atypical and, in retrospect, rather *bravura* set of stylistic choices for the time—appear to closely prefigure the "life lived in media" of a decade later: one increasingly reduced to and remediated by a constant flow of 240-character Tweets and photographic Instagram "stories."

Lying beneath *Dark of the Moon's* frenetic and pixelated surface, however, can be discerned a rejection of exactly that loss of "now" for which the film might otherwise be read as a symptom. Amidst all the narrative confusion and visual excess, director Michael Bay and his collaborators seem compelled to repeatedly grasp for the *present*—or, at least, for an abstractedly cartoonish version of it, one befitting an external world which had become increasingly fractured, extreme, and disorientating. *Moon* is without precedent in how many "shards of the real" it contains, explicit references to and literal reminders of an external world outside the fiction. Considering the film's production timeline,<sup>53</sup> a certain spirit of resistance may be read in its makers' decision to include a cameo from then-81 year old former astronaut Buzz Aldrin, the digitally composited likeness of a sitting President, or an as-himself appearance from Fox News personality Bill O'Reilly. There are legitimate practical and commercial considerations (Johnson 2013) which have led to the blockbuster's traditional avoidance of signifiers too explicitly tied to a particular space and time. For one, their appeal is largely built on catering to the audience's desire to escape the exhausting circumstances of real private and public lives (King 2000). The inclusion of such *shards* must also inevitably and quickly date a product,

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<sup>53</sup> Nearly two years from the commencement of pre-production to theatrical release.



potentially impacting ongoing revenue from home releases and television screenings. Indeed, even between filming and distribution real-world events (a death, an impeachment, a series of sexual harassment cover-ups) may have necessitated last-minute cuts or expensive reshoots. *Dark of the Moon* quite spectacularly, and repeatedly, throws all such caution to the wind. The film appears to recognise and attempt to cater to a burgeoning collective desire not for *timelessness*, but rather the sense of a shared and stable present.

*Dark of the Moon's* qualified longing for a comprehensible "now," manifested in its myriad *shards*, is only thrown into greater relief by the framing of its modern day material— the film depicts our current moment as a shrieking satire which, thankfully, will be over almost before it arrives. Frighteningly, too, its "shards of the real" clearly posit this fictional reality as one closely adjacent to our own—the same political leaders, same TV shows, same crippling existential fatigue. (The only real difference is that our phones are also cameras, where their cars are alien robots in disguise.) Franchise protagonist Sam spends much of the first hour of the film being passively buffeted from one humiliation to another,<sup>54</sup> his response to these indignities being, at most, a snide quip or eye-roll. As Harvey writes, "the first line of defence" against the postmodern condition is often "to withdraw into a kind of shell-shocked, blase, or exhausted silence and to bow down before the overwhelming sense of how vast, intractable, and outside any individual or even collective control everything is" (1990, 350). *Shell-shocked* is a particularly apposite term to apply to Sam. He is

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<sup>54</sup> In one early scene, respectfully tolerating the deranged self-aggrandisement of potential employer Bruce Brazos (John Malkovich), in the next scowlingly suffering the emasculating remarks of his partner Carly's (Rosie Huntington-Whitely) dishy boss, Dylan Gould (Patrick Dempsey).

essentially a war veteran suffering from PTSD, the victim of a culture so time-starved and amnesiac that even his key role in saving the planet only two years (and one movie) earlier can't help him find employment, or engender any respect from other people. The film does not appear critical of its characters' inability to function in anything but an essentially reactive mode, however, as Harvey observes, "excessive information, it transpires, is one of the best inducements to forgetting" (350). Reality being reframed by pervasive and ubiquitous digital media, memory (like attentivity) has become a depleted resource, only to be sparingly used. There is insufficient mental bandwidth to retain any data not likely to be of immediate future value. The present moment is already past, and the past is an indulgence we can no longer afford.

This theme is underlined by one of *Dark of the Moon's* most pointed and jarring "shards of the real," through which the film rather desperately reaches for the *present*, and then immediately dismisses it as insubstantial and inconsequential. Sam begins the film resentfully residing in partner Carly's (Rosie Huntington-Whitely) swanky uptown apartment, knotted up with sexual jealousy and general insecurity: "You love it, don't you? I'm just your American boytoy," he whines. "You know how demoralising it is, to save the world twice and still be grovelling for a job?" As Carly dresses for work, Sam flashes back to better times—specifically, the day he received a Presidential medal for aiding in the earlier Decepticon defeat. The brief sequence is essentially a "meet-cute" for the film's central couple, and could easily have served that function without crowbarring in the likeness of a sitting President. And yet, somewhat bizarrely, Barack Obama is represented not once, but twice; he's first seen in a jokily



Fig 22. The President and "The President" with Sam Witwicky (Shia LeBeouf). Michael Bay, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011, captured from DVD. Composite by the author.

implausible still photograph, his actual likeness crudely Photoshopped in beside a madly grinning LeBeouf (Fig 22). Then, in the next shot, Obama appears as an even less convincing lookalike actor, quickly moving away from Sam to hover indistinctly at the back of frame. The effects of this particular *shard*, as stated above, are twofold and somewhat contradictory. On one hand, the explicitness of the reference indicates a deep desire for a shared *now*, defying the usual tendency of the fantasy blockbuster to avoid such context-dependent specifics.

<sup>55</sup> On the other, the whole point of the scene is that none of this *matters*.

"Obama" mumbles a cursory endorsement and promptly disappears into the background of the shot, like Sam's medal never to be mentioned again.<sup>56</sup> Even as

<sup>55</sup> Prior to *Dark of the Moon*, four of Bay's six present-set features included high-up military characters or members of the political administration. All of them are entirely fictional; "The President" (Stanley Anderson) seen briefly in *The Rock* (1996) and *Armageddon* (1998) doesn't even get a name in the end credits.

<sup>56</sup> It is possible, though of no real significance here, that director Bay's unconfirmed but oft-mooted Conservative politics played a role in deciding how the scene was staged: "Yes, I am a political person, and I have my views about America," Bay says. "I'm very proud of my country; obviously it's going through a lot of turmoil, and we have a very ineffectual government." He however declines to indicate whether he leans right or left: "It doesn't matter at all—it's not a

the US military mobilises against potential apocalypse, later in the film, the incumbent Commander in Chief is nowhere to be seen. Obama's attenuated appearance may assert a shared current moment, a "shard of the real" we and the film's characters have in common, but any reassurance the passage offers is immediately and distressingly qualified. The film reaches out for the present, but is incapable of holding onto it for more than a few lightly-sketched seconds: even the current President can only exist in flashback.

As Ioanna Constantiou and Jannis Kallinikos remark, "big data epitomizes the move to de-contextualization *par excellence*" (2015, 61), and the surreal snapshots of past and present which constitute the film's "shards of the real" are likewise de-contextualised, marked by tonal disjuncture and heavily dependent upon digital trickery for execution and effect. The key distinction is that while the film's contemporary *shards* are played primarily for laughs, its historical pastiche is chiefly played as drama. It is an absent present, not the fading past, for which the film reserves its greater scorn and sorrow. (At least history had the decency to carry out its deceptions with a little *gravitas*: it was a lie you could *believe in*.) In the digitally-circumscribed modern era of *Dark of the Moon*, nothing can truly disappoint us, because nothing exists beyond the current moment—and even the current moment has become so farcical and fleeting its presence barely registers. The White House scene described above follows a six minute opening montage, a stretch of backstory set during the sixties, in the course of which the moon landings are exposed as a sinister Governmental cover-up. President Kennedy himself appears in this material, like Obama

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part of what I do. I don't feel the need to go out and tell people what to believe politically" (Subseang 2013).

manifested via digital composition, an actor double and the usage of an actual photographic likeness.<sup>57</sup> In narrative terms, however, JFK has an agency and impact that his successor doesn't—the decisions made by his administration lay the groundwork for the film's modern day action, while the plaudits of the current Commander-in Chief are of no practical use to Sam whatsoever. If the 1961 material, shonky CGI and all, reduces history to an animated cartoon, it still moves, is framed as possessing some residual freedom and agency. The amusingly shoddy Photoshop of Sam and Obama sitting on Carly's mantel, by contrast, closely resembles a one-panel Reddit meme, and the subsequent live-action encounter with the Presidential double possesses all the emotional resonance and duration of a 36-frame "reaction" GIF. The current moment is thus rendered more distant, less affecting and effective, than the past.

Throughout *Dark of the Moon*, in fact, past- and present-set "shards of the real" are often positioned to reflect each other. These glimpses of history are used to both accentuate and, on occasion, attempt to redress a fading sense of *now*. The opening montage features 1969 TV footage of Walter Cronkite soberly reporting on the Apollo 11 moonshot; clips echoed, an hour later, by a scripted cameo from Fox News host Bill O'Reilly waxing hysterical about the present day consequences of just that event (Fig 23). Likely unintentionally, the viewer is asked to connect and compare these two approaches, to weigh the solemn naiveties of the past against the immediacy and outrage of today's media culture. As Alan Liu observes, "there is now no sense of history that is not also a sense of

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<sup>57</sup> Strikingly, while "Obama" double gets one line of mumbled dialogue, and it's a joke—"Thank you, baby, great job"—archive film is shown of the real JFK delivering his famous May 25, 1961 address to Congress: "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth."



Fig 23. Broadcasters Walter Cronkite (left) and Bill O'Reilly consider what lies ahead. Michael Bay, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011, captured from DVD. Composite by the author.

media history" (2018, 36). When O'Reilly beams in via digital link to rant and rave in widescreen and full HD, he is as much a part of that history—the annals of the screen—as Cronkite peering out from his ancient 4:3 videotape. At a time in which "all major changes in the social, economic, political, and cultural orders are channeled symbolically and/or instrumentally through narratives of media change" (Liu 2018, 38-39), the two broadcasts speak to alterity, but also continuation. They are both shards of the *same kind* of real. As Cronkite's solemnity reflects that of the millions who watched humanity first reach the stars, the familiar cadences of O'Reilly's *faux*-outrage similarly assert the existence of a communal *now*, a shared emotional tenor of paranoia and contempt.<sup>58</sup> It doesn't hugely matter that the present is depicted as being somewhat degraded and deranged in comparison to the past. Amidst all the artificiality and transience that marks the world of the film, one in which the CGI Autobots are largely better defined as characters than most of its human

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<sup>58</sup> "Get 'em out of here! We *don't* need them here!" rants O'Reilly of the robots, but he may as well be condemning Mexican immigrants or members of the "Black Lives Matter" movement.

denizens, Bill and Walter seem equally *real*, equally present in their own time. Crucially, too, it is implied that the cultural attitudes they respectively represent will mean the same thing *then* as they do *now*. If Cronkite's analogue awe can survive retranslation into the digital present, then so might O'Reilly's contemporary rage remain readable—resolutely itself, an identifiable symptom of a particular techno-cultural condition—into the future. In the uncertain, constantly shifting *now* of *Dark of the Moon*, the potential for any such longevity of meaning is a comfort in and of itself.

In the examples discussed above, I have tracked how *Dark of the Moon* uses its "shards of the real" to accentuate and/or redress a loss of present by way of implicit contrast with the totems of the past. There is one moment, however, when both *now* and *then* are put into direct juxtaposition, allowed to share the same frame, and the effect is both comforting and deeply strange. At exactly the 27-minute mark, Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin strides in for a present-day cameo, sharing a round of mutual flattery with fellow space traveller Optimus Prime. Suddenly, the film contrives to overlook the fact that Aldrin is (within the fiction) a co-conspirator in the covert mission which leads to humanity's near-enslavement.<sup>59</sup> Instead, the scene's swooning score and Aldrin's heroic framing suggest both reverence and, powerfully, a sense of relief that here is one still-living historical figure over whose greatness and decency a

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<sup>59</sup> Seconds after Neil Armstrong's iconic utterance, "a giant leap for mankind," NASA is shown turning off the public radio signal and instructing the astronauts to take care of their *real* business: the exploration and pillaging of the crashed Cybertronian scoutship. Knowing parties to the cover-up, the heroes of Apollo 11—including a youthful Aldrin double—get right to work uncovering and unknowingly reactivating Sentinel Prime. Crash to opening titles.



Fig 24. Buzz Aldrin (himself) is introduced to a fellow space traveller.  
Michael Bay, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011, captured from DVD.

consensus can be assumed. Smiling bemusedly up at the apparatus of the contemporary blockbuster, not entirely convincing within this high-tech setting (Fig 24),<sup>60</sup> Aldrin is nonetheless *real* in a way his scene partners—the phantom Autobots, sure, but also a hammily in-it-for-the-paycheck Frances McDormand—are not. The scene has emotional import because *Dark of the Moon's* fixation on the mid-twentieth century doesn't simply indicate a need to assign blame for our current situation. It speaks also to a desperate desire to be located within a coherent temporal landscape, to deny however briefly the innately transitory nature of big data and the endless *updatability* of the digital age—one in which "the present is only fugitive while the past does not provide solid evidence for what is to come" (Constantiou and Kallinikos 2015, 63). Just by his presence, the elderly Aldrin transcends the film's often cynical attitude to

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<sup>60</sup> Aldrin is on-screen for less than a minute and does not seem totally comfortable talking to an empty space, yet to be filled with digitally-designed machine flesh. Of his two lines of dialogue, most of one—"From a fellow space traveller, it's a true honour"—is somewhat awkwardly dubbed over a reverse shot of Optimus, cutting after the first word to what sounds like a different vocal take.



provide "solid evidence" that humanity has achieved good and extraordinary things, and may do so again. This is one of *Dark of the Moon's* very few measured moments, and the only one of its *shards* not coloured by smirking irony or sceptical revisionism. There is a palpable sense of relief to the scene, as if the film is finally breathing out. For a few short minutes, the fugitive present is temporarily reclaimed through our shared appreciation of this grand old man of history.

Aldrin's appearance is all the more affecting for its brevity. Once again, the film reaches for a sense of *now*, briefly makes contact, then reflexively releases its grip. *Dark of the Moon* seems to want to be part of an unfolding history, to locate itself in real time, but having asserted the existence of a communal present it quickly shies away, appalled perhaps by the obviousness of its own desires. As Hal Foster writes in *The Return of the Real*, this is the contradictory push-and-pull of *postmodern dis/connection*, new technologies and media allowing "a new level of oxymoronic pain-and-pleasure. Such was the CNN Effect of the Gulf War for me: repelled by the politics, I was riveted by the images, by a psycho-techno-thrill that locked me in, as smart bomb and spectator are locked in as one" (1996, 222). The technical resources of the contemporary blockbuster might allow for the "psycho-techno-thrills" of the CGI recreation of a dead President, or an authentic astronaut sharing the frame with a fifteen foot truck-robot, but the film is far too aware of its own artifice and techno-cultural context to linger on them long. In *Dark of the Moon*,



Fig 25. Jerry Wang (Ken Jeong) has an unexpected IT issue at work.  
Michael Bay, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011, captured from DVD.

scientific advancement—the same digital developments which make such scenes possible—has largely separated us from each other, worn us out and made us cruel. Sam finally lands a job at Accuretta, "the global leader in telecommunications and aerospace", and finds himself entirely surrounded by incompetent narcissists, passionless drones and deranged conspiracy nuts.<sup>61</sup> This is a communications company in which nobody listens to each other, and nobody *cares*. Seconds after conspiracy theorist and walking "gay panic" joke Jerry "Deep" Wang (Ken Jeong) plummets from his office window to a grisly demise dozens of floors below, for instance, we see a colleague instinctively taking a photo on his phone of Wang's splattered remains. This is the most interest anyone takes in the fatal event; a world without a present must always be moving inexorably into the future. "Come on, people," announces CEO Bruce

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<sup>61</sup> Closely recalling Sherry Turkle's portrait of human relationships as reconfigured by the "tethering devices" of mobile media, these "workplace comedy" scenes depict "a world of madmen and women, talking to themselves, sometimes shouting to themselves, little concerned with what is around them, happy to have intimate conversations in public spaces" (ed. Katz 2008, 122).

Brazos (John Malkovich). "Yes, a workmate died, but looking through the window isn't going to bring him back."

In many ways, in fact, this line might be read as *Dark of the Moon's* thesis statement: the sense of a *present*, as we used to know it, is gone, and cannot be meaningfully restored. Aldrin, JFK, Obama and O'Reilly float in and out of the film, briefly glimpsed and quickly discarded, simply "spectre[s,] in need of screens to claim attention" and "offering merely a sense of history in this time of 24/7 sensational news" (Liu 2018, 13). Their impact lies not in what they do, but simply that they are there at all, that these are figures we remember and recognise. The film's *shards* may be burlesques, subversive and/or broadly comedic in tone, but they indicate also a deep desire for *what is* and *what was*, for shared symbols ("It's the one where Spock goes nuts!") and common consensus ("From a fellow space traveller, it's a true honour"). No wonder; like most of us in the capitalist West, *Moon's* human characters—Sam in particular—exist at the mercy of political and technological systems beyond their understanding or control. They are temporally disenfranchised and beleaguered by the random demands of a world gone mad. As Crary writes, "everyday life is no longer politically relevant, and it endures only as a hollowed-out simulation of its former substantiality" (2013, 73). A "hollowed-out simulation" is exactly how the film feels for close to two hours of its 154 minute runtime. It is only during the final 40-minute Robot V. Robot battle sequence, set in motion by Sentinel's betrayal of Optimus Prime, that the narrative begins to cohere and operate in something approaching *real-time*. What's to come, the film suggests, is in the hands of the machines, and what lies between *then* and

*next* is essentially meaningless: an endlessly transient *now* marked by madness and uncertainty, its warp and weft decided by the algorithms, data patterns, and economic objectives of digitality.

And yet, remixed and remediated in the digital cauldron of the FX house and editing suite, Moon's "shards of the real" possess a kind of gonzo dynamism which undercuts the film's cynicism and sense of futility. They propose a new kind of "present" which, while externally imposed and often disconcerting, is not entirely without value. Nimoy-as-Sentinel quoting Nimoy-as-Spock in order to justify a robot genocide might be jarring and nonsensical, but it's also rather *fun*, like a YouTube "mash-up" video in which two separate pop-culture totems are edited together or overlaid to produce a brand new cultural artefact.<sup>62</sup> We may be best served, the film suggests, not by railing against the temporal disorder of digitality, but by operating in concert with it. As Mark Deuze writes, "a life in media" is at once "connected and isolated, requiring each and every individual to rely on their own creativity to make something out of life: not just to give it meaning, but to symbolically produce it" (2012, 15). Ahistorical and re/de-contextualised perhaps, the film's various shards are nonetheless engaged in the *symbolic production* of meaning in a uniquely contemporary way. Mashed up, digitally doctored and contextually resituated, these signifiers of the real are forced into new shapes, better fitted for today's world and the new ways in which we receive and relate to information—to the present, in other words.

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<sup>62</sup> My personal favourite being a dizzying number of videos called "Steamed Hams but it's...", in which a scene from *The Simpsons* is re-edited, recontextualised and/or revoiced to often hilarious effect: "Steamed Hams but it's Basket Case by Green Day", "Steamed Hams but it's Directed by Quentin Tarantino", "Steamed Hams but There's a Different Animator Every 13 Seconds."

Sam Witwicky's character arc takes a similar trajectory. In the film's final act, he is redeemed and reinvigorated (he finds *meaning* and *connection*) only when shifting his focus from the tawdry headaches of this modern life—work, family, romance—to stand alongside the CGI bulks of the Autobots, allied with the machine in the struggle over what's to come. Sam has himself become a "shard of the real", made vivid and vital not in opposition to the digital apparatus surrounding him, but in allegiance with its most benevolent aspects. Yesterday can be debunked, and today dismissed out of hand, but *Dark of the Moon* is not without an AllSpark<sup>63</sup> of optimism for the future; the film is at once a eulogy for an old kind of *now*, and the christening of a new one. The bad news is that the present, as we once knew it, is dead—that is also the good news.

