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Big and Loud: The Sonic Aesthetics of the Fight Scene in Digital Action Cinema

ACTION CINEMA NOW

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Big, Loud, Noisy: The Action Film as a Sonic Cinema of Attractions

Criticizing the "movie-as-Theme-Park" phenomenon of Hollywood action cinema in the 1990s, Larry Gross decries the "Big Loud Action Movie" for its aesthetic hyperbole (1995: 5). Although his article does not focus on sound, the use of "loud" as a disparaging designation highlights the fact that action films have been and continue to be thought of as noisy, sonically chaotic, and sometimes dangerously high-volume cinematic objects. Such commonplace rhetoric obscures the nuance and complexity of the soundscapes of action cinema. It also fails to consider the significant attractions of action cinema's spectacular soundscapes.

Interrogating the complexities and pleasures of "big loud" action cinema, this chapter focuses on the Hollywood blockbuster fight sequence, arguably one of the biggest, loudest scene types in the genre. We contend that sound is not only crucial to the fight scene's appeal but is key to its construction as an identifiable set piece. The fight scene is set apart from the narrative through its architecture, kineticism, and spectacle; it is also set apart through sound and music.

By defining spatial boundaries, mapping the violent confrontations of bodies in motion, and drawing the viewer in through propulsive and immersive effects, sound in the fight scene is a defining cornerstone of bigger budget action's impact. "Impact aesthetics" (King 2000) have become synonymous with action cinema, a pairing that we contend is easily and productively transferred to a sonic register.

To analyze action's sonic impact aesthetics, we draw from a dataset of post-millennial fight sequences from some of the loudest, longest running, and most financially lucrative Hollywood action franchises. The restriction to post-millennial fights is significant because of the development of digital surround sound technologies, which allow for dense soundscapes that amplify volume and intensify sonic effects. Incorporating sonic visualization, production studies, sound and music studies, critical reviews, media paratexts, and close analysis, we zero in on the human-scaled fight scene, arguing that as a set piece it is largely framed and realized via distinct spatial chronotopes that work in concert with sound.[1] The fights we focus on are most accurately labeled as "hand to hand" rather than unarmed, as they prioritize contact between bodies—striking, blocking, grappling—as well as the use of found objects as weapons. Physical fight scenes are instructive because they rely on the yoking of violent impact and spectacle with sonically charged affect, using propulsive beats, loud high and low frequency effects, and loud booms of bodily contact. More than just being loud, fight scenes have potential to be acoustically assaultive and haptically charged.

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[1] Bahktin defines a chronotope as a solidification of time and place: "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history," (Bahktin cited in Bemong et al. 2010: 4). To this formulation we add the findings of subsequent works that draw on Bahktin's formulation, especially Murphet 1998.

After establishing the slippery connotations of loudness and the concept of sonic impact aesthetics, we focus on two contrasting sonic chronotopes as case studies: fights set in loud or quiet spaces.[2] Specifically, we analyze fights staged inside the expansive and loud public performance locale of the opera house and those fought in the quiet, liminal space of the public bathroom. The qualities of these spaces transform the ways combatants fight one another and shape the sonic character and impact of the scene. They further illustrate the nuanced and meticulous nature of many fight scenes' sound designs. Too often, we argue, these are oversimplified and overlooked as merely big and loud.

Defining Loudness in the post-Dolby Fight Scene

Loud is an imprecise term: for instance, loudness can be volume but also unpleasant brashness or enjoyable thudding viscerality. It can describe the clamor of machine, crowd, or pyrotechnic noise, or simply indicate that music and effects are louder than dialogue. Even volume—a relatively precise term—is a complicated category. Screenings at cinemas are different from home viewings. Each can be further broken down: by the architecture, speaker placement, technological sophistication of the setup and space; by the quality and format of the film being viewed; by the hearing capacity, sensitivity, and age of the listener; by the number and placement of the audio-viewers. Furthermore, this does not even begin to consider the listening variations of earbuds or headphones.

