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Car Chase as an "Attraction" : Comparison between Point-of-View Shots in *Bullitt* and *The French Connection*

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Abstract: Many Hollywood blockbusters have been recreated as popular theme park attractions. What is the similarity between action films and these attractions? It is that they directly address the audience/participants, implying that both action cinema and attractions set out to provide them with bodily thrills. This viewpoint was first presented in a seminal essay, "The Cinema of Attractions," written by film historian Tom Gunning; it characterizes early films as emblematic of a type of cinema that showcases spectacles as sheer entertainment rather than one that tells a story. In this sense, action cinema that aims to address the audience directly may be referred to thrilling action films and the rise of such films is a notable phenomenon in present-day Hollywood. Car chase scenes are one of the keys to interpreting this phenomenon because almost all action films incorporate them as a strong draw. Hollywood's contemporary enthusiasm for car chases began in the late 1960's, when two car chase movies — *Bullitt* and *The French Connection* — released a few years apart became smash hits. The car chases depicted in these films were quite different from the ones that preceded them in terms of conveying the reality of the chase and the sense of speed. Both films employed point-of-view shots to give the audience the feeling of driving a car at a high speed. *The French Connection*, in particular, succeeded in creating the pure kinetic image of speed. In other words, these point-of-view shots attempted to address the audience directly and can be considered a component of the cinema of attractions. A car chase is, in short, the most simple and the most effective way to appeal to the viewer's emotions directly, which is what makes movies with car chases similar to theme park attractions. In this context, *The French Connection* that not only incorporates an exciting car chase sequence but is also well known for the speedy development of its narrative, both of which are two characteristics of an action blockbuster, can be regarded as the archetype of contemporary thrilling action cinema.

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1. Hollywood Blockbusters, Theme-Park Attractions and Car Chases

A noteworthy phenomenon in contemporary Hollywood filmmaking is the frequent recreation of blockbuster films as theme park attractions. Blockbuster films such as *Raiders of the*

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Lost Ark (1981), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and *Jurassic Park* (1993) , have been recreated as theme park attractions and have attracted a huge number of tourists. On the other hand, Hollywood action cinema itself has evolved into a roller coaster ride and boasts of extravagant spectacles that give the viewers bodily thrills. What is common between these action films and these attractions? Film scholar Geoff King points out some important aspects that both share, remarking, "Film-based rides and attractions establish a similar kind of relationship with the audiences. As participants, we are directly addressed and interpellated in many cases."[1] King regards the direct address to the audience as the key characteristic that explains the rise of contemporary thrilling action cinema. From a cinematic viewpoint, the direct address to the audience is equivalent to, in short, displaying only visually appealing spectacles rather than narrating a self-sufficient story. Among the various kinds of spectacles, car chase action appears to have held the creative minds of Hollywood filmmakers in a tight grip. Every year, they compete with each other to create the most spectacular display of high-speed automobile slaloms and the extraordinary destruction that they cause. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to find blockbusters that have no car chases at all. Car chases have become such a rage in contemporary Hollywood filmmaking that *Time* magazine, somewhat ironically, states that "studios are speeding up to build more car movies and inject car chases into other action films. It's more than a trend; it seems to be a rule."[2] Given this enthusiasm, it can be said that car chases are considered a symbol of today's thrilling action films. In this article, through the analysis of two car chase movies, *Bullitt* (1968) and *The French Connection* (1971) , I will expound that the chase genre is actually not a recent phenomenon but one of the oldest cinematic attractions and that car chases, in particular, are part of the origins of contemporary thrilling action films.