### SC3

**"If you're just joining us..."**

**Charlie Rose questions Superman, Bill O'Reilly chastises the Autobots,  
and Wolf Blitzer becomes fake news**

As noted above, *Dark of the Moon* is exceptional in the frequency with which it features its shards of the real, and the wide range of forms such *shards* take. One particular variant the film employs, however, has persisted to become a familiar feature of subsequent blockbuster instalments: the *in-universe* appearance of a real life newscaster or political pundit. While the "as-themselves" cameo is

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<sup>63</sup> It's a *Transformers* thing: <https://tfwiki.net/wiki/AllSpark>

hardly unprecedented in mainstream Hollywood product—comedies are particularly prone to such appearances—they have traditionally been rare in the action blockbuster.<sup>64</sup> Quite suddenly, however, from 2011's *Dark of the Moon* onwards they become a recurring feature of spectacular franchise films, cropping up in entries as disparate as *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder 2016), *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out* (McQuarrie 2018) and the *Fast & Furious* spin-off *Hobbs and Shaw* (Leitch 2019). Further, it is noteworthy that these cameos are almost entirely by TV journalists, political commentators and late-night satirists: chroniclers of the *present*, tellers of the *news*, interpreters of *current events*. The populist blockbuster, traditionally averse to too explicitly referencing "the real world", has recently found a new kind of escapism, one fitted to a techno-cultural period in which a sense of *now* has been transformed by the transient temporalities of social media, and *the real* thrown into confusion by "fake news", "deep fakes" and endless unvetted op-ed pieces. These films retreat into reality itself, their fantastic narratives and CGI ciphers validated by fleeting appearances from veteran broadcasters—the living embodiments of a more legible yesterday, surviving symbols of a present moment already fading from view.

As I have already observed of the two commentator cameos featured in *Dark of the Moon*, the real-time reactions of a newsreader or political commentator can forge a sense of shared present, of a stable place in time, which today often feels to be of dwindling supply (Sharma 2014). They also

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<sup>64</sup> The Arnold Schwarzenegger-starring meta-adventure/comedy *Last Action Hero* (McTiernan 1993) being both exception and exemplar here: Leeza Gibbons, James Belushi, Damon Wayans, Chevy Chase, *Bond's* Timothy Dalton, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Arnie's then-wife Maria Shriver all appearing as themselves in one short—but *side-splitting!*—sequence.

suggest the possibility of some control over digitality's endless information flows, the parsing out of *what really matters* in a world reconfigured by "ubiquitous online connectivity, near-instantaneous communications, and the ready availability of data [which] are beyond the powers of an individual to influence, modulate, or control" (Paasonen 2016, 7). During a period in which new media and data sources crowd the most mundane margins of daily life (Crary 2013), submerging the present in a surfeit of transient notifications, updates, "likes" and reaction GIFs (Thulin 2018), it's not so much answers these "experts" are expected to provide, but focusing questions. Amidst all the masculine posturing and brooding angst of *Batman v Superman*, for instance, we find commentator Soledad O'Brien covering a congressional hearing over the titular Kryptonian's lack of administrative oversight: "Of course, the big unknown in all of this is, will Superman show up?"<sup>65</sup> Beyond the cinema screen, on our TVs and digital devices, we find a similar fixation on individual decorum and legislative minutiae even as the planet burns and democracy crumbles around us. In both realities, the established broadcaster is called in to arbitrate upon such troubling questions, to reduce them conceptually and temporally into something manageable. We lose the present when we can no longer hold even aspects of it clearly in view; guiding our focus and providing a framework for unfolding current events is a key interpretive function of the newsreader and "qualified" political pundit.

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<sup>65</sup> There's a great joke here, though the film doesn't seem to recognise it—humanity's whole place in the universe has been cast into existential doubt, but "the big unknown" is whether an all-powerful alien god is going to make his court dates in a timely fashion.



Fig 26. Soledad O'Brien, in the moment: "The big unknown in all this is, will Superman show up?" Zack Snyder, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, 2016, captured by author from DVD.

So urgent and deep-seated has the desire for a comprehensible *present* become, in fact, that the recent blockbuster eagerly courts of-the-moment relevance in ways that must rapidly and inevitably render it an antique. Primary among these is the commentator cameo. For the action franchise film's target demographic,<sup>66</sup> the televised cable news show is itself becoming an anachronism, a historical artefact belonging to a prior generation: "Across all markets, our survey data reveal that the smartphone is the main device used for accessing news for the vast majority of under 35s (69%)" reported Reuters in May 2019.<sup>67</sup> And yet, when such films reach for their "shards of the real", it is the image-formation of a venerable pundit pontificating in a news studio they most frequently grasp.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Typically 15-32, skewing toward male viewers. The theatrical release of *Batman v Superman*, for instance, was cut to reduce moments of more extreme violence and ensure a PG13 rating; the "Director's Cut" released on home media, which restores these shots and sequences, is rated R.

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/how-younger-generations-consume-news-differently/>

<sup>68</sup> It is true, of course, that the old-fashioned TV screen is far more photogenic than the smartphone display—generally speaking, contemporary cinema's relationship with mobile media is fraught with complication—and the occasional recourse to a talking head on the nightly news can be justified as a matter of narrative expediency. As I will soon observe, however, the commentator cameo in these films is rarely required by the plot, and serves little expository function.



The inherently paradoxical commentator cameo may be read, therefore, to suggest a development of Fredric Jameson's conception of the *nostalgia film* (1981/1991), a term which Ian Buchanan clarifies should not be interpreted to suggest that "we are nostalgic for our own present [...] rather, it suggests we are nostalgic for the lost 'presentness' of the past" (2006, 95). Jameson's analysis concentrates on films set in history, within living memory<sup>69</sup>, and posits that these fundamentally *ahistorical* works decontextualise the most obvious visual and aural symbols of their era and lay them out as a trace reminder of a simpler and *more present* time: "the signifier has become little more than a dim memory of a former sign, and indeed, of the formal function of that now extinct sign" (1991, 83). When *Batman v Superman* trots out Charlie Rose, or *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out* ropes in Wolf Blitzer for an extended cameo, the effect is much the same, but with one key difference. These are *living* anachronisms, eulogies for a period that hasn't even passed yet. We have become so immured in impermanence that *signs* and *former signs* seem equally distant, and essentially the same thing. The stars of cable news, aging embodiments of a *now* which may not still exist when we leave the cinema,<sup>70</sup> exude a credibility, longevity and gravitas that may be burlesqued in the moment but which we are already preparing to exalt in retrospect. Today isn't even over, and already we miss it.

Just as the commentator cameo allegorically invokes the desire for a more stable temporality, however, its formal qualities suggest an urgency and

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<sup>69</sup> ie. Lucas' *American Graffiti* (1973) and Coppola's *Rumble Fish* (1983).

<sup>70</sup> In 2016, the Year of Celebrity Departures, "Charlie Rose Dead at 72" would not have been a shocking headline to read upon emerging from the multiplex.

impatience to get "back to the action" before too much new information is missed. Reflecting a world in which immediacy has become the default tempo of communications (Thulin 2018), and one moment flows constantly into the next (Paasonen 2012), such sequences are typically brief and getting briefer.<sup>71</sup> Talking heads, quick cuts, edited down to only those snippets which directly concern themselves with the matter at hand—these scenes may *look* like TV, but more often *feel* like viral videos, "desultory electronic exchanges" (Crary 2013, 117) which offer little in the way of new information. Indeed, their main function is typically not to provide exposition for the viewer, but to act as an emotional spur-to-action for the films' characters, offering either approbation or censure in *real-time*. The archaic image-formation of the TV news broadcast is so repurposed to symbolise the "likes", "retweets" and "downvotes" of mobile media. Whether the renegade protagonists of *Hobbs and Shaw*, seeing their falsified international vilification played out on giant monitors affixed to a skyscraper, or an ideologue techno-terrorist being flattered into confession by the televisual attentions of Wolf Blitzer in *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out*, heroes and villains alike must be "wired in" to understand not only the world, but their place within it. This speaks to a cultural moment in which to separate oneself from the digital grid—even if only for a brief period—can feel like an abdication or betrayal, as Eva Thulin observes: "Even when one knows that one should turn the mobile phone off, doing so is often not that easy, and is associated with stress and

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<sup>71</sup> In *Dark of the Moon* (Bay 2011), the sequence featuring Bill O'Reilly is one minute and twenty four seconds in length; *Batman v Superman* (Snyder 2016) includes two montages of current events commentary lasting over two minutes, but the average in-vision appearance time for any one broadcaster is less than twenty seconds; *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw* (Leitch 2019) amps up the efficiency by presenting multiple (real) international newsreaders on giant electronic billboards within the same frame, but with all their dialogue muted.



Fig 27. Superman (Henry Cavill) is worshipped during a Mexican Day of the Dead festival while, via overlaid audio, documentarian Vickram Gandhi (himself) renders the obvious explicit. Zack Snyder, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, 2016, captured from DVD.

Subtitle original.

anxiety at not living up to expectations, making someone sad and missing out on things" (2018, 477). That is how fleeting and fragile the *present* has become: two hours on flight mode are two hours of moments missed, messages to reply to, and information to absorb. Look away, even for a moment, and you may spend the rest of the day scrambling to catch up.

A particularly striking expression of this phenomenon occurs in *Batman v Superman*, a film in which no less than seven real pundits make brief appearances,<sup>72</sup> four of them being featured in a two minute sequence which occurs 45 minutes into the movie. The film's main narrative strands and key players established, the plot stops dead for a montage of Clark Kent/Kal-El's (Henry Cavill) heroic activities around the globe—saving a Mexican child in the midst of the Día de Muertos festival; extracting a manned orbiter capsule from

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<sup>72</sup> In order of appearance: documentarian Vickram Gandhi, retired blogger Andrew Sullivan, astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, CBS anchor Charlie Rose, journalist/commentator Nancy Rose, special correspondent Soledad O'Brien, and CNN's Anderson Cooper.

an exploding rocket launch; rescuing families stranded on rooftops by a flood (Fig 27).<sup>73</sup> While Kent's heroism is presented in a series of mute vignettes, the soundtrack consists of voice-over commentary from real-life pundits<sup>74</sup> talking about the Kryptonian amongst us, cutting in brief bursts to extracts of the television shows on which these discussions are taking place. The sequence ends with Clark pensively watching *Charlie Rose* in his apartment, the veteran host asking Senator Finch (Holly Hunter), "Must there be a Superman?" ("There is," she flatly replies.) After almost an hour of breathless action, plot exposition and character introductions, the "real world" suddenly rushes in to provide approbation, criticism and commentary, as if *Batman v Superman* itself has felt the sudden need to take a quick break, check its phone and see what other people are saying about it. Just as the "likes, shares and subscribes" of social media quantify an individual's popularity and codify the value of personal opinion, this mid-film "talking heads" montage possesses its own kind of dopamine rush. The brief appearances from documentarian (and the film's co-producer) Vickram Gandhi, say, or Neil deGrasse Tyson imbue the film not only with credibility, but contemporaneity. *Batman v Superman* needs *them* for the same reason its audience craves constant "heart" reactions, retweets and shares. In an oppressively *connected* world, in which one public thought is almost immediately supplanted by another, Snyder et al's anxious pursuit of

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<sup>73</sup> There is no particular narrative or thematic necessity for this sequence; director Snyder's recurring Randian obsession with the Exceptional (Super)Man, Reviled By His Inferiors has been explicitly established in dialogue both earlier in this film and in the preceding *Man of Steel* (Snyder 2011), and in the annals of cinematic redundancy it's hard to beat four mid-film minutes of *Superman* performing random benevolent acts just to show he's a good guy who cares about people.

<sup>74</sup> With one exception: two lines of dialogue from anti-Superman blogger Glen Woodburn (Chad Krowchuk), the character's surname being a witty portmanteau of Nixon-busting journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

*of-the-moment* relevance speaks to a cultural condition uniquely of the digital age.<sup>75</sup>

This condition, a digitality-driven development of that which David Harvey called "time-space compression" and Mark Deuze more generously terms "a life lived in media," may be seen as the consequence of an extended and concerted attack on the present itself. As Bruce Wayne (Ben Affleck) observes, in a typically light-hearted monologue: "There was a time above, a time before. There were perfect things. Diamond absolutes. But things fall, things on earth. And what falls is fallen." In other words, there is no way back to what we may dimly remember of certainty, continuity, stability. "The temporality of shared culture," writes Alan Liu, "is no longer experienced as unfolding narration but instead as "real time" media... transform[ed] into the new ideal of *instantaneous/simultaneous* temporality—a kind of quantum social wavefront connecting everyone to everyone in a single, shared *now*" (2018, 30). The endless eruptions of *now!* which characterise the *micro*-microtemporalities of mobile media have restructured the experience of daily living into a series of interruptions and distractions. The flow of the recent blockbuster has been similarly reconfigured. *Batman v Superman* features several such diversions: most remarkably, a momentum-killing scene just before the film's culminating battle sequence in which Bruce Wayne sits down to send Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) a friendly email. The commentator cameo is also used to break up the

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<sup>75</sup> "I have my phone all the time, in case I get notified that something is happening on Facebook [i.e. Messenger], then I have to check it right away. I have to check Instagram all the time to see if someone has posted something. Especially if my friends have posted something, then you need to 'like it' as fast as possible, you want the person to get a lot of likes and quickly" ('Klara') [Thulin 2008, 477]

action—in temporal and spatial terms—of this final conflict, CNN's Anderson Cooper reporting on the fight from a series of monitors in different locations. Cooper is a reassuring and familiar "shard of the real", but he cannot keep up with Liu's "new ideal of *instantaneous/simultaneous* temporality." His scripted dialogue is full of qualifiers, updates phrased in the past tense: "This thing emerged from the Kryptonian crash site just moments ago... Those are Apache helicopters, they have now just arrived... We just lost connection with Metropolis 8 news. Now, it's not clear what just happened..." By the time the anchor refers to an event, the action of the film has already moved on; the present moment has become so fleeting that even *real-time* coverage is insufficient to capture it. Again, we find in the recent blockbuster a longing for *now*, inextricably linked to the underlying conviction it has drifted too far away from us to ever be truly restored.

In general terms, the affective power of the commentator cameo can be closely compared to Sussan Paasonen's description of the *affective economy* of social media, "centrally one of diverting pleasures but not necessarily one of sheer fun. Pleasures, as intensities of feeling, may be elusive, strained and dark, ambiguous and paradoxical—and this may be where much of their appeal lies" (2016, 11). The commentator cameo often acts as a soothing distraction, a brief diversion from the dark doings of these films' hectic narratives. Yet the device's thematic purpose is typically "elusive," the effects it creates "ambiguous and paradoxical." Bill O'Reilly's appearance in *Dark of the Moon* provides a particularly clear example of one such ambiguity. Generally speaking, the Fox host drives the scene and the film seems largely "on his side." Indeed, he is a

reassuringly analog presence in a landscape largely comprised of ones and zeroes.<sup>76</sup> And yet, O'Reilly is *completely and utterly incorrect* in all his assessments and predictions. The Autobots *are* good guys, and it is ultimately through their efforts that humanity is spared from enslavement by the Decepticons. Similarly, all the journalistic hand-wringing about whether or not Kal-El's arrival on earth is good or bad for the human race in *Batman v Superman* is, narratively-speaking, pointless: It's *Superman*, people! He's *good!* The thrill of recognition with which we're expected to greet an unheralded appearance from one of these familiar faces is immediately undercut by the realisation that *we*, in fact, may know better than the experts. It's the professional broadcaster's job to relate the present to us; the recent blockbuster frames these figures as being as much in the dark, as divorced from the current moment, as everyone else.

Both reassuring and *wrong*, at once authentic and contrived, the commentator cameo speaks to a world which has become something, quite literally, stranger than fiction. How can we "live in the moment" if the moment itself cannot be trusted? Even the evidence of our senses has been called into question by the proliferation of digital manipulation tools, such as online editing and Instagram filters, collapsing old notions of indexicality (Prince 2012) just as the *micro*-microtemporalities of social media have reshaped time. If the commentator cameo on one level works to reassure, validate and verify—to "bring the present back"—then it simultaneously reminds us of just how

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<sup>76</sup> The Fox News pundit amuses, in fact, because he is unchanged; a "shard of the real" which defies reconfiguration in translation to the cinema screen, and by extension the digital wizardry and techno-fetishism which otherwise permeates the film and the outside world it speaks to.

untrustworthy, how easily corrupted, our current moment has become. In consistently misinterpreting the truth and delivering falsehoods with such conviction, these professional broadcasters are shown to be just as susceptible to manipulation and errors made in good faith as the rest of us. Further, their consistent *wrongness* places them implicitly on the side of the films' dissembling and deceitful villains, enemies of the present who think only of future dominance. It should also be noted that these adversaries are, as a rule, closely associated with cutting edge technologies, digitality in particular. They are narratively and symbolically aligned with the operations and agents of Shoshanna Zuboff's *Big Other*.<sup>77</sup>

It's all the more disconcerting, therefore, when such forces are shown subverting the old fashioned news broadcast—literally *rewriting* the present—to further entrench their power and advance agendas of self-interest. In the most recent example of the commentator cameo in a major franchise entry, *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs and Shaw* (Leitch 2019), this subtext becomes text. In order to turn public feeling against the titular heroes, the high-tech villains of the piece—"a mercenary army with plenty of dark money"—leak a false narrative to the press, and within seconds we see actual Scottish broadcaster Gavin Esler<sup>78</sup> delivering these lies from a massive LED screen mounted on a skyscraper (Fig 28): "Apparently they control the media as well," gasps Shaw's sister Hattie

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<sup>77</sup> The Decepticons, disguised as laptops or converting human flesh through the insertion of microscopic nanobots; Lex Luthor (Jesse Eisenberg), whizz-kid CEO of the tech giant LexCorp; the cyber-terrorists of *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out*, hacking servers and corrupting files to frame Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise), or those of *Fast & Furious presents: Hobbs and Shaw* (Leitch 2019), with their technologically-enhanced leader Brixton Lore (Idris Elba).

<sup>78</sup> Best known to British viewers as a main presenter on the BBC 2 political analysis programme *Newsnight* from 2002 to 2014.



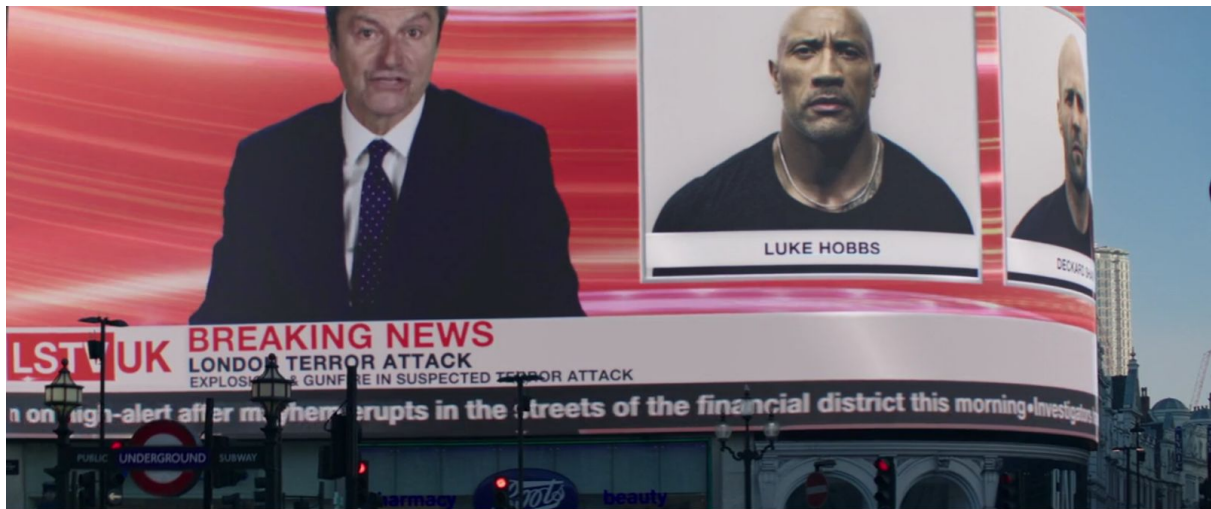


Fig 28. "Apparently they control the media as well!" Broadcaster Gavin Esler (himself) unwittingly performs a frame job on Hobbs (Dwayne Johnson) and Shaw (Jason Statham). David Leitch, *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw*, 2019, captured by author from DVD.

