Action scenes

a'ction n., & v.t. exertion of energy, implies movement

Action scenes are notoriously difficult to write, rarely transitioning from script to screen in anything like their original form. Indeed, writers may even be asked to leave the action scenes in their scripts blank, to be choreographed later by the director or a special effects artist or even stunt coordinator. However, if you aspire to the stuff of movie history with your action scenes, then your focus should be aimed at story substance with the potential to capture the heart and soul of the audience. Unfortunately, action scenes are far too often reduced to superficial spectacle set to overpowering sound levels. The arrival of the digital age has served to blur the line further between credibility and the universal craving for visual spectacle. Today, special effects are no longer an exception on screen and too often the audience leave the cinema uttering those three damning words of faint praise: 'Great special effects.'

In this article I should like to move beyond the fast-paced, spectacular (and unbelievable) car chase in *Bad Boys 2*, to discuss structural devices that should be taken into account in writing an action scene. I shall draw on Mary Watson's *Writing Action Scenes* published in 1995 by Harlequin and Pinnacle, and also Charles Deemer's *The Rhetoric of Action* taken from the Winter '95 issue of *Creative Screenwriting,* as well as my own personal experience of writing and shooting action scenes.

I will cover methods of describing movement whilst considering the following aspects: how is the overall relationship of protagonist and antagonist played out in the

Enemy of the State, Speed, Indiana Jones, The Mummy, The Lord of the Rings and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* - a disparate selection of films sharing one important ingredient in common: action scenes. These are the trademarks of a great many films right across the genres and inevitably they are the scenes that distributors pounce on first, knowing their ability to pack just as powerful a punch in the promotional trailers. Martina Nagel takes a fast-paced look at action scenes.

action sequence? Are action scenes based on physical conflict alone or can they also be the vehicle for interpersonal and even inner conflict? And finally, who should the writer identify with in an action scene?

The layout of action scenes should not differ essentially from the rest of the scenes in a script. Descriptions of landscapes or buildings should be added at the beginning of the scene immediately below the scene heading; such detail should never be allowed to stem the momentum by popping up during the action scenes themselves.

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Every action scene is led by physical movement, which must be described with great precision and credibility. By credibility, I mean that it is important that the writer abide by the rules of the universe that he or she has created. These depend upon the characteristics of the main character: is he young, old, male or female, disabled in some way or a superhero? They depend, too, upon the environmental backdrop to the action and also upon the powers of the antagonist. The

struggle of protagonist and antagonist should be finely balanced.

As with every other scene, action scenes are subject to cause and effect. Repeatedly, the writer has to ask what the most effective way is for the protagonist to overcome their obstacles. In doing this, the writer has to take into consideration the mental or spiritual as well as physical strength of the main character.

Battles are not always won purely on a physical level 'But by my spirit,' says the Lord. *Whale Rider* is a perfect example of this. Armed with a tractor, an entire village attempts to haul a beached whale back into the sea, but the rope fails and the villagers return to their homes, exhausted and despondent. Yet, with nothing more than whispered encouragement and a prompting, gentle kick, a young girl succeeds where the rest of her village has failed. The girl has inherited the spirit of her ancestor who arrived on the island riding on the back of the whale. The power of the spirit should never be underestimated; it is capable of moving mountains or, in the case of *Whale Rider*, the largest mammal on earth.

Charles Deemer suggests that there is a common rhetoric to action scenes in successful screenplays. He believes that inexperienced writers can have a tendency to over-write action scenes by piling on adjectives that lead to over-blown descriptions. Deemer believes in the 'economy ▸

of language [that you find] in any effective script'. Action scenes, he argues, should rely on vivid verbs to evoke images of action. These can be strengthened by adverbs such as 'fight forcefully', 'enters quickly'. The use of short sentences and the interruption of the grammatical flow can help to underline the action by echoing the pace in the rhythm of the language.

An author should consider the overall mood and writing style of their script before diving into a verb-driven action sequence. Take the aforementioned scene in *Whale Rider* or the Third Act climax scene in *Dead Poets Society*. Both the mood of these scenes and the directing style shed some light on the writers' approach. Instead of accelerating, both scenes begin to 'stretch' time. This is a common directing style whereby every movement and reaction is captured in a shot and then edited in such a way that an action takes twice or even three times as much screen time as it would normally take.

So, in *Dead Poets Society*, before we see student Todd (Ethan Hawke) clamber on to the desk, we have already been made aware of the internal agonizing that culminates in his outburst about the trumped-up nature of the papers denouncing his beloved teacher. Thus, his words: "Oh Captain, my Captain!" shouted from his vantage point on the top of the desk at the very moment Robin Williams reaches the door, carry with them all the added impetus of this knowledge. One could argue that these are not classic action scenes and, indeed, this is precisely where the definition of such scenes becomes subjective and has to be

judged in relation to the rest of the script.