2. Chase Genre and the Cinema of Attractions

Throughout the history of cinema, chase have constituted one of the most popular genres. The earliest example of this genre, *Stop Thief!*, was directed by the pioneer British filmmaker, James Williamson, in 1901, only six years after the Lumière brothers' first public projection of moving pictures in Paris in 1895.[3] The chase genre flourished in the U. K. at first and its fever spread to the U. S., becoming "one of the most popular narrative genres" in 1903 and 1904.[4] Film historian Tom Gunning characterizes cinema comprising such early films as the cinema of attractions. This is a conception that views cinema "less as a way of telling stories rather than as a way of presenting a series of view to an audience."[5] Early films place greater emphasis on presenting visuals as pure attractions rather than on narrating a self-sufficient story. The works of Georges Mèliés, an early French filmmaker, easily come to mind as the most suitable example. His famous trick shots are what embody the cinema of attractions. It goes without saying that the car chase was one of them. In the late 1910s, Hollywood entered the classical period, with narratives becoming the driving force and other factors, including visual spectacles, being subordinates to it. The cinema of attractions, however, survived. Gunning argues, "In fact the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e. g., the musical) than in others."[6] As for the chase, many slapstick comedies in the

1920s incorporated dramatic chase sequences. For example, silent comedies such as Buster Keaton's *Cops* (1922) and *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and Harold Lloyd's *Girl Shy* (1924) and *For Heaven's Sake* (1926) are well-known for their unique and extended chase sequences. It is true, nevertheless, that the cinema of attractions could never acquire the status of mainstream cinema during the classical period. The next time a dramatic chase scene surfaced was in the late 1960s, when many norms that had sustained the classical narrative became invalid. Since then, blockbuster films that contain spectacular visual attractions have become the most marketable commodity in Hollywood. With regard to the tendency toward presenting visual spectacles, one can easily recognize that there is a strong similarity between early films and contemporary action films. Thomas Elsaesser also recognizes "significant analogies" in their relationship and proceeds to mention that "classical cinema may yet come to be seen as itself a 'transitional' stage in the overall history of the audio-visual media and technologies of mechanical recording and reproduction."[7] In this context, many film scholars such as Richard Maltby and Linda Williams, as will be mentioned later, take up Gunning's concept and apply it to the interpretations of postclassical Hollywood cinema. I will follow the same approach as theirs and analyze the significance of the car chase in the rise of contemporary thrilling action films.

3. Point-of-View Shot in *Bullitt*

The most characteristic feature of the cinema of attractions is, as I already mentioned, the direct address to the audience, which is akin to "emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe."[8] Richard Maltby employs this concept to explain the emotional impact of the car chase action sequence in *Bullitt*, one of the best car chase movies ever. In this cop thriller, Steve McQueen floors his Ford Mustang skillfully and pursues two assassins through the streets of San Francisco in a spectacular car chase. *Bullitt* is regarded as the film that distinctly revived the chase genre and initiated the cycle of the 70s car chase movies. In *Bullitt*, the key factor behind the successful staging of the car chase sequence is the placement of the camera. Cinematographer Bill Fraker places it inside the car (on the backseat) and shoots through the windshield. Since the camera substitutes for the driver's eye, this kind of shot is called a "point-of-view shot" and functions as giving the audience, in Fraker's words, "a feeling of participation."[9] What the audience sees on screen is almost the same as what McQueen is seeing. Maltby pays particular attention to this point-of-view shot and interprets it in the context of the cinema of attractions.

> The camera shoots through the windshield of McQueen's car as it hurtles down the steep inclines of San Francisco's streets, bouncing furiously every time he crosses an intersection. Audiences, too, bounce up and down energetically in their seats, their sympathetic motion an exaggerated, physical form of their willingness to cooperate with the movie in anticipating, perceiving, and reacting to movement within the image.[10]

Here, Maltby elaborates on how directly the point-of-view shot addresses the audience. In fact, much of the chase's thrill depends on such point-of-view shots and on effectively editing them into

the entire chase sequence. Viewers feel as if they themselves are driving a muscle car at an extraordinary high speed. As Geoff King asserts, the "first-person perspective" gives "the viewer a sense of being carried on the ride itself."[11] Although this practice of shooting is quite common today, it was revolutionary in those days. In the classical period, filmmakers usually used a screen-process apparatus in a studio to film a close-up of the driver, which lacked the reality of a moving vehicle.