(Vanessa Kirby). Importantly too, while in other films the excerpted current events programmes are resolutely American in provenance and transmission, these are international broadcasts, a false threat spread simultaneously around the world. With "live television and 'real time' networked media," Scott McQuire observes, "events happening in one place have instantaneous effects in another, or in a multiplicity of others, potentially impacting on sites distributed across the entire globe... In this context, concepts such as distance, proximity and locality, as well as interiority and exteriority, take on a range of new meanings" (2008, 10–11). That array of new meanings is disorientating enough when one can assume the basic veracity of the event being reported on; in the decade since McQuire made his observation, many people have lost confidence even in that. In *Hobbs & Shaw*, the real-time international media is framed as simply a mouthpiece. *What's happening*—ie. the present—is what *they* say it is, and *they* are anyone with the economic or political clout to pay off a teleprompter.

It's tempting to read the commentator cameo, therefore, as implicitly critical of the remediation of global events through digital media, of a thinning distinction between fact and fiction in a culture which favours opinion over reportage, online "hits" over accuracy and objectivity, and increasingly suspicious of the power of "dark money" to reconfigure reality as it sees fit. But this is not really the effect of such scenes. The featured pundits might be wrong, but they are not knowingly *telling lies*, and that distinction cuts to the heart of something true and terrifying about our modern era: "It isn't a lie if you don't know you're not telling the truth." The internet and mobile media devices may have brought the world into our pockets, but this unprecedented access to information has been accompanied by vast volumes of *misinformation* (Fuchs 2014). This takes the form not only of "fake news"—as an intentional political tool—but accidental errors in Wikipedia entries and unvetted pieces of online journalism. As Jameson wrote in 1991, back at the dawn of the internet, the "mode of contemporary entertainment literature" he characterises as "high-tech paranoia... must be seen as a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (37). That impossible totality, now further reconfigured by the *micro*-microtemporalities of mobile media, has only become more *totally impossible* to think or make comprehensible. Our loss of the present—which is to say, a current moment in which the "truth" can be a matter of common consensus—is now so profoundly unsettling that just the image of a man in a suit on the telly retains its totemic power even as the words flowing from his lips are manifestly inaccurate. It is the



Fig 29. "Wolf Blitzer" (himself) reports on fictional nuclear attacks - outside and within the movie. Christopher McQuarrie, *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out*, 2018, captured from DVD.

form we respond to, not the *content*. In a world of endless "hot takes", op-eds and viral video, conviction is king.

The simultaneous affirmation and undermining of such conviction, of the very idea of a reliable present moment, is the subtext of the final commentator cameo to be considered here. This sequence, featuring an extended appearance by CNN's lead political anchor Wolf Blitzer, occurs in 2018's *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out*. The scene is especially fascinating in that it is at once a cameo commentator and *not* one. Blitzer is first seen on a TV screen, presenting his weekday current events programme, *The Situation Room* (Fig 29). That monitor is located in a hospital ward, where rogue nuclear weapons specialist Nils Delbruuk (Kristoffer Joner) is being interrogated by Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) and Luther Stickell (Ving Rhames) following a car accident. The events being reported on are three terrorist attacks carried out using weapons designed by Delbruuk; Blitzer outlines the crisis from the screen with typical gravitas, but at first the scene's attention is firmly on our heroes' efforts to coerce a passcode

from the invalid. These attempts proving futile, Hunt apparently about to cross ethical lines into outright assault, Stickell makes the scientist an offer. Give them the passcode, and Wolf Blitzer will read the terrorist group's manifesto live on air. This *quid pro quo* is accepted, a phone call is made, and Blitzer abruptly halts his prepared broadcast to "read [the] manifesto in its entirety." As he proceeds to do so, Delbruuk happily gives the operatives access to his schematics and data archives. His moment of triumph is short-lived, however—Hunt whispers the word "Go!" and the walls of the ward fall backward, revealing the room to be, in effect, a TV studio. On the monitor, Blitzer rises from his desk in silhouette, exits that frame and re-enters to stand beside Hunt and Stickell. He then removes a rubber mask to reveal that Blitzer is, in fact, fellow Impossible Mission Force (IMF) operative Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg). "Told you we'd get it," says Benji, but his voice is still Blitzer's, dubbed in post (Fig 30-32). "I don't understand," mutters the crestfallen Delbruuk. "The attacks didn't happen?" Hunt looms over him with a high-tech hypodermic, pressing it into the terrorist's neck. "What's done is done," says Ethan, "when *we* say it's done." Smash cut to opening titles.

This scene may be read, in part, as a somewhat confused commentary on the phenomenon of "fake news" which had been a signature element of the recent 2016 Presidential elections.<sup>79</sup> As with the later *Hobbs & Shaw*, the film implies the ease with which powerful organisations and individuals might subvert "the news" to advance their own hidden agendas. There is, I suggest, a

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<sup>79</sup> It also suggests, perhaps coincidentally, the technology of "deep fake" facial replacement which would enter the public discourse more fully the year after the film's release.

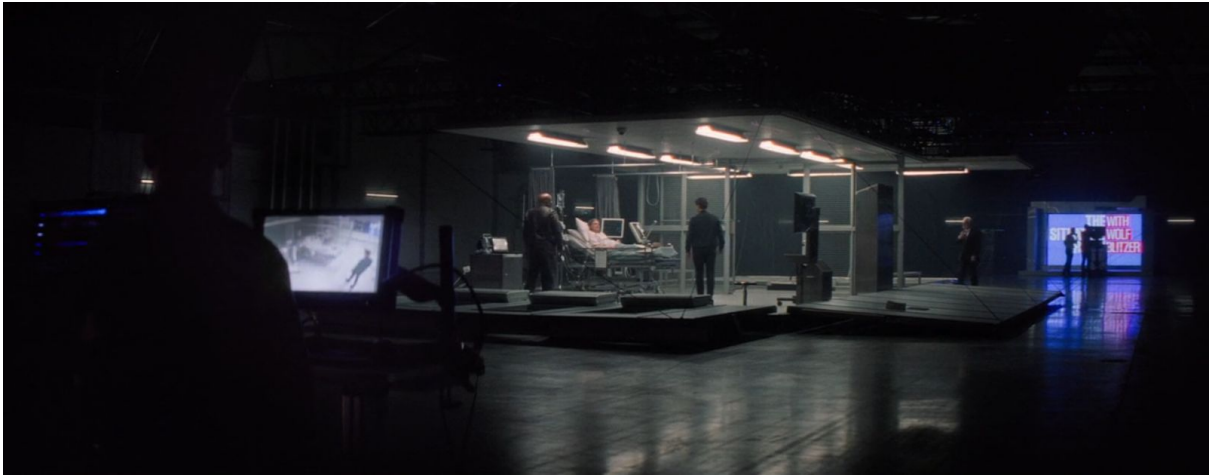


Fig 30. The walls of the hospital ward collapse, revealing a mock-up TV news studio.



Fig 31. "Wolf Blitzer" joins Hunt and Stickell at Delbruuk's bedside, peeling off a rubber mask...



Fig 32. ... to reveal IMF operative Benji Dunn. His next line is said with Blitzer's voice.  
All images this page: Christopher McQuarrie, *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out*, 2018, captured by the author from DVD.

deeper subtext at work here also. The phrase "fake news", after all, can be read as a synonym for "false present." In this commentator cameo, we find a "real now" seamlessly substituted by its high-tech simulacrum; one can perceive also a floating and detached narcissism uniquely of the digital era. When Delbruuk is enjoined into coughing up his bomb-making blueprints through one phone call to a major news network, the film frames this as one more sally in an ongoing and deeply personal grudge match between Hunt and anarchist ideologue Solomon Lane (Sean Harris). As Christian Fuchs (2014) has argued, the power of new technologies to make great volumes of data more accessible than ever before has led to an increasing inability to situate these "nuggets of data" within a larger historical or political framework. Digital media, he writes, tend to "present public developments as private affairs" (2014, 226) with any meaningful distinction between the two spheres being "distorted to the point of unrecognizability" (Fuchs quoting Habermas 1989, 172). *Distorted to the point of unrecognisability*—like Benji Dunn beneath his 3D-printed Wolf-face—the world reflected back to us through social media is solipsistic by design. Whether for fun or profit, and usually both, the chief objective is to reconfigure global reality into something of personal interest to you, *the viewer*. It's no longer just the future that's "what you make it," but the present as well—and a present which is endlessly mutable and customisable to personal tastes becomes as fleetingly insubstantial as the digital detritus through which it is increasingly determined and displayed.

As we have seen, playing fast and loose with *now*, teasing a restored sense of present and quickly discounting it, is a persistent feature of the commentator



cameo. Blitzer's appearance in *Mission: Impossible 6*, however, is subtly troubling in ways that, say, Bill O'Reilly's *Dark of the Moon* vignette is not. There, the audience and O'Reilly are all in on the gag together—it's funny because he's shouting about robots now—and the film, at least, plays the joke straight down the line. The contortions of *Fall Out*'s broadcaster cameo are altogether stranger and more alienating. The film may play it coy about suggesting that, even in the interests of national security, one of the bastions of TV journalism might be easily (indeed, willingly) co-opted, but its assertion of a *real present* fails to convince. Within the fiction, Delbruuk certainly believes that the Government-adjacent forces of the IMF have enough clout to tell Serious Journalist Wolf Blitzer what to say on air. The dramatic tension derived from Blitzer's extended reading of the manifesto suggests that the film-makers are confident audiences will believe it also. The scene's final reveal—that Wolf was really Benji the whole time—is meant to reassure us that no certified journalists took part in the IMF's manipulative fact-finding exercise. The scene only functions, however, because a certified journalist has signed on to take part in a manipulative cinematic exercise.<sup>80</sup> In universe, all these tricks might be pulled by the good guys, to prevent mass death and chaos, and on a formal level by a production team wishing to surprise and delight the film's consumers. *The Situation Room* has nonetheless become just one more site of hollowed-out reality, of a degraded and diminishing present. On a symbolic level, it is difficult to think of a more fitting reflection of a world newly cognizant of how easily

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<sup>80</sup> A fictional newscaster, played by a supporting artiste, being revealed as Benji in disguise would hardly have the same impact: "But I thought you were NSABC's Trent Magnussen, venerable host of 'Current Ev-Trents with Trent Magnussen!'"

doctored, dissembled and distorted the current moment has become—one in which not even Wolf Blitzer can, quite literally, be taken at face value.

"Elusive, strained and dark, ambiguous and paradoxical" (Paasonen 2016, 11), the commentator cameo is a shard of the real which can, on one level, be read as allegorically expressing a deep desire for the departing present. Hand-in-hand with that feeling, however, is the sense that a cultural course has been charted which cannot now be undone. The particular details of past and current events washed away by ever-greater waves of digital noise, by the omnipresent mobile device's constant clamouring for attention (Terranova 2012), such *shards* are, as Alan Liu writes, merely apparitions. They haunt the margins of the recent blockbuster, offering fleeting comfort while simultaneously acting as reminder of digitality's displacement of traditional temporalities. I have given over much of this discussion to the commentator cameo because close textural study of that particular trope, as it has been twisted by multiple filmmakers and franchises into ever more conflicted and convoluted shapes, allows for an allegorical analysis not contingent on one creative viewpoint or from the perspective of a single year. As Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge remark of coded applications, very often "people see the changes that are occurring as simply an extension of previous systems to which they are already conditioned; how software is incrementally employed is seen as an inherent aspect of how things are now done and are therefore unchallengeable" (2011, 20). In other words: if Big Other is indeed waging a war on *now*, it is one of attrition. Attempting to specifically *periodise* these developments—to ring in the changes as reflected in the form of the wide-release Hollywood franchise film—is, in many ways, the



cornerstone framework of this thesis. By doing so, we may chart a progression which, over the past fifteen years and in the advanced West at least, has advanced not in obvious fits and bursts but incrementally.

I made a similar claim in the previous chapter, arguing that from *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008) to *Fate of the Furious* (Gray 2017) one could perceive a shifting view of data collection, mass self-surveillance and the socio-economic operations of *big data*, the end point of which was a sort of acceptance—a cultural "assimilation," in Scott McQuire's phrase, of those forces and technologies into "the dominant social habitus" (2008, 14). As the blockbuster has allegorically dealt with a digitality-driven *loss of present* over the same time period, however, it appears an inverse trajectory has been taken. At the end of the last section, I suggested that for all the cynicism of *Dark of the Moon's* portrayal of its fleeting and fragmented current moment, some glimmer of optimism remained for a new kind of *present*, a "life lived in media" which might offer its own satisfactions, pleasures and meaning. In terms of the commentator cameo, Bill O'Reilly's appearance in that film seems to embody the most relaxed and amusing aspects of a *remixed/remediated* digital culture as advocated for by Mark Deuze. Politically and emotionally detached, perhaps, but as Deuze put it in 2014, maybe "living as a zombie in media is the only way to survive." The scene is certainly *playful*; a quality which Sean Cubitt, in 2004, described as an inherent quality of "the new Hollywood blockbuster movie: [offering] an appeal to self-loss in the modeling of a coherent spectacle, whose offer is of a coherence that is impossible in the contemporary world" (236). What we find in

the subsequent iterations of this particular trope, however, is something quite different: they evoke instead a sort of *anti*-coherence.

Even when the films possess an overall tone of fun and play, as in the buddy action-comedy romp *Hobbs & Shaw*, the commentator cameo has come to embody tension, rather than relief; cooling remainders of a present which feels increasingly removed from us, of a remediated reality experienced largely through a screen. Take *Batman v Superman*'s broadcaster montage, a half decade after O'Reilly's pioneer cameos in *Iron Man II*<sup>81</sup> (Favreau 2010) and *Dark of the Moon*. These moments are also held separate from the main narrative, but are used to express not humour, rather anxiety and existential dread. Two years after that, *Mission Impossible - Fall Out* lands shy of explicitly stating that media may be used to dismantle the truth for hidden purposes, while implicitly suggesting just how easily this might be achieved. Finally, in 2019's *Hobbs and Shaw*, we are witness to exactly that on a textual level: well-intentioned but oblivious newsreaders placed, within a single cut, into service of the film's well-resourced villains, blithely broadcasting their malicious lies to an international audience of billions. Year by year, cameo-by-cameo, such sequences offer less comfort and more conflictedness. However familiar the face, however authoritative the intonation, these broadcasters don't understand *now* any more than we do. Within the *cultural dominant* of digitality, we are all strangers in a strange land; there are no locals to ask for directions.

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<sup>81</sup> Not previously outlined as the Marvel movies fall largely outside the remit of this research, and O'Reilly's appearance is extremely brief, just 24 seconds in length. He does not interact with any of the film's characters and appears only to label Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) with his trademark epithet, "pinhead."



Fig 33. "We're getting reports there are total blackouts..." Anderson Cooper tells it like it isn't. Zack Snyder, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, 2016, captured from DVD.

In 1991, Fredric Jameson wrote of a postmodern populace afraid of losing "a set of privileges which we tend increasingly to think of in spatial terms: privacy, empty rooms, silence, walling other people out, protection against crowds and other bodies. Nietzschean wisdom, then, tells us to let go of that kind of fear and reminds us that whatever social and spatial form our future misery may take, it will not be alien because it will by definition be ours" (286). The assumed privileges we have more recently lost are as much temporal as spatial, conceptual as well as physical. Traditional temporalities have been supplanted by information flows, "constantly mov[ing] and stretch[ing] from the current moment to the future and the more or less recent past" (Paasonen 2016, 9), and direct experience by the isolating immediacy of online reaction/interaction (Turkle ed. Katz 2008). Life itself has been remediated by user-driven algorithms, delivered through increasingly sophisticated mobile media, benefitting shadowy forces we both fear and are, to no little degree, dependent upon to function. What might once have been considered undue solipsism now

presents itself as the only defence against existential despair. Which is likely why audiences don't balk when Anderson Cooper appears on the cinema screen to report on Superman battling Doomsday in the same way he might cover a Federal budget crisis or war in the Middle East on TV—or, a few hours later, in an excerpt uploaded to YouTube. In a world without a stable present or meaningful past, all the blockbuster film can reassure us with are those few totems which, for the moment, still manage to represent both: a monochrome JFK, a still image of Obama, a couple of shouting O'Reillys and a Charlie Rose in repose. "Shards of the real" may well be all that's left of *now*—and if they cut us a little, so much the better. Such pangs of pain and loss do not belong to the Decepticons, the Kryptonians, or *Big Other*: they are, by definition, not *alien*, but ours.