Just as with any other scene in a script, action scenes require a beginning, a middle and an end. Something initiates a sudden outburst which then often escalates into a life-and-death situation. Every action needs to have a clearly defined objective that ultimately supports the desire of the protagonist to achieve their overall goal. The action can either be initiated by the protagonist in pursuit of the goal, or by the antagonist who might be competing for the same goal or else in pursuit of something in

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direct opposition to the hero's goal. Within this scenario, the writer has to identify the consequences for both characters of not achieving their goal.

It is very important, therefore, to define what is at stake for both characters if they do not succeed. Only if the main character has everything to lose - perhaps his own life or the life of his partner or child, or even his dignity, his reputation or his soul - only then are the audience emotionally involved in the action sequence. In other words, if the audience have not been led to care sufficiently about the character involved in a physical action, then they simply have no investment in the

outcome of that conflict. The reason why James Bond movies enjoy the luxury of being able to open their films with action sequences is that the audience already have an attachment to the main character. The same scene involving an unknown agent, played by an unknown actor, would merely be an accumulation of attack and escape scenes with random explosions: the audience would have no idea whether to identify with the character attacking or escaping, especially if both are equally featured in screen time.

If an experienced writer chooses to open their film with an action scene, they will often choose a commonly held value in order to inject the scene with emotional impetus. For example, *X-Men* opens with the well-known holocaust situation, immediately creating empathy for the main character who was abused for medical experimentation. If pre-cognisance of a situation does not exist, then the writer has to create empathy by familiarising the audience with the character's motives, strengths and weaknesses before homing in on his desire-line and what he stands to lose if he does not achieve his goal.

There must be something at stake for the main character as part of the overall storyline as well as in an action sequence. In order to raise the stakes on the physical as well as the psychological level, the writer should consider the relationship between the protagonist and antagonist. It is one thing to be chased down the road by a dog; it is quite another thing to be chased by one's husband, son or best friend who is after your life. As always, the bloodline is the most powerful interpersonal connection; love that turns to hatred is filled with passion and engages the audience in an action sequence on an emotional as well as a physical level.

Most movies make a point of introducing the protagonist and antagonist to each other at some point in the movie. In classical storytelling, hero and nemesis always encounter each other, if they haven't already done so, in the final climax. However, many writers aim to personalise the relationship earlier. In *The Fugitive*, Harrison Ford and Tommy Lee Jones come eye-to-eye in the pipe of the dam. Ford assures Jones that he did not kill his wife. Jones' unemotional response: "I don't care," reveals him as a man who is just out there to do his job. This is a very simple encounter.

There are more personal ones in *Witness* or *L.A. Confidential* where the nemesis is the

They must have really hated my script!

Bad Boys 2: Columbia Pictures

Whose point of view?

Gladiator: Universal

long-term friend and boss of both heroes or in *Fatal Attraction*, where Michael Douglas engages in a weekend affair with the person who subsequently becomes a fierce enemy. *Chinatown* probably ups the stakes in the most searingly personal way with the character of the grandfather who has had an incestuous relationship with his daughter and who now determines to procure his granddaughter/daughter.

In her article *Writing Action Scenes*, Mary Watson states: 'As a rule action scenes don't include much, if any, introspection or exposition. When your characters are in the middle of the action, they don't have time to think about what's happening.' Certainly, it is highly unlikely that a character will lose himself in deep, self-reflective thought while being chased down the road. However, it is also true that there is never more character revelation than during an action scene.

The main character may not himself engage in personal introspection during the action but for the audience these scenes are potentially extremely character-revealing. In hindsight, though, the main character will often reflect on these moments during times when grappling with uncomfortable issues about his true self. Why did I act in this way and not grasp the opportunity to save her when I could? Why did I lose control and hit my child? Why did I break under

interrogation? Why? ... It is only under pressure that true character is revealed, in storytelling as much as in real life.

And at this point I have to part company with Mary Watson when she argues further: 'This also means that action scenes are usually not a good place to bring in internal conflict. Try to keep the conflict external - coming at the characters from the outside. Action scenes aren't the place for your characters to examine their relationship or their feelings. Those issues should be dealt

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with either before the action scene, or afterwards, as a follow-up. But what if an internal conflict (e.g. duty v. loyalty) is directly linked to the action scene? I still advise waiting until the action scene has ended to have the character reflect on the internal conflict and agonise over whether s/he made the right decision, took the right action.'

In my opinion the great classics fly in the face of Mary Watson's assertion. For example, in the wonderful romantic drama *An Officer and a Gentleman*, under immense physical pressure Richard Gere's character finally breaks down and calls out: "I have nowhere

else to go!" Here is a man who claims again and again that he wants to become an officer, fly jets, wear the fancy uniform but under physical pressure his real motive is finally revealed: he simply has nowhere else to go.