In my view, however, the point-of-view shot in *Bullitt* is not "direct" enough. I focus on McQueen's right shoulder placed to the bottom left of the screen. In terms of classical Hollywood filmmaking, a shot filmed over one's shoulder is usually referred to as a "semi-subjective shot." Typically, this practice is often employed in filming a shot/reverse shot schema of two characters facing each other and having a conversation. This style reflects a "general orientation toward character psychology."[12] The semi-subjective shot, in other words, induces the audience to empathize with the screen character being projected. In *Bullitt*, the audience experiences the speed and thrill of the chase like McQueen. Another function of the over-the-shoulder shot is to "provide spatial cue to orient the spectator."[13] In this case, McQueen's shoulder provides a point of contrast against which the street's image seen through the windshield advances rapidly and bounces up and down. His shoulder performs the function of exaggerating the car's movements. With a subjectively placed camera inside the car, director Peter Yates succeeds in generating visceral thrill. It should not be overlooked, however, that this framing also keeps the spectator from experiencing the visual stimulation directly. Instead, the audience is placed in the driver's position and experiences the chase through the driver's eyes visually as well as psychologically. The *Bullitt*'s point-of-view shot is, therefore, not so much a direct address to the audience as Maltby interprets. A much more direct address of the kinetic image of speed to the audience was later achieved in a film that, along with *Bullitt*, sparked the car chase fever during the 1970s, *The French Connection*.

4. Point-of-View Shot in *The French Connection*

In *The French Connection*, director William Friedkin places the camera at a place where no director had ever tried to until then: on the front bumper. And this device allows him to create a pure kinetic image of speed. In this film, Gene Hackman portrays a detective in the New York City police force who is on the trail of an assassin trying to kill him. Hackman fails to apprehend him and the assassin boards an elevated subway train. Hackman, by commandeering a car that is passing by, sets off on a furious pursuit through the busy streets of New York City. This six-minute-long chase is so skillfully filmed and edited that it succeeds in creating a mounting sense of excitement. On the film's first release, this scene was singled out for praise by many film critics. In cinematographer Owen Roziman's words, "as exciting as the chase was, it really provides very little to talk about."[14] Just as in *Bullitt*, the key to the scene's success lies in the effective use of point-of-view shots that give the audience a participatory feeling. Friedkin set up three positions to shoot. Inside the car, he placed two cameras on two mounts to shoot a over-the-driver's-shoulder-shot and a view straight ahead from the windshield. The director's original idea, however, required a view from the third position outside the car, i. e., on the front

bumper mount. Although Friedkin calls all these point-of-view shots, i. e., "Hackman's point of view," I believe that there is an essential difference between the former two positions (inside the car) and the third position (outside the car).[15] While shots filmed from inside the car resemble those in *Bullitt* and can be recognized easily as the driver's point of view, the third kind of shot filmed from the bumper, is actually nobody's point of view because, simply put, no one sits on the bumper while driving.

The direct address to the spectator is successfully achieved by employing this shot filmed from the bumper. Without traffic control, Friedkin had a stunt man drive the car with cameras mounted on it through 26 blocks at speeds of 70 to 90 miles an hour. At such speeds, sometimes, the car sped in the wrong direction, cutting off oncoming traffic. The images he obtained from this dangerous maneuver are amazing: cars head straight toward the camera, narrowly missing collision, and quickly disappear from the side edge of the frame. Its wide and low angle heightens the sense of speed and exaggerates the size of the oncoming cars. The audience feels as if these cars are rushing straight toward them. Without doubt, this is nothing but a direct address to the spectator; or rather, a direct "assault" may be a more appropriate word. The shot, filmed from the bumper, is such a successful component in the film's chase that it has become the hallmark of action movies with car chases that have followed Friedkin's masterpiece. Friedkin himself effectively made use of it in his film *To Live and Die in L. A.* (1985). Further, car chase films such as *The Driver* (1978) , *Mad Max* (1979) and *Ronin* (1998) , to name a few, incorporate the same type of shot to directly address the audience's emotions.