These variances have become heightened in an age of digital surround or post-Dolby sound (the era following the popularization of Dolby Digital in the 1990s). Digital surround sound makes room for sound effects to come to the foreground and allows for greater immersion,

[2] We treat "loud" and "quiet" as oversimplified categories that require a critical deconstruction. We are interested in complexities associated with both terms. We do not view either merely as an indicator of volume.

higher volume, more robust low frequency effects, and more intricate soundscapes. The post-Dolby fight sequence layers sound to direct attention, guide audience response, intensify suspense, and highlight emotional stakes. Sound in the fight scene encourages spectatorial affect through thundering amplification, energizing or sedating rhythms (heartbeat sounds escalating tension for instance), sonically jolting "stabs," and the hapticity of low or high frequencies. Focusing on sound effects and Foley in particular, Michel Chion articulated what he saw as the potential for digital surround sound to make the materiality of bodies and things more present and weighty. In a pre-digital era, noise on the soundtrack was interference, something to be eliminated. With technological advances that eradicate interference, noise has now become an important entity in its own right, offering texture, materiality, and a more sensory-focused cinema. It is not incidental that Chion tied action cinema to this digital sonic shift:

> Recent American productions like John McTiernan's *Die Hard* [1988], Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* [1989], or James Cameron's *The Abyss* [1989] have also added to this renewal of the senses in film through the playful extravagance of their plots. In these movies matter—glass, fire, metal, water, tar—resists, surges, lives, explodes in infinite variations, with an eloquence in which we can recognize the invigorating influence of sound on the overall vocabulary of modern-day film language (1994: 155).

He goes on to note that these films point to a return of an epic quality in cinema, "making its appearance in many films in the form of at least one fabulous sequence. Think of the Dantesque escape of the heroes, in thunder and rain, in Andrey Konchalovsky's *Tango and Cash* [1989], which is otherwise a pretty bad film" (1994: 155). Chion is not alone in noting this shift. For instance, Jeff Smith outlines the key ingredients of this post-Dolby style: "increased volume, low

frequency effects, expanded frequency rage, the spatialization of sound, the ‘hyperdetail’ of contemporary Foley work, and the use of nondiegetic sound effects as stylistic punctuation” (2013: 338). Echoing Chion’s claims for Dolby’s “sensorial capacities” (2009: 133), Smith notes “Dolby’s ability to enhance the visceral experience of cinema” (2013: 337). As both highlight, action cinema is an ideal home for the amplification and elaboration of these capacities and tendencies. The claims for digital sound’s impacts on style are not limited to the theatrical experience, but are built into sound design, including home and mobile exhibition.

A Violent Sensory Cinema: Loudness in the Fight Sequence

To Chion’s list of glass, fire, and metal, we add the human body in our focus on the hand-to-hand physical fight scene. For us, the body is the center point of action cinema’s sonic impact aesthetic. The fight is a fundamental feature of big budget Hollywood cinema, from the shaky desperation of the bathroom knife fight in *The Bourne Ultimatum* (Paul Greengrass, 2007), to the hyperreal authenticity of the stairwell fight in *Atomic Blonde* (David Leitch, 2017), to the elaborately staged operatic sequence in *Quantum of Solace* (Marc Forster, 2008), to the spotlit brutalism of the final boxing match in *Creed* (Ryan Coogler, 2015). On the one hand, these fight scenes offer a performance of realism and authenticity that stresses physical violence; on the other, they offer a digitized unreality that transforms violence into pure fantasy. The hand-to-hand fight sequence is a paradoxical object that illustrates the central ambivalences of digital corporeality and, as such, it is a crucial site for interrogating contemporary sonic impact aesthetics.

For the spectacle-focused syntax of the fight scene, the capacities of post-Dolby surround sound highlight the corporeal, affect-driven, and energizing pulse of engaging action cinema. Sometimes dismissively referred to as “chaos cinema” (Stork 2013), the impacts, collisions, and

kinetics of contemporary action have sonic import and texture. They also have affective weight: impact in this framework has a multiplicity of meanings that are beyond the merely assaultive or chaotic. Sonic impact aesthetics are characterized by complexity, enveloping immersion, affectively charged viscerality, and energizing dynamism. Within this framework, loudness is not merely the average or peak decibel level of the soundscape of a film's theatrical exhibition or sound mix/design. To describe a film as loud is to confirm its nature as an impactful cinematic spectacle, to recognize its sonic complexity, and to appreciate how sound works through dynamism to communicate and augment the fight scenes' qualities of urgency, kineticism, and haptic intensity.