The same is true for *Rebel without a Cause*. James Dean's character is powerless to express himself either in front of his parents or in the company of his friends. But when he finally does break, the scene is both highly physical and intensely self-revealing. Dean grabs hold of his father and shakes him shouting: "Be a man!" So this is what lies at the root of Dean's dysfunctional behaviour. All the nights out drinking, car racing and generally showing off are rooted in his inability to come to terms with his mother's treatment of his father. Action scenes reveal character and they are highly explosive and emotionally fulfilling if they are centred around the inner conflict of the main character.

Michael Hauge confirms this in his bestseller *How to Write a Screenplay that Sells*. He notes that all three levels of conflict - outer, interpersonal and inner conflict - should be present in one and the same scene. A wonderful and often used example of this is the kitchen scene in *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Dustin Hoffman tries to serve his little boy breakfast when the kitchen suddenly erupts into a battlefield. Every piece of equipment, from the toaster to the kettle explodes, burns or breaks ▸

in this scene while Hoffman's character tries to engage in a friendly conversation with his son before finally exploding with the words, "That bitch!" indicating his wife. Both the physical chaos of the kitchen and the inner tensions are beautifully orchestrated in this scene, while a further dimension of interpersonal conflict is played out between father and son who suddenly come to depend on each other. So the exploitation of psychological tension can add an equally important dynamic to the composition of action scenes.

My last point relates to the point of view in action scenes. Often the scenario demands that multiple characters interact with one other and the writer has to choose between their perspectives. The most obvious point of view is that of the hero but when we find ourselves on a battle field like in *Gladiator*, whose perspective do we really see? Here the director decided not to keep to just one point of view. So the hero disappears behind enemy lines and the battle opens without him. The perspective changes to the first man in command, then back to the hero attacking from behind. Once we hit the battlefield we see a little bit of everyone, a chaotic bloodbath unfolds in front of our eyes and soon there is no telling apart the Romans and Germans.

Braveheart handles the same sort of scenes in a slightly different way. Every battle has its own strategy and the director visually emphasises the five Scottish characters, Wallace and his close friends. Again and again the camera returns to these characters and shows them battling against the enemy.

L.A. Confidential holds even more closely to a chosen point of view. The two heroes, who are former foes, are trapped in a building surrounded by gunfire. Not once does the camera leave the building. The outside is only visible to the extent that it can be viewed by Guy Pearce and Russell Crowe. Skillfully the director restricts the action to one room where the two characters endeavour to survive. The experience for the audience is breathtaking because not only are the two main characters kept inside this building, but by extension, we, the audience, are trapped together with them.

Spielberg internalises the dramatic approach of a reduced point of view in *Saving Private Ryan*. Tom Hanks' character is in command. He bellows his directions,

The spirit soars

Whale Rider: Icon

galvanising his troops out of the boat and straight into open gunfire. We see glimpses of soldiers being shot in the head, falling to the ground before they even have a chance to leave the boat. The perspective is that of Tom Hanks and thus comes from behind. When the soldiers jump into the water and dive beneath the surface, once again the camera reveals Hanks' point of view instead of focusing on his character. Not only does the audience share

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the visual experience of being underwater with Hanks, but the audio track changes dramatically too, pulling the sound right down.

Spielberg then internalises the entire battlefield experience by revealing the action from a vantage point inside Hanks' head. Tom Hanks clambers out of the water and a grenade explodes right beside him. Hanks' eardrum collapses and his hearing fades. Everything appears to be far away like a mute picture on a television screen. Hanks' ears and eyes become, in effect, the audience's own senses. We see a man looking for his dismembered arm and picking it up as if it still belongs to him, a soldier dragging his dead friend along the beach and then Hanks' hearing returns briefly before fading away again.

The first battle scene in *Saving Private*

Ryan provides an extraordinary experience and it received enormous praise at the time of its release. Personally I felt that I was on the battlefield myself, something I had never felt to the same extent in other war movies. Interestingly, I did not have the same experience in the last action sequence of the same movie even though the scenes that featured mainly one point of view, like that of the interpreter, were extremely gripping.

The difference was that this time the point of view kept changing from that of Hanks, who cowered close to Matt Dillon, to the character in the tower, to the interpreter played by Jeremy Davies. So I did not identify with just one character but was able to take in different perspectives and this affected my level of personal engagement.

There are many things to consider if one wants to write a remarkable action scene with the capacity to move people. I believe that a limited point of view, a personal relationship of the protagonist with the antagonist who externalises the hero's greatest nightmare, and a physical conflict that lays bare the hero's inner struggles are all essential ingredients for a successful action sequence. Maybe not all at once or in every action scene, but certainly even one of these aspects incorporated into *Bad Boys 2* would have made the film a more enjoyable experience for me.

Martina Nagel is a scriptwriter and director of photography. She co-founded with Bart Gavigan script clinics that have attracted Hollywood film-makers and European writers.