## THREE

### RUNNIN' AIN'T LIVIN'

*"The larger thrust of my argument is that, in the context of our own present, sleep can stand for the durability of the social, and that sleep might be analogous to other thresholds at which society could defend or protect itself. As the most private, most vulnerable state common to all, sleep is crucially dependent on society in order to be sustained."*

- Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 2013

*"What I won't stand for, what I will lose sleep over—and I love my sleep—is the idea of an irresponsible, rogue agent working in my office. So I'm going to slow things way down here. You can look at me with those judgemental, incriminating eyes all you want, but I bullshit you not."*

- Theodore Brassell (Laurence Fishburne), *Mission: Impossible III*, 2006

## SC 1

**"Sleep well, everyone. Busy day tomorrow"**

**The action hero adapts to a 24/7 world**

Going by the evidence of the screen, Impossible Mission Force operative Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) hasn't had a good night's sleep in over a decade. He's been gassed, drugged and knocked unconscious by an exploding Kremlin, certainly, but in terms of a good old fashioned nap—*nada*. Even the last time Ethan slept in a domestic setting, in *Mission: Impossible III* (Abrams 2006), the event is documented largely by way of inference. Only frames into a tight shot on Hunt's sleeping face, his eyes snap open, sweat beading on his brow. Haunted by the gruesome death of a junior agent (Keri Russell) he'd trained, her voice echoing out from a black void, Hunt lurches up into a sitting position and gasps for air. His fiancée Julia (Michelle Monaghan), sleeping alongside, stirs and gently pulls him back down to the mattress. Forty seconds later, we see Hunt roaring up to an IMF aircraft on his motorcycle, bathed in sunlight, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. In rest, Ethan's mind has betrayed him, briefly threatened to expose a secret life; snapping awake, he quickly asserts control and recovers his cool. The latter condition, the film implies, is Hunt's natural one. Even his sleep is not *real* sleep, rather a state of "low-power readiness" which "remakes the larger sense of sleep into simply a deferred or diminished condition of operability and access" (2013, 13). This is how Jonathan Crary describes the now-ubiquitous "sleep mode" setting of the digital device; it captures also the relentless drive of Cruise's character and the thriller narratives in which he operates. When he

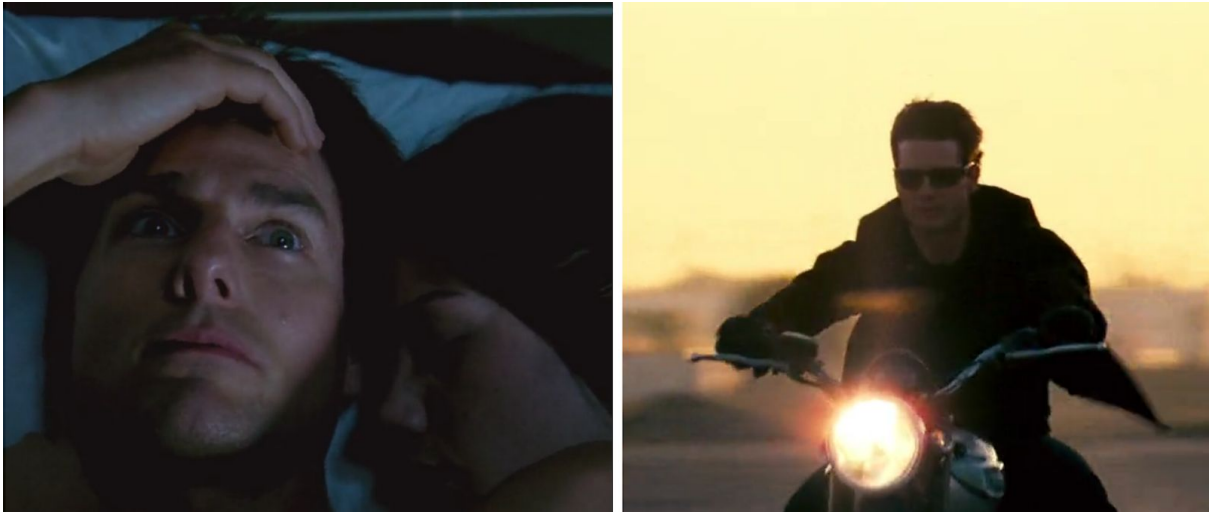


Fig 34. What a difference a change of scene makes: Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) in the marital bed (left) and on his way to work a few frames later (right). J. J. Abrams, *Mission: Impossible III*, 2006, captured from DVD. Composite by the author.

bolts awake, sweaty and panicked, Hunt is presented as the victim of sleep—it *makes him do* things he doesn't want to do. One scene later, tearing down the runway in a rakish suede jacket, literally high on the hog, Hunt/Cruise have been restored to their full iconographic glory (Fig 34). It's the last time but one in the franchise he'll voluntarily risk the nightmares and potential infantilisation which may come with a good night's rest: "Within the globalist neoliberal paradigm," as Crary notes, "sleeping is for losers."

In my first chapter, I explored the theft of *data* by Big Other—the exploitation of "life itself as raw material" (Couldry and Mejias 2018, 14) to enrich organisations and enshrine their systems of control, as allegorically expressed in the developing image-formation of the blockbuster's wall of screens. In the second, I applied the same approach to an equally alarming diminishment of temporality, reflected in these films' increasingly desperate and often inchoate usage of explicit real-world references, their "shards of the real." Here, in this

final chapter, we can track digitality's attack on human biology itself. To do so, I have recorded every instance of a named character eating, sleeping, or fornicating in the course of three action franchises which began before the event of Web 2.0<sup>82</sup> and have continued well into our current period of advanced informational capitalism. What this data shows is a progressive decline in such activities in all three blockbuster series considered: *Mission: Impossible* (six films, 1996-2018); the *Fast Saga* (eight films, 2001-2017); and the *Bourne* series (five films, 2002-2016). On a textual level, too, the movies' treatment of these base human requirements can be read to reflect an increasing resentment over their functional necessity *and* a criticism of the techno-cultural operations which have engendered such derision. "We are now in an era," notes Crary, "in which there is an overarching prohibition on wishes other than those linked to individual acquisition, accumulation, and power. In a 24/7 world these limits are as much self-enforced as they are imposed externally" (2013, 111). The strangely puritanical limitations placed upon the recent blockbuster hero, at once *self-enforced* and *externally imposed*, reflect the rejection of such basic desires in an increasingly 24/7 world. Through the escalating absence of sleep, food and sex, these films do not simply record the passing of old wishes and physiological realities; they may also be read to mourn their passing in real time.

In making this argument, I do not pretend that the relative lack of bodily functions is new to the spectacular event movie. Obviously, the action film necessarily involves action, and a hero who spends a realistic proportion of the runtime catching forty winks, going to the lav, or fixing a sandwich would not

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<sup>82</sup> As established in the Introduction, circa 2004/2005.



make for a particularly compelling or exciting dramatic lead. Nonetheless, it is a quantifiable fact that these series did once make time for food, sex and sleep in a way their latter entries do not. This analysis will begin with a focus on sleep; how natural rest has vanished from the action blockbuster in close parallel with the rise of what Crary terms "a time of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate and within which sleep has no necessity or inevitability" (2013, 9). I shall then explore, in two subsequent sections, the ways in which eating and sex have been similarly displaced in the recent blockbuster. Only the *Fast & Furious* films persist in making the shared meal a site of interpersonal connection, literal sustenance and emotional succour. Even here, however, the frequency of such scenes sharply declines after 2009's *Fast & Furious* (Lin). Strikingly too, it's following the same film in which the testosterone-fuelled blockbuster hero appears to lose all manifest interest in sex. A couple of babies born between *Fast* instalments aside, we find carnal desire going the way of other base requirements such as food and sleep: the endless demands of 24/7 leaving no time in which to snack, snooze or get laid.

This line of enquiry is a novel one, largely unexplored by the extant literature on post-2005 Hollywood effects cinema. In her 2015 primer, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, Yvonne Tasker devotes a half chapter ("Espionage Action") to *The Bourne Identity*, with reference to the later instalments in the franchise, noting that the action/espionage hero "is necessarily detached from the social bonds of family and community" (174). What Tasker does not acknowledge, however, is these characters' equal detachment from biological necessities such as food, sex and periods of rest. Lisa Purse's



Fig 35. Jason Bourne allows himself a rare unguarded moment in the company of Marie Kreutz (Franka Potente). Doug Liman, *The Bourne Identity*, 2002, captured from DVD.

*Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011) deals extensively with the subject of sex, almost exclusively in the context of "homosexuality as a metaphor" in spectacular action films such as *300* (Snyder 2007) and *Alexander* (Stone 2004), but eating is barely mentioned and sleep noted only in terms of scene-setting.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, in *Spectacular Digital Effects* (2014) Kirsten Whissel understandably fails to locate a discrete "emblem" in the absence of these activities; as in *Purse*, terms such as "eating", "sleep" and "sex" are employed almost entirely to describe on-screen action. Pre-Web 2.0 work on the mainstream effects film, such as that of Geoff King (2000) and Sean Cubitt (2004), evinces no particular interest in the celluloid representation—or absence—of such biological mundanities. Cubitt briefly touches on spectacular cinema's juxtaposition of "eroticized, commodified, desire" with "the ridicule of death, the body, eating, sleeping, and disorganization" (2004, 24), but only in reference to the pioneering

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<sup>83</sup> Such as, discussing the socio-political dimensions of *Avatar* (Cameron 2009): "Jake is first shown waking from an extended sleep in a 'cryo chamber'" (24)

silent fantasies of Georges Méliès. None of this writing appears to recognise the Lacanian *absent presence* of sleep, food and sex in mainstream cinema of the past 15 years—a trend which can be persuasively tracked against the horizon of digital developments and the rise of informational capitalism.

The only theorist to substantively explore this connection, in fact, is Jonathan Crary, whose 2013 book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep* both inspired this chapter and will provide its core critical framework. Crary refers to a number of twentieth century films<sup>84</sup> in order to trace "an outline of a reconfigured relationship to an emerging global consumer culture that would be more securely in place by the 1990s" (103), with a particular focus (as the title suggests) on the degradation and diminishment of sleep. The emergent globalist culture Crary describes, enabled and expanded by the operations of digital capitalism, has since flowered to become what he terms the "24/7 environment." I aim to extend upon his work by charting these techno-cultural (r)evolutions as expressed in the more recent—and, indeed, rather *lower-brow*—cultural production of the populist action blockbuster. In order to do so, I rely also upon scholarship from authors such as Melissa Gregg, Sarah Sharma, Sherry Turkle and Eva Thulin; work which delineates the personal, professional and political ramifications of evolving and pervasive digital technologies. I will apply these frameworks to the changing operations of the Hollywood event film—societal and behavioural alterations tracked allegorically through the statistical and textual analysis which I apply to these long-running blockbuster franchises.

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<sup>84</sup> Among them, *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960), *La Jetée* (Marker 1962) and *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982).



Fig 36. Brian O'Conner (Paul Walker, left) and Dom Toretto (Vin Diesel) enjoy a pre-heist meal. Evidently it's a hearty one; Dom will only be caught masticating once more in the next two decades. Rob Cohen, *The Fast and the Furious*, 2015, captured from DVD.

This progression, viewed with a critical eye and an index finger constantly hovering above the pause button, is not at all difficult to discern. In 1996 and 2000, we saw Ethan Hunt get some shut-eye. In 2001, Dom Toretto excused himself from a party to take his girlfriend Letty (Michelle Rodriguez) upstairs for a little how's-your-father. In 2002, Jason Bourne eagerly scarfed down a breakfast burrito upon waking from a good kip. For over a decade, however, all three men have been essentially sexless, foodless and sleepless, at least on-screen. The unvariegated *non-time* of Crary's 24/7 allows no space for rest, repast or reproduction: Hunt must always be running, Toretto endlessly fighting for his "family," and Bourne constantly searching for home. These men may defend democracy, expose terrorist/conspirators, and reliably extract their loved ones from the most diabolical death traps—but, metaphorically speaking, they can no longer find a space or time in which they don't feel obligated to check their work emails.

## SC 2

**"Rest now, little brother, while I settle your one last score."**

**No rest for the wicked—or anyone else—in the post-Web 2.0 blockbuster**

Sleep, states Jonathan Crary, "is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism. Most of the seemingly irreducible necessities of human life—hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and recently the need for friendship—have been remade into commodified or financialized forms" (2013, 10). Sleep alone persists as the one (living) state in which we cannot easily be sold to, or induced to sell ourselves; it is the one condition in which we are more-or-less *unprofitable*. Though prescription sedatives, herbal supplements, sleep-tracking apps and white noise machines may extract capital from the act of getting to sleep, or retrospectively reviewing our quality of rest once awake, while in the state of sleep our value as consumers is largely suspended.<sup>85</sup> Little wonder, then, that the operations and technologies of digital capitalism have worked to reduce sleep, just as they have shrunken temporalities and eaten away at traditional notions of personal privacy. Studies have shown a "strong and significant correlation between usage of smartphones and subjective quality of sleep" (Randjelović, Stojiljković, Radulović, Ilić, Stojanović and Ilić, 2018).

Younger people—a key target demographic for the films under review—are particularly at risk, as a recent issue of *Jornal de Pediatria* relates: "while using

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<sup>85</sup> Though we may lose value as active consumers, we nonetheless remain a commodity. Raw data continues to be beamed out from smartphones and other digital technologies and harvested by corporate interests, even as people and devices lie dormant in their respective "sleep modes."

social networks to make the school bus journey go quicker might be inconsequential, the same online activity but at nighttime might have adverse effects on the quality of sleep. In fact, adolescents who used screen media before sleep reported shorter and disturbed sleep" (Kostyrka-Allchorne 2019, 380). Sleep has become less a natural dividing line between one day and another, and instead a regrettable biological function to be avoided or interrupted wherever possible. The key purpose of this section is to demonstrate how accommodatingly the mainstream Hollywood blockbuster has fallen in line with this new ethos, removing sleep from its bag of tricks in close correlation with the rise of 24/7 time and the "perpetual contact" culture of mobile media.



Looking at the graph above, the most obvious observation to be made is that, since 2015, there has been only one instance of a named character shown sleeping in any of these film series. Even then, in fact, the moment is brief and concerns *waking* far more than *sleeping*: a few frames of Ethan Hunt bolting awake from a nightmare at the beginning of *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out* (McQuarrie 2018), mirroring the scene from *Mission: Impossible III* described above. A more detailed exploration of the data reveals that in all eight entries made prior to the event of Web 2.0 (approximately 2004-2005) we are shown a lead character asleep, if only for a few moments. In the twelve films released from 2006 onwards, natural sleep is depicted on only five occasions. These numbers reflect an external culture in which sleep has become, at best, an irrelevance; its practical necessity often a source of irritation and/or discomfort. Revealingly, for instance, *The Bourne Supremacy* (Greengrass 2004) and *Mission: Impossible III* and *VI* all frame sleep in terms of the nightmares which precede their heroes' waking.<sup>86</sup> The comparatively domestic *Fast & Furious* franchise keeps sleep around longer—isolated instances occur in 2009, 2011 and 2015—but nonetheless rest, in these films, has become an exclusively female enterprise. All three naps are taken by the male leads' love interests, supporting characters in a series increasingly centred on the bulging biceps of Vin Diesel and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.<sup>87</sup> The later films in all three series don't even imply that sleep occurs off-screen, or between instalments. Bourne

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<sup>86</sup> *The Bourne Supremacy*, indeed, being the last time Bourne is seen sleeping—as if the character simply decided no good can come of rest, and henceforth resolved to do without.

<sup>87</sup> The last male character to be shown asleep is Brian O'Conner (Paul Walker), a slightly feminised figure himself whose "prettiness" is recurrently remarked upon by the series' more rugged cast members.

and Hunt, in particular, are characterised by a certain world-weariness, but this is framed as existential angst rather than physical exhaustion. There is simply too much to *do*, too many conspiracies and terrorist plots to uncover, to allow for the tedious non-action of sleep.<sup>88</sup>

It may be coincidence, but the second *Bourne* (2004) and *Fast* (2003) films, and the third *Mission* (2006)—in each, the final time a recurring male protagonist is shown in bed, enjoying a state of natural sleep—are the last series entries to be released prior to the launch of the Apple iPhone in 2007.<sup>89</sup> The mobile digital device, as stated above, has been noted for its deleterious impact on both the quality and duration of rest. Technological/biological reasons for this have been identified, particularly the screen's emission of blue light which "stimulates your brain and fools it into thinking it's daytime" (Whitney 2019).<sup>90</sup> The psychological factors in play are just as pertinent; the state of "perpetual contact" (Katz 2008) enabled by smartphones and the like being, somewhat perversely, accompanied by a concomitant "fear of missing out" (Thulin 2018, 476). As Crary notes, "the number of people who wake themselves up once or more at night to check their messages or data is growing exponentially" (2013, 13). To be asleep is to remove oneself from the digital grid, and consequently risk ignorance and irrelevance. Who knows what social activities might be discussed in a group chat, or prodding replies posted on an online fan forum, while one's time is

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<sup>88</sup> On the subject of "tedious non-action," Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1964) is perhaps cinema's ultimate riposte to the capitalist status quo: almost five and a half hours of looped footage of a man (John Giorno) dead to the world in bed.

<sup>89</sup> *Fast and the Furious 3: Tokyo Drift* (Lin, 2006) is essentially a spin-off from the main franchise, the only returning character being Dom Toretto (Vin Diesel), who makes a brief cameo during the final moments of the film.

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.magzter.com/article/Science/PC-Magazine/How-To-Stop-Blue-Light-From-Disturbing-Your-Sleep>



squandered in dreams? "Sleep is an irrational and intolerable affirmation," says Crary, "that there might be limits to the compatibility of living beings with the allegedly irresistible forces of modernization" (2013, 13). The *irresistible forces of modernisation*, as represented by the ubiquitous gadgets, super-charged vehicles and all-seeing computer programmes of these films, not only threaten the safety of our heroes; they also keep them alive. Phones are constantly buzzing, screens flashing and bombs about to go off. There's always another train to catch or flight to make, and more work to do in transit. With world security on the line and loved ones constantly being kidnapped and held to ransom, for Hunt or Bourne to sleep would not only seem "irrational and intolerable", but an act of arrant negligence.

For Ethan Hunt, Jason Bourne and Dom Toretto, availability is *everything*; they are never "off the clock". Consider how the recorded messages which relay to Hunt a new mission appear without warning, typically disguised in pointedly archaic, analogue forms.<sup>91</sup> Or Jason Bourne, who begins every film *incognito*, doing his utmost to avoid being pulled back into his former life with the CIA, and yet without fail is tracked down and forced to re-engage. *Fast & Furious 6*<sup>92</sup> (Lin 2013) opens with Dom Toretto sequestered in an unnamed tropical paradise: "Nice weather, and no extradition." Diplomatic Security Services agent Luke Hobbs (Dwayne Johnson) turns up unannounced one morning to recruit Dom for

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<sup>91</sup> In *Mission: Impossible II*, a pair of sunglasses—essentially Google Glass thirteen years early—which promptly explode in mid-air; in *Mission: Impossible IV* a commodified phonebooth; in *Mission: Impossible V*, a vinyl record; in *Mission: Impossible VI*, most anachronistically yet, a video projector hidden within a hardbound edition of Homer's *Odyssey*.

<sup>92</sup> Even the film's promotional tagline is weighed down with obligation, the inevitability of future white-knuckled adventures: "All Road Lead To This."

another high-stakes caper. "It wasn't hard to find you," Hobbs remarks.<sup>93</sup> These characters' experience closely recalls the contemporary condition Melissa Gregg terms *presence bleed*, wherein "the location and time of one's labour becomes a secondary consideration to the task of managing the expectation and/or the possibility that one is able and willing to work" (26, 2011). Real world shift-workers and fictional highly-trained government operatives alike must spend even their leisure time awaiting an electronic call to action, "fac[ing] a 'to do' list that seems forever out of control... [a] feeling of anxiety that arises in jobs that involve a never-ending schedule of tasks that must be fulfilled" (Gregg 2011, 15). The characters in these films may resign, retire or remove themselves from professional networks, but even temporary absence requires extreme effort: fake names, secret bank accounts, removing themselves physically to remote locales. Staying *off grid* requires almost the same level of energy expenditure as being on it, and more work comes regardless.<sup>94</sup> "Submission to these arrangements," writes Crary, "is near irresistible because of the portent of social and economic failure—the fear of falling behind, of being deemed outdated. The rhythms of technological consumption are inseparable from the requirement of continual self-administration" (2013, 46). Periods of rest are, necessarily, an early casualty of such a techno-cultural condition. One must be awake to accept an offer of work; one must also be awake to smoothly and promptly manage its rejection.

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<sup>93</sup> "I wasn't hiding," replies Toretto. Dom, at least, is cognisant of his lot; the best one can hope for is a brief respite from calls to duty, and all good things must come to an end.

<sup>94</sup> "Your mission, should you choose to accept it," has come to feel less like a genuine opt-out clause than a contractual nicety thrown in for HR purposes.



Fig 37. Jason Bourne, all tuckered out, on a cross-continental road trip.  
Doug Liman, *The Bourne Identity*, 2002, captured by author from DVD.