5. Car Chase as an Attraction

The French Connection not only raked in very good returns but also received critical acclaim, winning five Oscars, including those for the Best Picture and the Best Director. The film's remarkable success, in retrospect, appears to have predicted the direction Hollywood action movies would eventually take: cinema that increasingly became similar to theme park attractions. Geoff King points out two distinctive characteristics of thrilling action films. One of these involves "a rapid movement towards the camera," which implies that objects such as cars, fireballs and debris are "thrust out towards the space occupied by the viewer." [16] As I mentioned earlier, this characteristic applies satisfactorily to the shot filmed from the bumper in *The French Connection*. The other characteristic is extremely rapid editing, which the film has in good measure too.[17] In addition to the chase sequence, *The French Connection* is also known as a film that depicts a speedy development of its narrative. In film critic Thomas D. Clagett's words, it is "the chase like speed of the narrative," which arises mainly from the quick pace of its editing.[18] Friedkin testifies, "I try and cut where it's least expected: either too early or too late, and that's conscious." As a result, the film becomes "elliptical and nerve-racking because it was unexpected."[19] Friedkin, who established himself by making TV documentaries, brought television's fast pace into feature filmmaking. It is not an overstatement to state that the entire film is a kind of a chase. When Friedkin says, "There was nothing to fall back on," or Clagett writes that the film establishes "a breakneck pace, and all we can do is hold on," their words strongly suggest that the experience of watching the film is quite similar to being on a roller

coaster ride.[20] In effect, *The French Connection* is the film version of a theme park attraction. Evidence that Hollywood cinema is transforming into theme park attractions can be found in a totally different kind of film, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Linda Williams, though in a different context, expounding on Hitchcock's masterpiece, argues on the nature of contemporary cinema. According to her, "the new cinema of attractions" has "a quality like a roller-coaster ride" and sets out to "stimulate the bodily thrills and visceral pleasures of attractions." As for *Psycho*, in which Anthony Perkins plays a psychotic killer disguised as a female, she asserts that Hitchcock destabilizes the two extreme poles of "normal and psychotic" or "masculine and feminine." As a result of this mutable nature of expression, the film becomes "a roller coaster ride that careens wildly between the gendered poles of feminine abjection and masculine mastery."[21] How insightful her argument is can be gauged by the fact that *Psycho* was at one point of time recreated as a theme park attraction and attracted throngs of visitors to the Universal Studios theme park in Orland, Florida. Thus, it is a general tendency that contemporary Hollywood action movies are perceived as a kind of theme park ride. *The French Connection* can be regarded as the archetype of cinema simulating a roller coaster ride. The film's famous car chase sequence, which has an effect on the audience that is similar to that on a passenger on a roller coaster, is not a mere spectacle but the epitome of contemporary Hollywood action cinema.

Note

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2. *Time*, "Summer of Vroooom," Vol. 161, No. 24, June 2003.
3. Michael Chanan, *The Dream that Kicks: the Prehistory and Early years of Cinema in Britain* (London: Routledge & Keagan, 1996), 224–225.
4. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 160.
5. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in ed., Thomas Elsaesser, *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 57.
6. Ibid.
7. Thomas Elsaesser, "General Introduction, Early Cinema: From Linear History to Mass Media Archaeology," in *Early Cinema*, 4.
8. Gunning, 59.
9. Dennis Schaefer and Larry Salvato, *Masters of Lights: Conversations with Contemporary Cinematographers* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 133.
10. Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 239.
11. King, 179.
12. Bordwell, 208–210.
13. Bordwell, 210.
14. *American Cinematographer*, "Photographing The French Connection," Vol. 53, No. 2, Feb. 1972.
15. William Friedkin, "Anatomy of a Chase," in ed., Richard Koszarski, *Hollywood Directors 1941–1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 399. Thomas D. Clagett, *William Friedkin: Films of Aberration, Obsession and Reality* (California: Silman-James Press, 2003), 113.
16. King, 94.
17. King, 94.
18. Clagett, 123.

19. Nat Segaloff, *Hurricane Billy: The Stormy Life and Films of William Friedkin* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), 117.
20. Clagett, 128. Segaloff, 117.
21. Linda Williams, "Discipline and Fun: *Psycho* and Postmodern Cinema," in eds., Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold, 2000), 351–377.

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