It wasn't always like this, however. In the initial entries of all three franchises, natural sleep is depicted as a kind of reward, a state of peace earned through surviving extreme action and physical deprivation. At the very end of *Mission: Impossible* (De Palma 1996), for instance, we find Ethan Hunt snoozing on an airplane, tuckered out from all the explosive action and convoluted intrigues to which he has just been subjected. After exposing both his mentor Jim Phelps (Jon Voight), and Phelps' wife Claire (Emmanuelle Béart), as murderous traitors in the IMF's midst, Hunt can finally doze off.<sup>95</sup> He knows who the bad guys are, and has seen them dispatched; in the midst of other slumbering civilians, Hunt can lower his guard and let his eyelids droop. A half hour into *The Bourne Identity* (Liman 2002), which opens with Bourne being fished up from the ocean, unconscious and riddled with bullets, the amnesiac former agent finds both a friend and temporary respite from the CIA black ops teams pursuing him. He promptly falls

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<sup>95</sup> When the stewardess who awakens him turns out to be a cover agent for the IMF, offering Hunt a new assignment, Cruise's expression is ambivalent—as if the character must choose between the natural comforts of rest and the excitements of high-tech espionage.

asleep during an all-night, cross-continental road trip and doesn't awaken until the car stops in Paris the next morning. In both *The Fast and the Furious* (Cohen 2001) and *2 Fast 2 Furious* (Singleton 2003), police officer/nascent fast-drivin' bad boy Brian O'Conner (Paul Walker) gets to enjoy periods of mid-film slumber. Strikingly, these scenes are not used to build tension, but rather function as moments of calm following or preceding storms of high-intensity action and physical danger. Sleep is framed not as a threat to the sleeper's wellbeing—a debilitating condition of "exposure, unprotectedness, and vulnerability" (Crary 2013, 8)—but a natural and necessary aspect of human existence. The fact that sleep occurs so briefly and occasionally, even in these early franchise entries, should not be read as a dismissal of such periods of natural rest. On the contrary, sleeping is presented as being all the more important and valuable for being so hard won.

Crucially, too, these early entries frame rest as a fundamentally social activity, a mutual contract of trust. As Crary observes, sleep is "one of the few remaining experiences where, knowingly or not, we abandon ourselves to the care of others" (2013, 125). This makes its diminishment by 24/7 time all the more concerning, and highlights a feature of the pre-2005 blockbuster which has been all but extinguished in the sequels that followed. In no less than five of the six films released prior to 2005, the "sleeping scenes" feature a woman nearby, watching over the resting hero or joining them in slumber. In *Mission: Impossible II* (Woo 2002), we see Hunt enjoying a whole five seconds of peaceful slumber alongside new partner Nyah Nordoff-Hall (Thandie Newton). The scene is unique in the franchise for being the only occasion in which Hunt is seen to wake slowly



Fig 38. Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) wakes up naturally from a snooze for the only time in twenty four years. John Woo, *Mission: Impossible II*, 2002, captured by author from DVD.

and unguardedly (Fig 38).<sup>96</sup> Nordoff-Hall's presence, the warmth of her body and the comfort of encircling arms, has made sleep for Ethan safe; has made it possible. Similarly, when undercover cop Brian O'Conner and Mia Toretto (Jordana Brewster)—the sister of his chief suspect—first go to bed together, not long before *The Fast and the Furious's* high-octane climax, the moment feels like an emotional oasis. We cut to the pair in bed, at rest, awoken by a phone call from Brian's LAPD commander. Despite his suspicions about the Toretto mob, the half-asleep O'Conner is given an out—"We're gonna move on [actually *bad* criminal] Johnny Tran and his gang at 1700 hours, unless you say otherwise"—and quickly takes it. A shared bed, the confidence in another person which this inherently requires; that act of trust has united Brian and Mia, and foretells his ultimate deliverance of her brother from police capture at the film's denouement. Importantly, too, the scene places sleep *before* sex. The coitus

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<sup>96</sup> From here on in, Hunt's waking will be preceded by nightmares or externally imposed unconsciousness. On which subject, more anon.

implied to follow is simply a consolidation of their new, familial bond, one forged first in sleeping. The aberration of *2 Fast 2 Furious* aside,<sup>97</sup> the rocksteady domestic relationship which follows is a dramatic cornerstone of the franchise—at least until the actor Paul Walker's death in 2013 imposed an unexpected curtailment of both characters' plotlines.<sup>98</sup>

This shifting conception of sleep, from a unifying and revivifying natural state to something not so much to be avoided, but simply no longer extant, can be most clearly tracked in the *Bourne* series. Throughout the entire franchise, spanning 2002 to 2016, Jason is seen to rest only during the first two films, and exclusively in the reassuring company of Marie Kreutz (Franka Potente). In *The Bourne Identity*, she drives while he sleeps; in *The Bourne Supremacy* (Greengrass 2004) she wakes with Bourne to talk through his nightmares and assuage his guilt. "Crucial is the dependence on the safekeeping of others for the revivifying carelessness of sleep," writes Crary, "for a periodic interval of being free of fears, and for a temporary 'forgetfulness of evil'" (2013, 28). In the first film, it is only under Marie's watchful eye that Bourne is able to temporarily *forget evil*—his own "evil," resurfacing in brief visions of his suppressed former life as a CIA assassin. In the second, the charm seems to be wearing off. Kreutz's soothing presence is sufficient to lull Bourne into sleep, but can no longer keep him there.<sup>99</sup> The remaining Damon-starring instalments of the series retain the distorted flashbacks and hallucinations, but no longer associate them with the

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<sup>97</sup> Essentially a spin-off film, O'Conner is the only character from the first movie to appear; drifting around Miami as an illegal street racer, he ends up being coerced into once again going undercover for the LAPD.

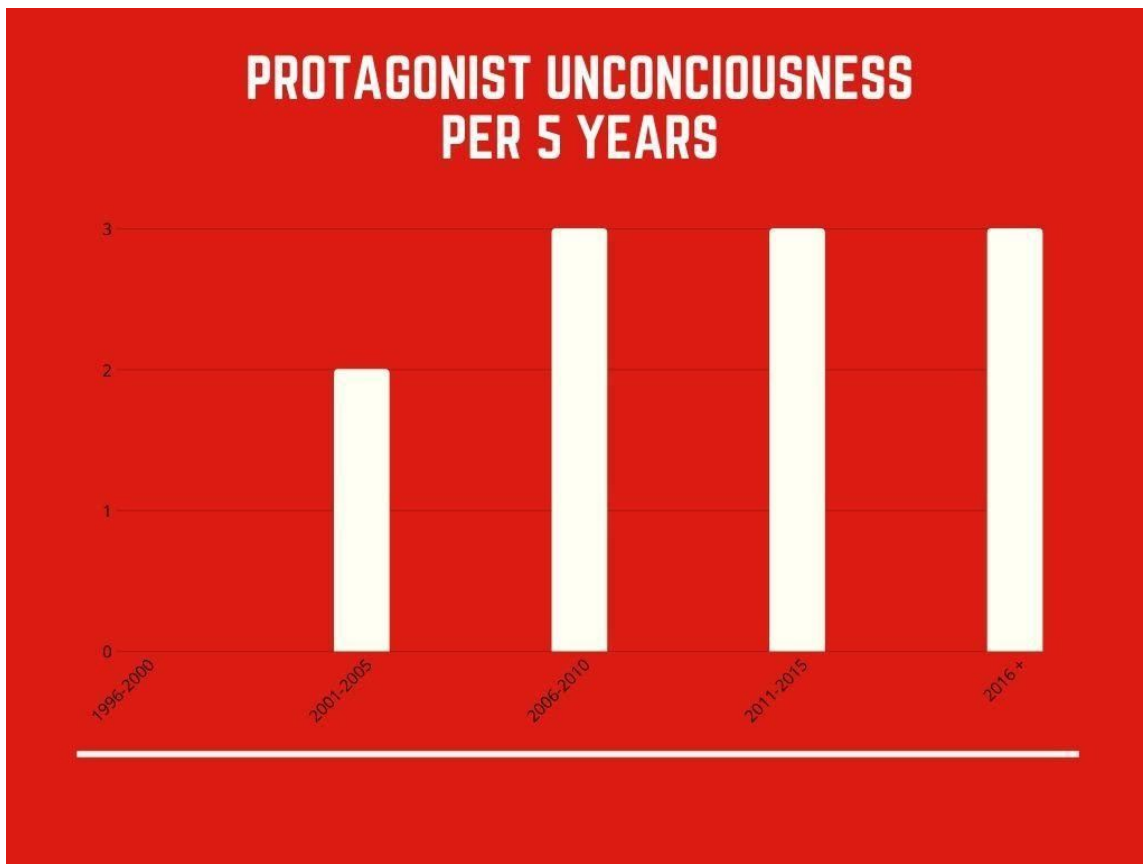
<sup>98</sup> <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/1646270/furious-7-was-almost-cancelled-when-paul-walker-died>

<sup>99</sup> As it happens, Marie is summarily murdered fifteen minutes of screentime later.

state of sleep.<sup>100</sup> They have become *waking nightmares*, apparently occurring unprompted even as Bourne prowls about and engages in street fights in various exotic locales. It's as if—displaced from their rightful place of psychic expression, the magic kingdom of sleep closed down—these fractured memories have no choice but to intrude upon Bourne's active hours. This formal technique is particularly prevalent in *The Bourne Ultimatum* (Greengrass 2007); as we have seen in Chapter One, an early example of the action blockbuster attempting to grapple with the sociological and technological changes of the digital age. Once again, and likely unknowingly, director Greengrass and his collaborators show to themselves to be ahead of the curve. When Crary describes 24/7 as "a zone of insensibility, of amnesia", he may also be describing the daily experience of Jason Bourne; after 2004, those dream visions crop up unexpectedly, regardless of hour or activity, and similarly serve to "steadily undermine distinctions between day and night, between light and dark, and between action and repose" (both 2013, 17). Bourne's passenger seat nap in 2002, along with Brian O'Conner's hotel room snooze in 2003, are the last time in these series we will see a lead character actually enjoying forty winks. Constant digital connectivity and the full flowering of 24/7 time will soon put paid to such old-timey indulgences.

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<sup>100</sup> I shall discuss 2012's *The Bourne Legacy* (Gilroy), with Jeremy Renner as the lead, later in this chapter.



As these franchises turned away from moments of natural rest, however, a structural substitution had to be found: sleep's sinister cousin, the externally imposed state of unconsciousness. The graph above shows that, just as incidences of natural sleep in these films have declined over the past 24 years, a concomitant rise can be seen in blows to the head, an unexpected gassing, or a mickey successfully slipped. Numerically, there are close to double the instances of forced unconsciousness in the post-Web 2.0 entries of these series than scenes of natural sleep. Even more strikingly, there are only two examples of a named character being rendered unconscious in the eight films made prior to 2006, and seven in the twelve released afterwards.



It is not, perhaps, implausible to read into this data the allegorical reflection of an external world both resistant to sleeping and sorely longing for rest, through any means necessary. According to the *American Journal of Public Health*, in 1993—just three years before Ethan Hunt was shown comfortably snoozing on a plane in *Mission: Impossible*—"approximately 2.7 million adult [medical] office visits involved complaints of sleeplessness in 1993. By 2007, this figure had more than doubled to 5.7 million" (Moloney, Ciciurkaite and Brown, 2015). In a subsequent study by the same scholars, published in August 2019, they report that diagnoses of insomnia "steadily increased over 23 years, from 800,000 in 1993 to 6.1 million in 2007, and from 6.6 million in 2008 to 9.4 million in 2015" (3). The experience of the blockbuster hero during this period, then, mirrors that of its growingly sleepless audience. For those consumers, used to staying well past their bedtimes and increasingly prone to seeking medical intervention in order to rest, sleep has become both elusive and requiring external imposition. The state of oblivion no longer just arrives, part of the natural order of human existence, but must be actively summoned.

This external collective experience is echoed by the film world. During 2006's *Mission: Impossible III*, Ethan Hunt is forced to take a sleeping drug at the behest of black marketeer Owen Davian (Philip Seymour Hoffman); later, he stops his own heart with a defibrillator to defuse a micro-explosive bomb implanted in his brain. On both occasions, Hunt is greeted by the face of partner Julia on his return to consciousness, drawing a visual parallel with his nightmare/waking in the marital bed near the beginning of the film. What differentiates the experience of unconsciousness and natural sleep, at least as



Fig 39. "Time to get up, honey." Julia Meade (Michelle Monaghan) revives fiancé Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) from self-induced heart failure with a little medical finesse.

J. J. Abrams, *Mission: Impossible III*, 2006, captured by the author from DVD.

depicted on-screen, is that the former does not come accompanied by bad dreams. The circumstances of these two knock-out sequences may be terrifying, but once under there is simply blackness—literally, fade outs and fade ins—and nothing more. Medicated stupefaction carries a distinct advantage. There is no guilt, no trauma, no disembodied voices calling out. In fact, when Hunt himself stops his heart to save his brain at the film's climax, the allegory becomes even more explicit. He uses the tools of modern medicine, a defibrillator, to put himself to sleep—not for the purposes of rest, but to preserve sentience. Julia's role is to bring him around before he slips away entirely (Fig 39). Metaphorically, Hunt has taken an Ambien to ready himself for the next business trip; when Julia restarts his heart she is a loving wife nudging her napping husband awake. "Instead of sleep, the business traveler is offered an elaborate cocktail of military tactics, spa services, pharmaceuticals, technological gadgets, and commodities,"

writes Sarah Sharma (2014, 43). Remove the spa services, and Hunt's life as a secret agent is enabled by just these devices. Sedatives and stimulants have replaced the traditional patterns of waking and sleep; he can feel down, but he can never give up. In our current era, "being tired is a requirement of labor, but being tired *and* unproductive is not a viable option." (2014, 43).

There is no solution to this "problem of sleep", as Sharma puts it, which does not ultimately result in an end to sleep itself: "an area of scientific research shared by both the military and pharmaceutical companies" (2014, 40). Rest is a *bother*, a time in which we can't earn, buy or build relationships. It is also, irritatingly, still necessary; a good night's sleep allows us additional energy, efficiency, focus. With the reduction of sleep, waking life is also diminished, as Crary observes: "24/7 denotes the wreckage of the day as much as it concerns the extinguishing of darkness and obscurity" (2013, 33.) No natural pauses, no innate divisions of private life and public duty, are left to the heroes of the films under review. Unless drugged, punched or exploded, their lives are spent in a constant state of wary readiness, night and day conflated into one endless stretch of hyperkinetic activity. Even as the recent blockbuster rejects sleep in structural terms, replacing natural rest with the knock-out blow, it nonetheless appears to look back with fondness on *sleep-as-was*. When their leads return to consciousness, after a bomb blast or stealthily administered sedative, these scenes often look and feel very much like the moments of waking shown in earlier films. Blinking back into sentience at the end of *Furious 7* (Wan 2015), for instance, Dom Toretto smiles up at the face of lover Letty Ortiz (Michelle Rodriguez). He has just been pulled from the wreckage of the car he blasted off a



Fig 40. Dom Toretto (Vin Diesel) awakens from yet more vehicular carnage, safe in the loving arms of wife Letty Ortiz (Michelle Rodriguez). James Wan, *Furious 7*, 2015, captured by the author from DVD.

rooftop at a helicopter, but Toretto may as well be waking from a good nap in the marital bed (Fig 40). When Ethan Hunt stirs awake on a hospital cot in the final minutes of *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out* (McQuarrie 2018), the first thing he sees is the soothing visage of (now former wife) Julia, gently reassuring him much as she did back in *Mission: Impossible III*. We may take umbrage at the need for rest, but we equally resent its removal from us; even in the sleepless worlds of these latter franchise entries, visual echoes of a lost peace remain.

What these films appear to implicitly long for, even in their omission of natural rest, is that “innocent sleep/Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care,/The death of each day’s life, sore labor’s bath,/Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course.”<sup>101</sup> The heroic leads of the recent blockbuster find no such nourishment in sleep. For them, as for Macbeth, sleep has now ceased to exist. The fact that its progressive removal from these massively popular

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<sup>101</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth* II:II, 35.

franchises has not been critically noted or expounded upon suggests how closely this formal trend parallels the Western cultural experience of the past twenty years. Sleep has vanished from celluloid just as imperceptibly and inexorably as it has been discounted and diminished in the world beyond the screen. The 24/7 environment is constitutionally opposed to "down time", to even the brief departure from the digital grid required by sleep. These characters must wait, as we do, for a text message that may never arrive, a coded missive which, if not immediately engaged with, will quickly lose all relevance and meaning. "There is a profound incompatibility of anything resembling reverie," Crary argues, "with the priorities of efficiency, functionality, and speed" (2013, 88). The character of Ethan Hunt can be read to represent efficiency; Bourne functionality; and Toretto/O'Conner speed. Taken together, then, the post-2005 films in which these characters appear can be read to emblematises an end to *reverie*, the revivifying loss of oneself in dreams. They are marked instead by endless waking, watching and running, cultural artefacts which depict the "relentless incursion of *non-time* of 24/7 into every aspect of social or personal life" (30). Since there is no longer any moment in which we can easily and naturally put ourselves to bed, perhaps the best one can hope for is the artificial slumber of the sleeping pill, the doctor's jab, or an unexpected bonk on the head. In other words: we sleep no more; the iPhone does murder sleep.

### SC 3

#### **"We ain't hungry no more either, right?"**

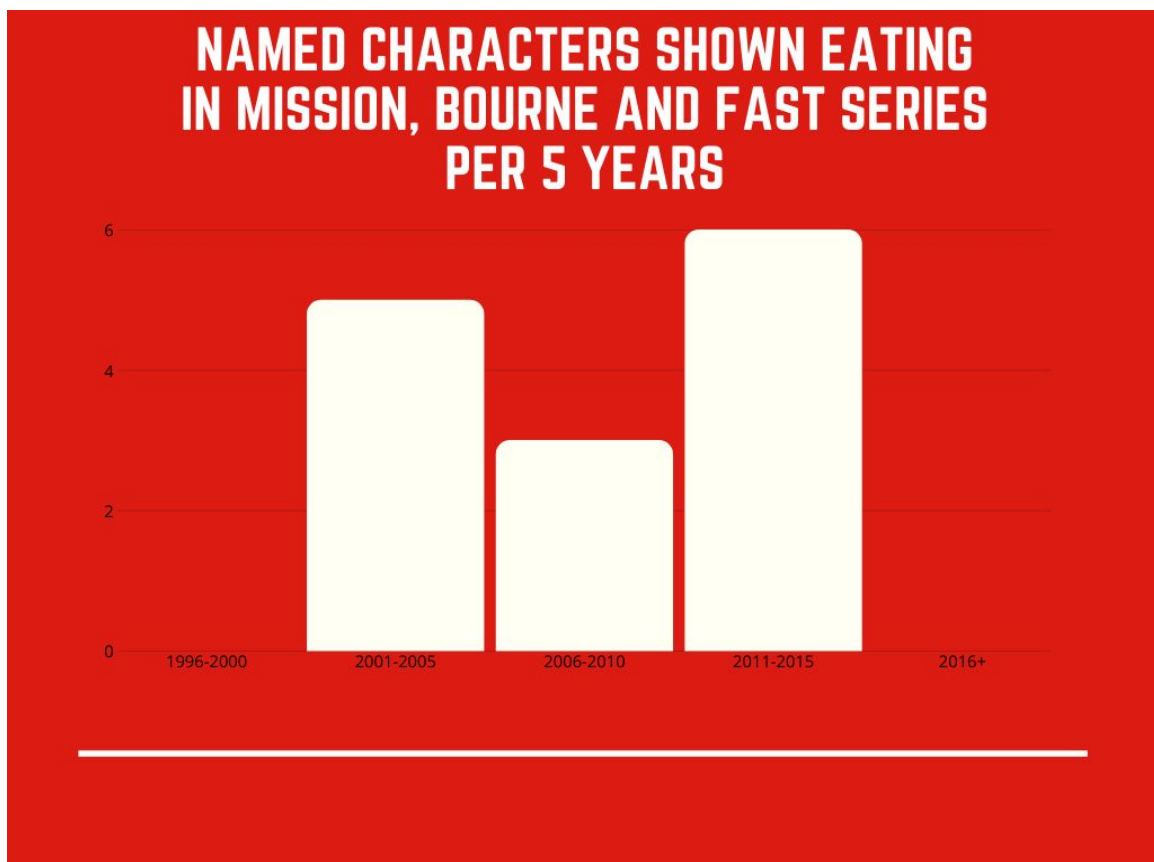
#### **The Fast Saga lays the table, and the Bourne series loses its appetite**

If sleep has become merely a memory in the recent event movie, the inclusion of other basic biological functions has seen a similar diminishment. The activity under analysis in this section is eating, food persisting in these films largely as set dressing or passive props for an actor to hold. There are some fairly prosaic production reasons at play here also; mainstream cinema and television are traditionally adverse to practical eating scenes.<sup>102</sup> Logistical considerations aside, however, the characters in these franchises *did* use to get peckish occasionally. In multiple early entries, we are shown moments of mastication, often occurring in scenes of interpersonal bonding within an everyday and/or domestic setting. Such instances disappear from these series in close parallel with incidents of natural rest. Once again, a close parallel can be drawn between the operations of the action event film and the behavioural patterns of the external world. "Human beings," writes Sherry Turkle, have long been "skilled at creating rituals for demarcating the boundaries between the world of work and the world of family, play, and relaxation" (2008, 131). With the advent of mobile media and tethering devices such as the iPad and smartphone, however, such boundaries between public and domestic lives have been eaten away: "Now always-on/always-on-me technology accompanies people to all these places,

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<sup>102</sup> For one thing, eating can easily lead to continuity errors—a chunk of steak disappearing and reappearing on the prongs of a fork, for instance—and it's difficult to elegantly exposit a complicated scheme with one's mouth full.

undermining the traditional rituals of separation” (131). For the heroes of these film franchises, the sit-down meal has increasingly gone the way of a good night’s bed rest. Perhaps, after the world’s been saved and kidnapes rescued, a beer might be poured and bread broken. Increasingly rarely, however, do we see a fork reach our heroes' lips. In the relentless present tense of the action blockbuster, as within the *cultural dominant* of digitality which these films reflect, there is no time to savour such simple moments. Just as it has done sleep, the event film increasingly consigns eating to the blank space following the closing credits; to those empty, unseen years between production logos.



It should be established that what is tracked above is not the visual *presence* of food in these films, but moments in which a named character is shown biting,

chewing or swallowing some comestible. Food as a commercial entity—a product to be bought, prepared and served—retains a role in the films under review. Audiences are shown canapes delicately arranged on silver trays in *Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol* (Bird 2011), for instance, and treated to loving close-ups of sizzling steak during the *Fast Saga*'s recurrent BBQ hang-outs. As a signifier of wealth<sup>103</sup> or a symbol of family togetherness, the photographic likeness of food persists in the recent blockbuster. It's the actual eating of it which these films gradually displace. If *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (Lin 2006) is considered Web 2.0-adjacent as opposed to being a truly post-Web 2.0 film, there are eight instances of a named character seen eating on-screen in the decade 1996-2006. In the twelve years which followed, seven such shots occur. No one eats at all in *Jason Bourne* (Greengrass 2016), *Fate of the Furious* (Gray 2017) or 2018's *Mission: Impossible - Fall Out*, the three films which populate the final bracket. When the data is organised not according to individual instances of eating, but in terms of which films feature one or multiple examples, the pattern becomes clearer:

<b>Period</b>	<b>No. of films released</b>	<b>Films which include eating</b>
1996-2000	2	0
2001-2005	4	3
2006-2010	4	2
2011-2015	6	3
2016-2018	3	0

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<sup>103</sup> Both *Ghost Protocol* and *Furious 7* feature coding heists carried out amidst lavish soirees in the United Arab Emirates. Background artistes may be glimpsed nibbling salmon mousse and tarte au poulet, but never the featured players.



Acknowledging the outliers of the *Mission: Impossible* series (two entries from which make up the whole of the first bracket), in which mastication has never played a significant part, 75% of these franchise entries feature a named character eating in 2001-2005, 50% from 2006-2015, and none since. The post-Web 2.0 rate of decline for eating is not as stark as that for incidences of natural sleep, but the basic pattern is extremely similar: a spike in 2001-2006, a plateau in the decade which follows, then a sudden near-total absence post-2015. This gradual de-emphasis of the body's need for sustenance is in accord with the ethea of advanced informational capitalism. For the contemporary worker, as Sarah Sharma observes: "The body is treated as having a hidden reserve of energy that can be unleashed with a little hard work. The focus on energy implies an ongoing timeless quality, a renewable resource that can be expended but also saved. It does not have to run out" (2014, 102). Likewise, these bodies, in constant motion, deny both the passing of time—witness the ripped physiques and suspiciously smooth skin of middle-aged actors like Vin Diesel and Tom Cruise—and any sense of physiological toll incurred through their habitual strenuity. To stop and refuel would indicate an incontrovertible weakness of the flesh, one in fundamental opposition to the expectations and obligations of an increasingly 24/7 world. These characters run, instead of running out; they can go forever if they feel the need.<sup>104</sup>

Again, this is a relatively recent development for the action blockbuster. Prior to 2009, the *Fast* franchise in particular still had time for incidental acts of

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<sup>104</sup> That need? For *speed*.

digestion. In 2001's *The Fast and the Furious*, for instance, Brian and Dom are seen casually chowing down on a bowl of hot chips, while 2006's *Tokyo Drift* has teenaged hero Sean Boswell (Lucas Black) nervously sampling the sushi served up in a Japanese school lunchroom. This more prosaic conception of *what-food-is-for* disappears just as the franchise itself is reconfigured according to new techno-cultural lines. Street racing and scrappy battles with local gangsters, staples of the first four films, are replaced by high-tech heists and globe-trotting adventures in search of sophisticated software, reflecting the rapidly increasing saturation of digital technologies into all aspects of daily life.<sup>105</sup> As the stakes become higher and ramifications of failure more global, a quiet snack between capers would seem an untenable anachronism. Instead, the franchise institutes a new trope, the concluding home-cooked meal of which nobody takes a bite. From *Fast Five* (2009) onwards, each instalment of the series ends with a scene of domestic togetherness. Both *Furious 6* and *Fate of the Furious* conclude with Dom's makeshift family gathering around an outdoor table covered with comestibles, mounds of steak and heaped bowls of potato salad glistening like they do in the commercials (Fig 41).<sup>106</sup> No one shows much interest in actually eating any of this, however; the films *spectacularise* food, make it something to be witnessed rather than consumed. (It would not seem totally out of place if the caption *#blessed* appeared at the bottom of the screen.)

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<sup>105</sup> According to PEW Research Centre, in May 2011 35% of Americans owned a smartphone; by May 2016 this figure had doubled. As of February 2019, 81% owned a smartphone and 96% a cellphone.

<sup>106</sup> These passages serve essentially a sentimental purpose—literally, often, a grace note. Dom's fast rule is that the first person to reach for food blesses the meal; queue the intonation of a final monologue as the camera tracks up into the sky and the picture cuts to closing credits.



Fig 41. A Fast family dinner. Justin Lin, *Furious 6*, 2013, captured by the author from DVD.

These overloaded, picture-perfect tables are monuments to consumerism, unintended metaphors for the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism and the primacy of the signifier over the signified. The ritual of the family dinner is all that remains; these characters have forgotten what it is to be hungry, but continue to go through the motions of procuring and preparing excessive repasts nonetheless.

There is a strong correlation between the *Fast Saga's* shifting conception of "what food is for" and eating patterns in the external world. A 2010 study by John Kearney, published in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, charts the then-recent transformation of traditional diets through "the globalization of food systems," citing factors which "include the rapid expansion of the global mass media [as well as] other factors related directly to the opening of our world economy" (2010, 2804). Noting that "both the frequency of family meals and home-prepared meals has declined over time," (408) a 2014 paper for *Child Care Health Dev* records that "preparing meals from scratch was the only meal

preparation method positively associated with family meals" (Kornides, Nansel, Quick, Haynie, Lipsky, Laffel, Mehta, 410). This *positive association* is reflected in the latter entries of the *Fast Saga*, that *frisson* of domestic pleasure each time we see Dom sip a Corona over the barbecue, or a former adversary arrives with a cling film-covered side dish. The films' depiction of home cooking conveys a sense of nostalgia for those "special times (the Sabbath), [and] special meals (the family dinner)" (Turkle ed. Katz 2008, 131) newly imperilled by tethering technologies and the "always on, always on you" behavioural expectations of digital capitalism. Their nostalgia only extends so far, however. The totemic power of the shared meal may be formally acknowledged, but these concluding scenes only emphasise how little the series has come to recognise *food as fuel*; a physiological requirement necessary for the body to function.

The only entry in these three franchises that *does* actively engage with such matters, concerning itself with eating as both a biopolitical transaction and practical necessity, is *The Bourne Legacy* (Gilroy 2012).<sup>107</sup> Jeremy Renner stars as Aaron Cross, the chemically altered result of a CIA Black Ops programme similar to that which spawned the Bourne identity. Dependent upon a constant intake of liquid "chems" to maintain his strength, vitality and intelligence, Cross finds his supply cut off and life endangered following the events of 2007's *The Bourne Ultimatum*. These chems are presented as almost miraculous substitutes for food, sleep, exercise, education. They promise transcendence over base biology, producing a smarter, stronger, never-tiring human capable of withstanding the

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<sup>107</sup> A quickly discarded and discounted attempt to continue the *Bourne* franchise after the departures of director Paul Greengrass and lead actor Matt Damon, *Legacy* leans away from geopolitical intrigue and further into science fiction than the rest of the series.

baroque "temporal architectures" (Sharma 2014) and endless obligations of 24/7 time. This triumph over natural limitations, however, comes at a steep price: the eventual abolition of "the natural" itself. The film frames Cross as the perfect consumer, relying on chems to function physically and mentally; the drugs have figuratively become his bread and butter. "It would be real hard to go back," he confesses in one scene, feeling his cognitive powers slipping away. This anxiety is not isolated to the film's vague near-future setting, nor its shadowy world of black ops offices and secret laboratories. Cross' trepidation over possible reversion speaks to wider societal fears about the biological and behavioural modifications which may be demanded by contemporary capitalism.<sup>108</sup>

Indeed, *Legacy* directly frames its high-tech, futuristic chems as a replacement for traditional organic sustenance on several occasions. In one early scene, we see Cross hunting deer with a rifle in the wilds of Alaska. After firing the successful shot, a hard cut takes us to the image of venison suspended over a campfire, the crackling of cooking flesh high in the sound mix. The camera pans left, to rest on Cross' crooked arm as he injects himself with another dose of chems. The procedure completed, he packs the syringe carefully back into its case and looks around, suddenly wary, ready to move on (Fig 42). The sizzling meat seems present largely to bear witness to its own obsolescence; the sustenance Cross requires cannot be found in the wild spaces of nature or

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<sup>108</sup> "DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, is searching for ways to create the 'metabolically dominant soldier.' Among the projects it is pursuing is the creation of a warrior who can fight twenty-four hours a day, seven days straight" (Sharma 2014, 42). Further, as Crary argues, "the sleepless soldier would be the forerunner of the sleepless worker or consumer. Non-sleep products, when aggressively promoted by pharmaceutical companies, would become first a lifestyle option, and eventually, for many, a necessity" (2013, 3).



Fig 42. Aaron Cross (Jeremy Renner) cleans up after one meal as another (far right) is destined to go uneaten. Tony Gilroy, *The Bourne Legacy*, 2012, captured from DVD.

the local butcher's shop. This scene is mirrored by a second hunting sequence, occurring twenty minutes later in the film. Using similar shot compositions, Cross is shown assembling a weapon to take down a military aircraft which has tracked him into the mountains. The plane fallen, we see Renner scavenging in the wreckage for its cargo of chems—his frantic hunger for the drug juxtaposed with an earlier lack of interest in the browning venison. Between these two passages, holed up in a shack with exiled operative Number Three (Oscar Isaac), Cross is seen to eat twice, resignedly chewing mouthfuls of an anonymous soup-like mixture. As with the deer leg above its improvised BBQ, however, there is a sense of *show* to these moments, eating presented as a social nicety instead of an essential pleasure or need. The soup is an unappetising entree which Cross suffers through knowing that his main course—the chems—will be coming along shortly. After downing the attacking plane, scrabbling through the snow to find only shattered vials, their precious contents ebbing away into the

ice, Cross no longer pretends to find comfort or sustenance in food. Indeed, the rest of the film largely revolves around his efforts to never eat again.

As outlined above, the emotional driver for much of *Legacy* is Cross' pursuit of another, better dose; a permanent fix which will free him both from biological limitations, such as the need for food, and his constant terror at potentially losing access to the drugs. As Cross frequently asserts to ally Marta Shearing (Rachel Weisz), their only chance for survival is to maintain the mental advantages the "blue chems" promote. This means breaking into a government-contracted pharmaceutical factory and injecting Cross with the chems' "live virus stems," a dangerous and untested procedure with potentially deadly consequences. Escaping the facility to Thailand, Marta guides a shaking, sweating Cross through an outdoor food market, shots of preparation and consumption intercut with close-ups of Renner's tortured visage. His reluctant engagement with eating in the early parts of the film is thrown into stark relief. The presence of cooking food nearby now causes Cross active nausea; even success feels like sickness. "No matter what the specific contours of capital are," Sharma writes, "whether we call it fast capital, neoliberalism, late capitalism, or empire, capital develops at the expense of bodies" (2014, 17). Cross' body, whether serving political capital or attempting to escape it, is under constant duress; the state considers him, quite literally, expendable. He spends the latter third of the film in various states of agony, suffering painfully through recuperation following the *ad hoc* medical procedure. His ultimate triumph is only achieved through volunteering himself, once more, as a pharmaceutical guinea pig. To survive contemporary capitalism and its systems of control, here

represented by the military industrial complex, Cross must allow those systems to (figuratively and literally) enter his body, for the changes imposed upon him to become permanent.

The film does not suggest that it is the chems themselves that are the problem, nor even the contracted firms and political systems which produce them. It's the daily cost of those rations which rankles. Cross isn't really a drug addict: losing the chems will simply return him to his natural condition, and though his painful adjustment to the live virus stem is presented in visual terms recalling detoxification, he is in fact permanently *re-toxing*. The injection has, in effect, allowed him to eat all the rest of his life's meals in just one sitting. We last see Aaron and Marta out at sea, on the deck of a fishing boat at a breakfast table without plates or cutlery. The scene opens with two Filipino boatmen and a young boy manning the craft, keeping it on course, wiping their brows amidst the equatorial humidity.<sup>109</sup> The child scampers over the railings to present Cross with a rolled-up map, and Marta emerges from her cabin to join him at table. Poring over cartography and smiling wanly at Shearing, Cross is finally at peace; he has nothing to do but consider his latitudes and longitudes. *The Bourne Legacy* speaks to a world "so tired and overworked that the mundane tasks of daily living and getting by are relegated as meaningless pursuits and

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<sup>109</sup> The first shot of the sequence is a close-up of a brown wrist wearing a large gold Rolex watch; the implied price of the Phillipino crew's ongoing service to Cross and Shearing. I couldn't help but think of Greil Marcus' chapter, in 1975's *Mystery Train*, on the work of Randy Newman—especially his description of an aborted film which would have visualised Newman's song "Sail Away": "He will dress himself in a pure white planter's suit, white shoes, white hat—perhaps a red string tie, for color... Newman is poised on the quarterdeck of a great clipper ship, testing his profile against the wind. What's he doing there? He's a recruiter for the slave trade" (118). As later expanded upon by Newman in the liner notes for the 2002 reissue of *Sail Away* (the LP), the scene would have concluded with the recruiter hurling various anachronistic baubles at the assembled Africans—inflatable beach balls, cheap sneakers, etc. As the final piano chords faded away, the slaves-to-be would rush *en masse* up the gangplank to the slave ship.





Fig 43. Aaron Cross (Jeremy Renner) enjoys newfound freedom. The kid (Adrian Talinga) is just happy to be there. Tony Gilroy, *The Bourne Legacy*, 2012, captured from DVD.

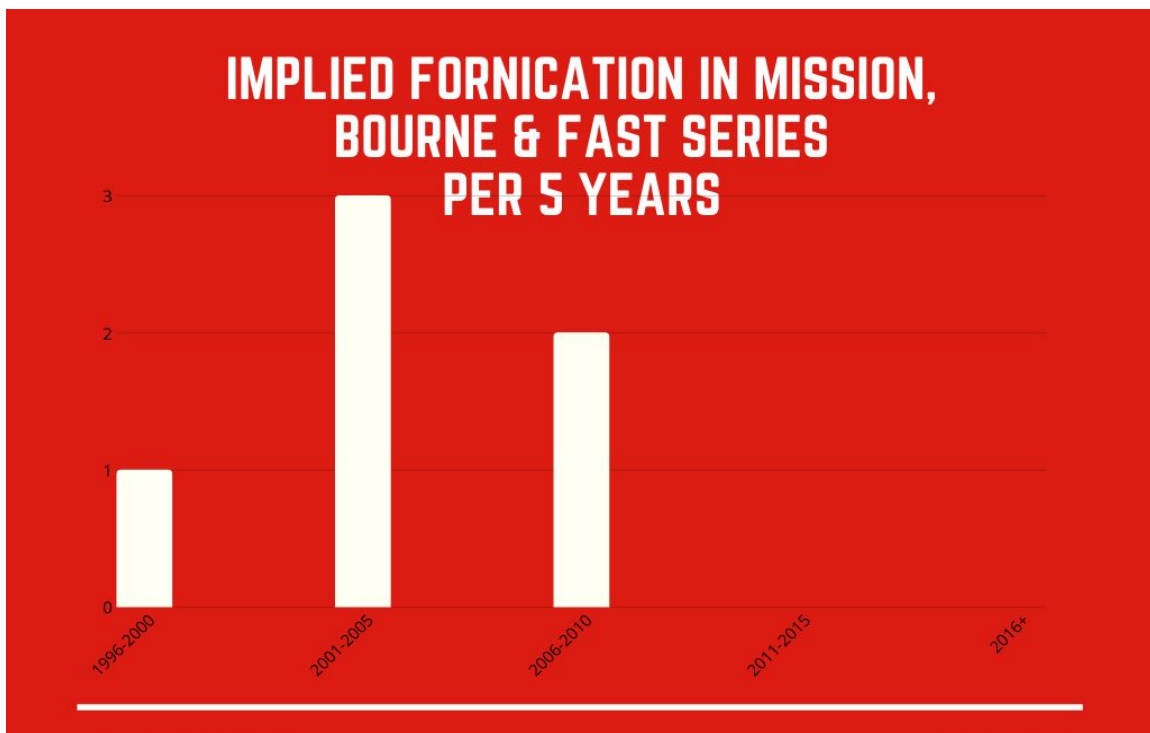
increasingly outsourced to others" (Sharma 2014, 19). On a superficial plane, this final scene relegates such mundane tasks, the *hard yakka*, to its non-white characters. On a deeper level, uniquely of our current technological epoch, it represents the culmination of the film's key thematic subtext: how to escape from the "meaningless pursuits" of daily living. The needle's jab has rescued Cross from the tyranny of physiological necessity, "outsourcing" the mundanities of food and fatigue to a state of perpetual medication. Lounging in the sunlight on deck, a pretty girl at his side and a staff of ethnic workers to do the fetching and carrying, Cross has all the time in the world, and nothing to do with it. The abused employee, the disillusioned super soldier gone rogue, becomes a poster child for advanced informational capitalism done right. Cross has not so much triumphed over 24/7 time, but—in a quite literal sense—internalised it. He'll never have to go hunting, build a campfire, or push a shopping trolley again. The pharmaceutical chem has rendered even the slurping of soup a thing of the past.

## SC4

### "Did he smack that ass? Or did he grab it?"

#### In which the recent blockbuster is all talk and no action

Just as these films displace eating and sleep, they similarly displace fornication—or, at least, the implication of copulation to follow, traditionally indicated by a suggestive crossfade from a lovers' clinch. As noted above, coitus is almost entirely absent from these franchises after their earliest instalments.<sup>110</sup> While achieving the lucrative PG-rating does mandate a certain sexlessness, prior to 2006 we nonetheless find several instances of named characters actually eating or in a pre- or post-coital moment. These incidents enter a slow decline post-Web 2.0 and are absent entirely after 2015.



<sup>110</sup> Hunt enjoyed his one and only romantic tryst in 2000; Bourne last copulated in 2002; Brian and/or Dom haven't been seen to "spend the night" with someone since 2009.



Fig 44. Brian (Paul Walker) and Mia (Jordana Brewster) enjoy a little afternoon delight. Justin Lin, *Fast & Furious*, 2009, captured by the author from DVD.

The comparative numbers here are lower than with eating or sleeping, but in terms of overall pattern make a starkly compelling case. The hyper-masculine, endlessly virile heroes of all three series seem suddenly neutered following *Fast & Furious* (Lin 2009). As noted in the previous section, this particular *Fast* entry marks the end of proaic and practical food consumption in that franchise; it is also the last time in all three series that characters are implied to get their rocks off. Appropriately enough, then, this scene of love-making is arguably the most immediate and passionate in any of the films under review—and one directly associated with home cooking (Fig 44). Mia returns home with bags of groceries, whereupon she and Brian enjoy some impromptu grinding on the kitchen bench. It's actually a rather sweet moment, all the more refreshing for how matter-of-factly the scene frames this spontaneous act of erotic accord. Despite the unarguable attractiveness of the actors involved, and recognising the limitations of a PG rating, there is no attempt to *spectacularise* sex here. The

scene carries no particular weight in terms of plot or character development; it's just a couple in love scratching an erotic itch. As stated above, *Fast 4* represents an end of the earthier, street-level version of the franchise as it began in 2001. There is something fitting about this moment of transition being marked by a little afternoon delight in the resolutely domestic and prosaic setting of the family kitchen.

It is likely, in fact, that the blockbuster's inability to truly spectacularise the act of intercourse has played a partial factor in its banishment. Compared to the dizzying quantities of extreme erotic delights readily accessed online, through premium cable and streaming services, the kinds of implied nooky available to the family event film are weak beer indeed: "Now, during waking hours, reality shows and websites indifferently detail every conceivable "prohibited" family romance or antagonism, while web pornography and violent gaming cater to any previously unmentionable desire" (Crary 2013, 108). Unable to compete with these new media, Hollywood seems to have decided simply not to try. I would argue that this is only part of the story, however. The strictures of the MPAA<sup>111</sup> ratings system aside, the blockbuster film—as we have seen—typically makes some effort to reflect shifting social mores and techno-cultural conditions. In the case of sex, however, these three franchises have made no attempt to emulate such digitally-delivered licentiousness. They have, if anything, taken the opposite trajectory. Pre- and just post-Web 2.0, implied fornication was a recurrent if not regular feature of the films under review. In those following *Fast & Furious*,<sup>112</sup> the closest any characters come to sex is a kind

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<sup>111</sup> The Motion Picture Association of America.

<sup>112</sup> Four *Fast* entries, three *Missions*, two *Bournes*.

of chaste flirtation, ambiguous glances exchanged at moments of high drama. There is nothing overtly hot and/or heavy about the relationship between Ethan Hunt and Ilsa Faust (Rebecca Ferguson) in the latter three *Missions*, or the rekindled love affair between Dom Toretto and Letty Ortiz which mandates much of the plotting of the fifth and sixth instalments of the *Fast Saga*. The *Bourne* series' ardour cools quickly and permanently too. Having slept with Marie an hour into *The Bourne Identity*, Jason rejects any idea of a repeat performance the next time they share a bedroom: "I'll sleep on the floor," he mutters petulantly. The next (and last) time we see Bourne in bed, he is waking from a nightmare; Marie dabs his neck with a cool cloth and offers soothing counsel. A similar attitude, more that of nurse than lover, is taken by Marta toward Cross in *The Bourne Legacy* as he suffers through his body's adjustment to the new chems.

The prudishness which creeps into all three series operate not so much in accord with ratings requirements, I suggest, but the changing behavioural codes and personal experience of an increasingly "linked in" world. Considering that the plots of the latter two *Fast* films, the third and final *Bourne* movies, and *Missions* 4-6 all revolve around hacked data and stolen surveillance software, these characters have good reason to keep their clothes on. Even without realising they're in the movies, they know they're being watched. As Hjorth and Lim observe, "the role of the mobile phone as a technology of propinquity (temporal and spatial proximity) [is] both instrumental in, and symbolic of, new erosions between public and private, work and leisure" (2012, 478). These blurred



Fig 45. Dom Toretto (Vin Diesel) finds out he's a father.

F. Gary Gray, *The Fate of the Furious*, 2017, captured by the author from DVD.

boundaries are even more obvious when it comes to "dating apps" such as Tinder, requiring the translation of personal information into an attractive digital persona. What you leave out, in other words, is just as important as what you put in. "The act of posting a profile," writes Eva Illouz, "allows the Internet... to convert the private self into a public performance. More exactly, the Internet makes the private self visible and publicly displayed to an abstract and anonymous audience, which, however, is not a public [but] rather an aggregation of private selves" (2007, 78). Dominic Toretto's *bete noir* in *Fate of the Furious*, the techno-terrorist Cipher (Charlize Theron) represents just such an unknowable and potentially malignant audience. Her ideological motivations are decidedly *abstract*, and not only is the character *anonymous* in terms of legal name and background, but she is an explicit referential stand-in for the real-world online collective Anonymous. Further, Cipher's ability to coerce Dom into various acts of violence is entirely based upon an extensive knowledge of his sexual history:

kidnapping former partner Elena (Elsa Pataky) and their newborn son and threatening to kill both if Toretto refuses to comply (Fig 45). His private life has become both public and political, and it's the act of sexual congress which indirectly leads to Dom's co-option. More devastating still, until Cipher reveals Elena and the infant trapped behind a bulletproof screen, Toretto has no idea he's even a father. The allegorical implications are clear: "the Internet" may know more about *you* than you do.

No wonder, then, that for the past decade these rugged studs have resolved to keep their drawers on. In all three franchises, we see a turn away from physical intimacy, let alone sexual engagement, between even established couples. Affection, concern and desire are suggested primarily through the meeting of eyes, expressions of familial concern. When Ilsa leans over a prone Hunt in *Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation* or at the end of *Fall Out*, she may as well be Skyping in from afar to enquire after his health. The more these films celebrate "family," directly in the *Fast* films and implicitly in the loose assemblage of agents and allies of the *Mission* and *Bourne* series, the more performative it all feels. As Hjorth and Lim observe, in an age of affective mobile media, "practicing intimacy [is] no longer a 'private' activity but a pivotal component of public sphere performativity" (2012, 479). A particularly striking example of this tendency occurs in *Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol's* concluding sequence, in which Hunt's makeshift crew meet at a bar after the main action has been resolved.<sup>113</sup> Cruise grips a depleted beer bottle throughout

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<sup>113</sup> One explicit example of such performativity: finishing a bevvv, Luther Stickell (Ving Rhames) gets up to leave, reaching into his pocket for cash to pay for his drinks. "You know I've got this," objects Hunt, to which Luther produces an empty hand with raised middle digit: "I know."



Fig 46. An automaton set to laugh mode: Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) unwinds at the end of another gruelling escapade. Brad Bird, *Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol*, 2011, captured by the author from DVD.

most of the scene, never lifting it to his lips, and when the team chuckles at one of Benji Dunn's (Simon Pegg) comic asides, he grimaces like an automaton set to laugh mode. "We were in the dark, unprepared, disavowed," Hunt enthuses, "and the only thing that functioned properly... was this team," handing out cellphones through which he'll notify them of the next mission. The scene, already odd when the films are watched in sequence, seems all the stranger in retrospect. Despite Hunt's glowing appraisal, we know that one of the three—token female/potential love interest June Carter (Paula Patton)—will never be mentioned again in the franchise. Presumably Ethan just decides to "lose her number;" in any event, following *Ghost Protocol*, Carter herself gets ghosted.

None of this is entirely new, of course. Capital's insatiable demand for labour, writes Karl Marx, "usurps the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of



fresh air and sunlight. It haggles over meal-times, where possible incorporating them into the production process itself, so that food is added to the worker as a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler and grease and oil to the machinery" (1867, 2010 ed., 375) The efficiency of that machine in our current digital epoch—one that converts bodies into bytes, in which sex has been reconfigured by the almighty algorithm, and sleep turned to sleeplessness—has perhaps never been greater. This is the external reality which the recent blockbuster reflects. Those films under discussion increasingly frame their heroes as unneeding of time to sleep, eat or screw; even friendship has become something dictated by random assignment from the powers-that-be. "A 24/7 environment," posits Crary, "has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness" (2013, 9). As these three wildly popular franchises have turned away from base physiological necessities, they have also adopted, if not encouraged, "a non-social model of machinic performance."

Examples abound in the films under review. Dominic Toretto nonchalantly shrugs off the death of his son's mother and presents that child to his current partner as a biological *fait accompli*, no sex required. Aaron Cross loses his appetite while acclimating to a new drug, and then forgets food entirely. Ethan Hunt has a fitful doze in 2003, wakes up in a panic in 2018, and seems none the worse for wear for the fifteen years between naps. What better term for such characters, whether pejoratively or in emulative appreciation, than *machinic*? They run without getting tired, cook without intending to eat, and reproduce

without procreation. None of this is presented as an essentially unnatural state of affairs. On the contrary, any recognition of humanity's innate physiological requirements have, cinematically-speaking, been stricken from the record. Food, sleep and sex are reconfigured as speed bumps, mere interruptions on the road to glory, better ignored than acknowledged. Prosaic and domestic scenes of eating, napping or copulation might provide a discomfoting reminder of just how much and rapidly the world has changed, of the heavy toll extracted from minds and bodies by 24/7 capitalism. The healthiest (or, at least, easiest) thing for these films to do is simply forget how life used to be. Humanity may be too far down the path of digitality to turn back now. As one random racer in *The Fast and The Furious* presciently shouts at the driver of a Pizza Hutt vehicle, blocking the road while *en route* to deliver his pies: "Street's closed, Pizza Boy. Find another way home!"

## CONCLUSION

### **The Life of Men's Souls, Revisited**

*"[M]omentary reunification would remain purely symbolic, a mere methodological fiction, were it not understood that social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process, in which there is no need to invent ways of linking language events and social upheavals or economic contradictions because on that level they were never separate from one another. The realm of separation, of fragmentation, of the explosion of codes and the multiplicity of disciplines is merely the reality of the appearance: it exists, as Hegel would put it, not so much in itself as rather for us, as the basic logic and fundamental law of our daily life and existential experience in late capitalism."*

- Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 1981

*"Life's simple. You make choices and you don't look back."*

- Han Lue (Sung Kang), *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*, 2006

When embarking upon this project, I hypothesised that the recent Hollywood blockbuster would offer a multitude of reflections of our contemporary social and political experience. It seemed plausible to assume that this massively popular form of cultural production would necessarily be informed by, as Fredric Jameson puts it above, "the basic logic and fundamental law of our daily life and existential experience in late capitalism" (1981, 24). As this thesis has demonstrated, these films do indeed frequently mediate the technologies and political operations of digital capitalism, as well as collective anxieties over their development and growing influence on social behaviours. In some of the latter entries of these franchises, such as the last two *Fast* installments and *Mission: Impossible - Fallout* (McQuarrie 2018), such concerns in fact hover near the surface of the text. The most rewarding discoveries, however, were allegorical in nature; recurrent traces of the *political unconsciousness* of our current period, "relocat[ed] within the object" (19) of the recent blockbuster. The more closely these texts were examined, the more deeply ingrained and indeed often nuanced their interpellation of contemporary conditions turned out to be. It has been the primary goal of this research to uncover and explicate a number of their more significant and persistent mediations. *Significant* and *persistent* are apposite terms here. In the over two dozen big-budget action spectacles analysed in these pages—those so-called "Dumb Movies for Dumb People" (Tasker 1993, 15)—we reliably find the Hollywood event film allegorically grappling, in *real time*, with a world being reshaped and reconfigured by the devices and socio-economic operations of late digital capitalism. No matter how

frantic, fantastic or frivolous the narrative, scratch the celluloid and *Big Other* peers out.

Over the course of three substantive chapters, all considering this tendency on the part of the recent blockbuster through different theoretical lenses, I have advanced three key arguments. In the first, I posited that the recurring image-formation of the "wall of screens" can be read as reflective of shifting societal attitudes to and understanding of the new and invasive dataveillance practices of Big Other (Fuchs 2014; Zuboff 2015). Further, that they mirror an increasing awareness of the individual's complicity in the profitability and pervasiveness of those operations (Couldry and Mejjias 2018; Constantiou and Kallinikos 2015). I concluded that the modicum of peace the action blockbuster has recently made with the existence of "big data" (Mashey 1998)—best exemplified by *Furious 7* (Wan 2015) and *Fate of the Furious* (Gray 2017)—occurred in close synchronicity with a developing public acquiescence over the inherently extractive nature of these systems (McQuire 2008). In the second chapter, I explored a "loss of now" resulting from the constant "information flows" (Lash 2002) of digitality; an endless stream of updates, notifications and messages which blur the traditional temporalities of past, present and future (Paasonen 2016; Terranova 2012). I suggested that the recent blockbuster's frequent and novel use of what I term "shards of the real"—literal representations, references to and recreations of political figures and real-world events—can be read as an attempt to redress a techno-cultural condition in which the current moment itself has come to feel as distant as the fading past and uncertain future. Paying close attention to the new trope of the

"commentator cameo," I argued that such shards indicate a somewhat desperate effort on the part of these films to ground themselves in a shared and coherent current moment, denying the temporal fractures and disorder of digital capitalism. In the third chapter, I analysed three long-running film series through the prism of Jonathan Crary's work on "24/7 capitalism" (2013), noting a steady diminishment in scenes of eating, sleeping and sex over the course of the past two decades. Parallels were drawn between the blockbuster's treatment—and growing dismissal—of these physiological necessities, and a similar devaluation of natural functions gradually gaining traction in the world beyond the screen. In the earliest entries of these franchises, we find food, sleep and fornication framed as both necessary and, indeed, as rewards for sustained and intensive effort. As the operations of digital capitalism increase their strength and scope from approximately 2005 onwards, these biological requirements become increasingly associated with weakness and personal endangerment. Finally, they disappear from the action blockbuster almost entirely, reflecting Crary's description of 24/7 time as one "of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate" (9). Accordingly, the blockbuster has become almost entirely *indifferent* to the traditional tempos and physical necessities of human existence. For their hard-hitting, fast-driving heroes to require sleep or succour would be to indicate a basic fragility; and within a techno-cultural context in which fragility is increasingly equated with inadequacy, as Crary formulates, this would never do.

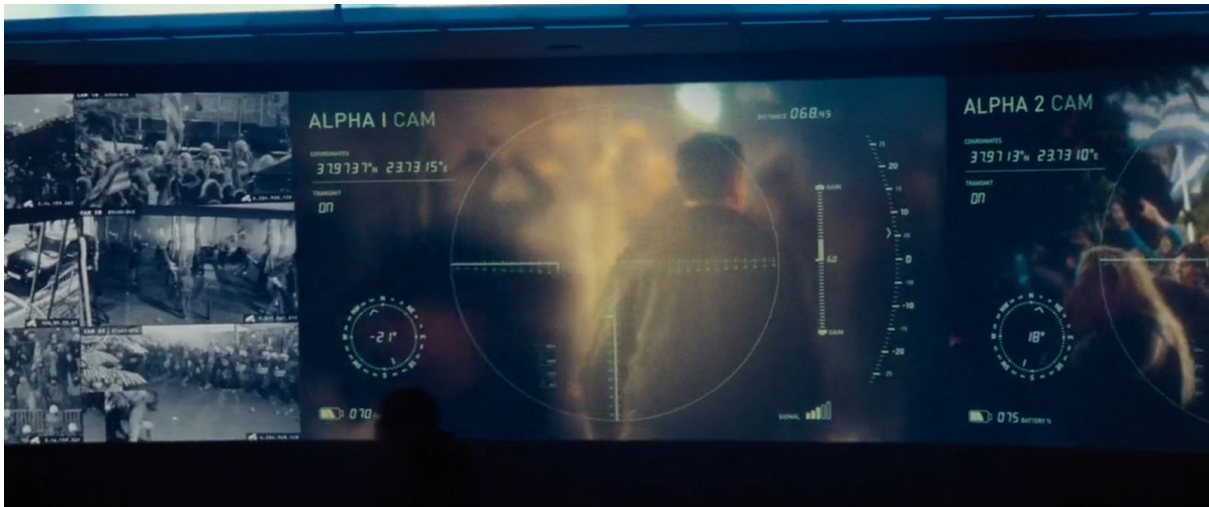


Fig 47. Bourne's (Matt Damon) back is shown retreating from camera like the player's avatar in a first person shooter.

Paul Greengrass, *Jason Bourne*, 2016, captured by the author from DVD.

These have been the key findings of this thesis. In the course of my research, however, several other avenues for investigation have presented themselves. For the most part, these focus primarily on the effect of digital technologies on individuals, and are less concerned with the politico-economic operations of digital capitalism. As such, they depart from the core enquiry of this work as much as they extend upon it. Nonetheless, as further examinations of the "life of men's souls," reconfigured by the cultural forces and new media of digitality, it seems appropriate here to briefly identify a couple of potential areas for future interrogation. One is the exploration of links between contemporary blockbuster cinema and other specific media practices, such as the multi-player online video game. The geographically distanced teamwork and voice-only *camaraderie* of online gaming provides an example of "mediated social communication becoming 'mobile' and thus liberated from time-space constraints" (Thulin 2018,

469); this experience is increasingly suggested in the formal devices of the action blockbuster. When Jason Bourne is tracked by CIA Directors Vosen (David Strathairn) or Dewey (Tommy Lee Jones) on their bank of monitors, for instance, we frequently see his back running from the camera just as one does the digital avatar in a "first person shooter" video game (Fig 47). Further, various on-the-run characters' hissing into phones and/or radio microphones is closely reminiscent of the communication through wireless headsets of online players—at once far apart, often in different continents, and simultaneously fighting side-by-side on some fictional dystopian battleground. These scenes recall Sherry Turkle's description of a world increasingly mediated by digital devices, in which "one can be a loner yet not alone... where one can have the illusion of companionship without the demands of sustained, intimate friendship" (ed. Katz 2008, 125). When Bruce Wayne (Ben Affleck) banter with ancillary Alfred (Jeremy Irons) over the Batplane comms system, or the dangerous exploits of Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) are nervously watched by boffin Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg) on a distant monitor, these men are "loners who are not alone;" isolated physically, yet connected through technology in a high-stakes multi-player gaming experience.

Another potentially fruitful area of investigation is how the contemporary blockbuster has dealt with the fairly recent appearance of what Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge (2011) term "code/spaces," environments that cannot perform their intended operations if software fails. Mounting collective concern over disruptive and debilitating system crashes/over-rides can be allegorically read in several action set pieces featured in the recent event film. Along these lines,



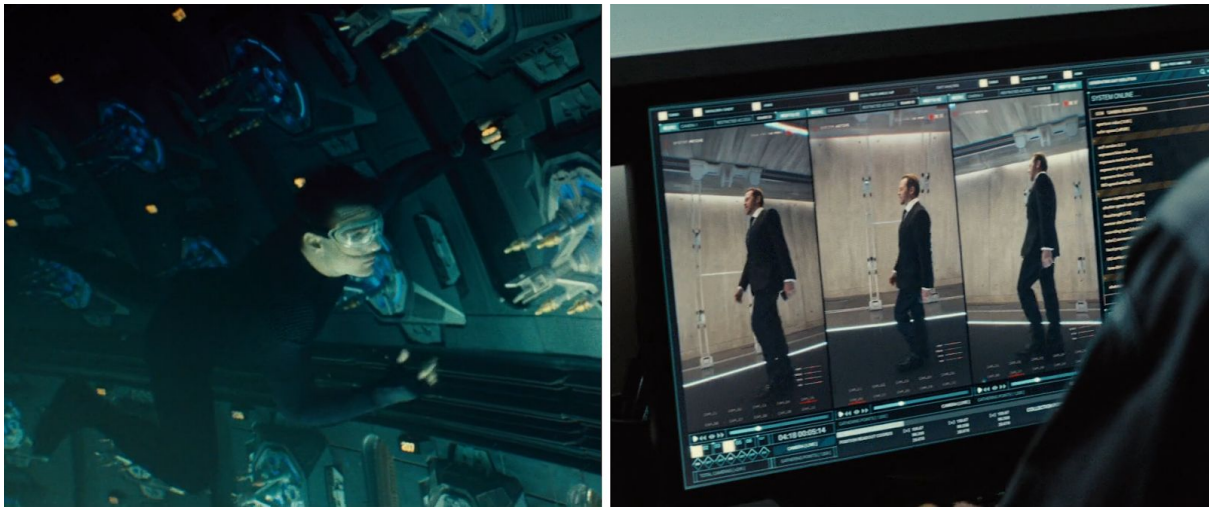


Fig 48. Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise, left) and Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg) face the perils of code/spaces. Christopher McQuarrie, *Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation*, 2015, captured from DVD. Composite by author.

*The Fate of the Furious* (Gray 2017) includes a spectacular scene in which baddie Cipher (Charlize Theron) takes control of the automatic guidance systems of dozens of "smart cars" and sends them racing amuck out of dealership windows and into the congested streets of downtown New York. Close-ups of panicked motorists, suddenly unable to control their vehicles, seem to tap directly into a shared anxiety over how much autonomy and control we have given up to the conveniences and tenuous efficiencies of intangible and ubiquitous coding.

Exploring a similar theme, a key action sequence in *Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation*'s (McQuarrie 2015) places the scrappy technical know-how of Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg) and superior physical stamina of Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) against the seemingly impenetrable digital armaments of a secure holding facility in Casablanca (Fig 48). Here, their successful subversion of the system is a source of audience gratification; this earlier film is more optimistic about the ability of

the individual to withstand and, indeed, triumph over coded environments than *Fate of the Furious*. Both set pieces, nonetheless, operate dramatically and thematically on the premise that such code/spaces exist, are potentially harmful to human life, and require concerted effort and exceptional ability to navigate successfully.

Such interrogations are subjects for future research, however. In terms of the films explored here, and their specific mediations of conditions of advanced digital capitalism, what overall conclusions can be drawn? I have argued that the recent blockbuster reflects shifting attitudes over the increasing power and pervasiveness of digital capitalism and its enabling technologies, from a pop cultural rhetoric of "annihilation" (McQuire 2008), as in *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008) or the early *Bourne* instalments, to one of acceptance and "assimilation" in the latter *Fast & Furious* and *Transformers* movies. Nevertheless, as I have tracked throughout, a certain spirit of resistance against the new norms of digitality persists in the Hollywood action franchise. The digital McGuffins which drive many of these films' narratives continue to be framed as fundamentally sinister and unfathomable, no matter how familiar the hand that controls them. The recent blockbuster frequently posits that for just one ideological malcontent, such as *Fate of the Furious*' (Gray 2017) Cipher or *Mission: Impossible - Fallout*'s August Walker (Henry Cavill), to gain control over these new networks may be enough to turn the whole world inside out.<sup>114</sup> They also remain sceptical, if less explicitly so, about the ability of state bodies to responsibly use and keep

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<sup>114</sup> "Cipher is like a digital act of God," states the hacker Ramsey (Nathalie Emmanuel) in *Fate of the Furious*. "They... well, she... can manipulate world systems from the shadows; governments, global markets. Anything that can be hacked is hers to play with."

hold of their technology. I have described how often in these films surveillance software and other digital armaments are either stolen from their gormless governmental guardians, or abused by bad actors from within.<sup>115</sup> Notably, those few establishment figures the films frame as essentially trustworthy and benign, such as the *Fast Saga*'s Mr. Nobody (Kurt Russell) or *Mission: Impossible*'s Alan Hunley (Alec Baldwin), are carefully distanced from real-world governmental agencies. They have to deal with cinematic versions of actual entities like the CIA and NSA, but are not directly employed by them. The mysterious Mr. Nobody, in particular, is presented as "okay" largely because he is unaffiliated with any specific government agency, only tangentially representing the real-world systems of digital capitalism with which Ciper and the *Bourne* baddies are more explicitly connected.<sup>116</sup> Even the altruistic Autobots of the *Transformers* franchise—literally super-powered machine men who dominate the present and render the future a *fait accompli*—are consistently framed as being "outside the system," working alongside the U.S. military when the situation demands, but never for it.<sup>117</sup> These films, in other words, view the global operations of Big Other with a perpetually cautious eye. Furthermore, the recent blockbuster's suspicion of digitality pales beside its contempt for those who overly define themselves by their connection to that technology. We may know the "good" agents of digitality, like Mr. Nobody or Alec Hunley, by how ready and able they are to crack open a Corona and hang with some mates after work.

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<sup>115</sup> Falling within the latter category, for instance, are the *Bourne* films' corrupt CIA heads Dewey (Tommy Lee Jones) and Vosen (David Strathairn), and *Mission: Impossible III*'s (Abrams 2006) traitorous senior agent John Musgrave (Billy Crudup).

<sup>116</sup> Accordingly, one custodian of God's Eye—Ciper—is last seen tumbling from a plane toward the ocean blue, while another—Mr. Nobody—ends the same film enjoying a casual BBQ hangout at Dom Toretto's penthouse apartment.

<sup>117</sup> From far beyond our star system, indeed.

Unlike Vosen, Dewey, Cipher or Lex Luthor (Jesse Eisenberg), they know when it's time to clock out and go offline.

In general terms, then, I would characterise the recent blockbuster as taking a decisive turn towards the humanistic. While these films' humanism is often expressed through attacks on digital technologies as "anti-human," it just as often takes another form—framing technology as fundamentally an extension of the human. "No matter how terrifying and powerful the machine," the contemporary event film consistently argues, "we made it, and we are responsible for what it does." This conception of humanism is at once classical and possesses a deeply contemporary resonance, perhaps best expressed by the Roman playwright Terence (circa 170–160 BC): "Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto." This Latin maxim, according to anthropologist Richard Bauman, can be translated as follows: "I am a human being: and I deem nothing pertaining to humanity is foreign to me" (2012, 1). The blockbusters discussed take pains to personalise the developers, exploiters and caretakers of the digital technologies which drive many of their latter instalments.<sup>118</sup> Even in the *Transformers* films, with their truck-robots and villainous aliens disguised as laptops, the future-tech is made *human*; they are given names, allegiances and placed on a clear moral spectrum.<sup>119</sup> In other words, digitality may be framed as threatening and mysterious, but still it inextricably *pertains* to humanity. The films

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<sup>118</sup> In *Furious 7* (2015), for instance, we are introduced by name and in terms of motivation to a character from each category: the creator of the God's Eye software, programmer Megan Ramsay (Nathalie Emmanuel), a goodie; the techno-mercenary Mose Jakande (Djimon Hounsou), a baddie; and guardian of world security Mr. Nobody (Kurt Russell), initially a neutral party who eventually and decisively joins the side of chummy righteousness.

<sup>119</sup> The Autobot Bumblebee is seen to cry greasy tears when forced to choose between fighting the latest battle in a centuries-long galactic war, and maintaining geographical and emotional closeness to his anthropoidal allies.

consistently defy a vision of digitality that necessarily leads to what Couldry and Meijas term the "hollowed out social world of data colonialism" (2018, 14), the transformation of "human life into a new abstracted social form that is also ripe for commodification" (15). In a somewhat naive and reactionary fashion, perhaps, these cinematic fairy tales make the use and misuse of new technologies *their business* on a deeply personal and humanistic level. Humanity as it stands is their be all and end all; its preservation is their one true aspiration. The recent blockbuster has little truck with the promises of post- or transhumanism (Badmington 2003, Wolfe 2010), even as they toy with similar ideas in the likes of *The Bourne Legacy* (Gilroy 2012), *Justice League* (Snyder 2018) or *Hobbs and Shaw* (Leitch 2019). Nor are they titillated by the idea of a new form of technologically-enhanced sentient life to follow us. Not for these films is Neil Badmington's assertion that "posthumans are far more exciting, far sexier than humans... I, for one, would rather go to bed with a cyborg than a "Man" of reason" (2003, 15). The "meta-human" superheroes of the Snyder comic book adaptations are a decidedly morose and unerotic bunch; *Hobbs and Shaw's* cyborg-esque villain Brixton Lore (Idris Elba) has none of the charm or thrust of the bulging Hobbs (Dwayne Johnson) and bullet-headed Shaw (Jason Statham).<sup>120</sup> And, after all, the high-tech always loses in the end: the abstract and abstracting algorithm stands no chance against Jason Bourne's fists, Ethan Hunt's ingenuity, or Dom Toretto's skill behind the wheel.

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<sup>120</sup> In other words: the recent blockbuster couldn't imagine why anyone would spend the night with a supercomputer while Tom Cruise was ready and able in the next bedroom.

The spirit of resistance this suggests on the part of the recent blockbuster is, inevitably, always qualified by a conflicting desire to defend the status quo, the prime directive of the Hollywood action film (King 2000; Cubitt 2004). Bad actors like Ciper, Lane or *Bourne's* Vosen and Dewey may be dispatched or denounced, but the systems of power they represent, and the technologies they employ, are not framed as essentially or inherently malign. The corporate powerhouses producing these films have much to lose in the event of any effective uprising against our current techno-cultural conditions (Bird 2011). As a result, there is a strong sense of "love the sinner, hate the sin"<sup>121</sup> in the post-Web 2.0 blockbuster's wrangling with the behavioural and socio-political impacts of late informational capitalism. These texts may make an allegorical argument for the domestic, unmediated and analogue, but they are still heavily dependent on the economic systems and technologies of digital capitalism; in an aesthetic sense, certainly, but also in terms of their distribution and marketing (Gomery 2013). No wonder, then, that the Hollywood blockbuster rarely frames new software or the coded device as inherently dangerous, nor the powerful and globally-active organisations which control them. It's always a few bad apples which spoil the barrel. No matter how badly he's mistreated during the main action, Ethan Hunt inevitably returns to the IMF fold before the final fade to black. Likewise, Dom Toretto may initially distrust *Furious 7's* mysterious governmental puppet master Mr. Nobody, but one film later invites him over for a dinner party at home. These movies may spectacularly blow up the boat, but they're rarely allowed to ideologically rock it.

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<sup>121</sup> Or, in a more contemporary parlance: "Don't hate the player, hate the game."



Fig 49. The Autobot Bumblebee (right) shares a moment of human emotion with Charlie Watson (Hailee Steinfeld). Travis Knight, *Bumblebee*, 2018, captured by author.

Or so it has been for the great majority of the blockbusters considered above. Two spin-off films, released in the past fifteen months at time of writing, find the spirit of qualified resistance parsed out in this research becoming more directly stated. In the most recent *Transformers* movie, eighties-set prequel *Bumblebee* (Knight 2018), we find a coming-of-age story which could just have easily been set in our current epoch. Teen heroine Charlie Watson (Hailee Steinfeld) makes her way through the film without recourse to a cellular phone, tablet or laptop screen; the film is refreshing largely because it acts as a reminder of how much humanity has managed to remain recognisably itself in the face of recent technological reinvention. Digitality is present only at a production level, and even then its usage is comparatively restrained. Most of the sets and locations appear on-set and in-camera, and the film's only obvious



Fig 50. Hobbs (Dwayne Johnson) and Shaw (Jason Statham) wake to greet another day. David Leitch, *Fast & Furious Present: Hobbs and Shaw*, 2019, captured from DVD.

employment of CGI is in the execution of its titular Autobot, a few villainous Decepticons, and the destruction they sporadically unleash. 2019's *The Fast & Furious Present: Hobbs & Shaw* waves its freak flag even more prominently on a textual level; the film's titular baldies (Dwayne Johnson and Jason Statham respectively) are placed in direct conflict with the technologically-enhanced terrorist Brixton Lore (Idris Elba), and the final battle in Samoa features Hobbs' extended family fending off Lore's high-tech army with decidedly analog apparatus.<sup>122</sup> The first scene after the opening titles may in itself be read as a visual clarion call against the machinic, the modified, the manufactured. Within a perfectly symmetrical split screen—a cinematic effect long predating online editing practices<sup>123</sup>—we see Hobbs and Shaw waking at home, making breakfast,

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<sup>122</sup> As Hobbs tells Lore during their final face-off: "Brother, you may believe in machines, but we believe in people. You may have all the technology in the world. We have heart."

<sup>123</sup> One favourite example occurs in Brian De Palma's *Phantom of the Paradise* (1973). While house band The Juicy Fruits perform Paul Williams' peerless Beach Boys parody "Upholstery" in the right half of the picture, the titular Phantom (William Finley) secretly plants an explosive device into a prop hot rod in the left. This scene is itself an homage to the opening sequence of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958), which *doesn't* feature any split screen but uses long camera takes and



and going about their more and less mundane daily activities (Fig 50). This is *living*, the film suggests, and all the nonsense which follows is just "what they gotta do" to get back to the real world of day jobs, friends and family. It's those experiences which must be fought for, savoured, held close; that best belong to us and cannot be replicated or resurrected by the digital device. Which is not to suggest the film is particularly resistant or radical in taking this stance; to the contrary, there is a deep conservatism present in the majority of the blockbusters considered. Nevertheless, *Hobbs and Shaw* is so clear about its throwback, pro-human position that the film must be acknowledged as making a statement in a way that, say, *The Bourne Legacy* or *Batman v Superman* cannot. Even the lyrics of the song chosen for its closing credits, YUNGBLUD's cover of Jim Croce's 1973 hit "Time in a Bottle," serve as a warning against complacency over the new normals of digitality, a reminder that life was short even before we spent much of it staring at a screen:<sup>124</sup>

*There never seems to be enough time  
To do the things you want to do, once you find them  
I've looked around enough to know  
That you're the one I wanna go through time with*

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careful sound mixing—in the "restored" 1998 cut, at least—to create a similar dramatic effect. In both cases, a car blows up at the end.

<sup>124</sup> Delightfully, and with no apparent intentional irony, Croce's original recording of this song was also used by Apple in a 2016 advertisement for the iPhone 6.

Which brings this research up to date, and also fittingly leaves us considering the past, present and future: what's been lost, what might be preserved, and what further alterations to the "life of men's souls" may occur in the decade just begun. If, as I have tried to establish in these pages, the action blockbuster does indeed provide an allegorical reflection of our "collective thinking and collective fantasies"—a window into the *political unconsciousness* of digital capitalism—then *Bumblebee* and *Hobbs and Shaw* provide an indication that the winds of change may be shifting yet. Perhaps the Hollywood event movie is, for once, allegorically and optimistically ahead of the curve. These two films suggest the development of a new kind of cultural rhetoric, existing on the far side of Scott McQuire's twin poles of technological "annihilation" and "assimilation," or the "passage of negotiation" (2008, x) which he describes as lying between them. Having stared too long into the digital abyss, and seen *big data* Snapchatting back, the digitality-advantaged citizen of the contemporary West may now be realising it's time to draw a line in the virtual sand. As Luke (Johnson) remarks to Deckard (Statham) early on in *Hobbs and Shaw*: "When it's the fate of the world, it becomes my business."

On a pop-cultural, political and technological level, the "life of [people's souls]" is indivisibly connected to the fate of the world. While forests burn, racial and religious divisions become ever more violently delineated, and the organs of state and business fail to save even their own constituents/customers from degradation and disease, we are all morally mandated to make those matters "our business." To operate in such a fashion, of course, would be directly against the interests and operations of Big Other—that entity being happiest when

people are distracted, confused, hopeless. As we have seen, its lucrative operations depend upon the individual belief that digitality is essentially unfathomable and uncontrollable, a force unto itself (Zuboff 2015). Often, it may seem, *big data's* dominance is almost total, and we've simply sold our soul too many times to find a way home again. In their own aesthetically inarticulate, commercially compromised way, the blockbusters discussed above suggest a developing collective objection to any such contention. Just as Dominic Toretto told Brian O'Conner all the way back in *The Fast and the Furious* (Cohen 2001): "If you can't find the right tool in this garage, Mr Arizona, you don't belong near a car." Figuratively speaking, this may be the central thesis statement of the recent event film. No matter how advanced or enshrined in the social system a technology becomes, humanity must carry the can for its misuse, and be responsible for any practical countermeasure. For all its visual bombast and narrative bluster, the contemporary franchise blockbuster makes a surprisingly consistent argument about the social and infrastructural impacts of advanced digital capitalism: Humanity built the car, it still owns the tools, and can at any time try to redress the damage and decay which may be found lying under the hood. What we do, or will not do, to repair society's engine is entirely on us.

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## The Films

*2 Fast 2 Furious*. Directed by John Singleton, Universal Pictures, 2003.

*Batman V. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Directed by Zack Snyder, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2016.

*The Bourne Identity*. Directed by Doug Liman, Universal Pictures, 2002.

*The Bourne Legacy*. Directed by Tony Gilroy, Universal Pictures, 2012.

*The Bourne Supremacy*. Directed by Paul Greengrass, Universal Pictures, 2004.

*The Bourne Ultimatum*. Directed by Paul Greengrass, Universal Pictures, 2007.

*Bumblee*. Directed by Travis Knight, Paramount Pictures, 2018.

*The Dark Knight*. Directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008.

*Fast & Furious*. Directed by Justin Lin, Universal Pictures, 2009.

*Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs and Shaw*. Directed by David Leitch, Universal Pictures, 2019.

*The Fast and the Furious*. Directed by Rob Cohen, Universal Pictures, 2000.

*The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*. Directed by Justin Lin, Universal Pictures, 2006.

*Fast & Furious 6*. Directed by Justin Lin, Universal Pictures, 2013.

*Fast Five*. Directed by Justin Lin, Universal Pictures, 2011.

*The Fate of the Furious*. Directed by F. Gary Gray, Universal Pictures, 2017.

*Furious 7*. Directed by James Wan, Universal Pictures, 2015.

*Jason Bourne*. Directed by Paul Greengrass, Universal Pictures, 2016.

*Jurassic Park*. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Universal Pictures, 1993

*Justice League*. Directed by Zack Snyder and Joss Whedon (uncredited), Warner Bros. Pictures, 2017.

*The Magnificent Ambersons*. Directed by Orson Welles, RKO Pictures, 1942.

*Man of Steel*. Directed by Zack Snyder, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013.

*Mission: Impossible*. Directed by Brian de Palma, Paramount Pictures, 1996.

*Mission: Impossible II*. Directed by John Woo, Paramount Pictures, 2000.

*Mission: Impossible III*. Directed by J. J. Abrams, Paramount Pictures, 2006.

*Mission: Impossible - Fall Out*. Directed by Christopher McQuarrie, Paramount Pictures, 2018.

*Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol*. Directed by Brad Bird, Paramount Pictures, 2011.

*Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation*. Directed by Christopher McQuarrie, Paramount Pictures, 2016.

*Transformers: Age of Extinction*. Directed by Michael Bay, Paramount Pictures, 2014.

*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*. Directed by Michael Bay, Paramount Pictures, 2011.

*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. Directed by Michael Bay, Paramount Pictures/Dreamworks, 2009.