Yet complexity (i.e., multiple interwoven tracks) does not necessarily make for noise or even loudness in the era of digital sound design. Not only can extremely quiet, exceedingly subtle sound effects take hundreds of tracks to create, but the packed and loud soundscape is not always indecipherable noise. As Mark Kerins comments when analyzing the extended freeway chase scene of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991), although it is impossible for the average listener to identify the multitude of sounds individually, the upshot is not sonic chaos but rather a clear communication of "intense movement, speed, and action" (2010: 69). To take Michael Bay's *Transformers* (2007) as an illustrative example of a wider trend in digital action sound design: a single moment in the mix of this film can contain anywhere from 100 to 1000 tracks, something inconceivable with pre-digital sound technologies. *Transformers'* sound mixer Greg Russell comments on the astonishing number of tracks his team required, "Altogether, with all pre-dubs and outboard gear, I was out to 256 tracks on the console, which was pretty much a full load" (Isaza 2010). Likewise, Bay recalls that the destruction of Chicago

scene had 30,000 fades and caused a computer crash, testifying to the importance he puts on sound design in the construction of his signature collision centered aesthetics (Giardina 2011).

However even very loud action soundtracks like that of *Transformers* are as much about dynamism as magnitude. As *Transformers* sound designer Erik Aadahl says: "When I first read the script, I remember thinking how huge it seemed. But I hoped that there could be more to the soundtrack than just 'big and loud' Bay-hem" (Isaza 2010). According to Aadahl, the sound team worked carefully to create robot personalities through sound, and this sonic characterization was not always focused on the big or obnoxious. He recalls,

> Our goal was to play the opposite of "big."… To get tiny, quiet, and intimate. To make the audience lean in, not get pushed back. For me, the scene plays like a symphony of little sounds.... It's a funny psycho-acoustic phenomenon, that "small" sounds can be manipulated to sound bigger than "big" sounds. In sound design we often find the "macro" in the "micro" (ibid).

In the same article, Aadahl also describes the importance of dynamism and contrast in the action sequence soundtrack. Rather than extended sequences of pure loudness, the goal instead is to differentiate and demarcate, to provide loudness through contrast not merely through volume or noise: "Quiet scenes help cleanse the sonic palate.... Dynamics are the key to both storytelling and sound" (ibid). For sound editors like Aadahl, the small details are important as each character is paired with a specific sound that is distinct in terms of timbre and frequency, and each weapon effect has layers and nuance. Each loud, explosive moment is positioned carefully to take full advantage of sound dynamism to stress magnitude, momentum, and weight.

Even when dynamic, however, the roller coaster ride of Bay-hem suggests the extent to which many set pieces in digital action cinema attempt to move beyond human stakes and scale.

Their loudness may be built through mechanization and fueled by speed, for instance the robots of the *Transformers* series (2007–) and the car chases of the *Fast and Furious* franchise (2001–). Such sonic mechanization speaks to the wider sensation driven conventions of the post-Dolby action sequence and includes large-scale military battles and explosions as well. However, the human body is the focalizing element distinguishing the fight scene from the action set piece. Even when chases or battles create sensational set pieces, they are frequently punctuated by physical combat of some form. Often the fighting is intercut with chases, countdowns, or threats to innocents, or there is a culminating epic fight between key characters.

Mission: Impossible—Fallout's (Christopher McQuarrie, 2018) final set piece is illustrative in this regard as it cross cuts between several action scenes but remains rooted to the closer range fights between protagonists and antagonists. It is densely scored, and takes approximately twelve and half minutes of the film's runtime (Figure 1). Viewers of the *Mission: Impossible* franchise (1996–) have come to expect an intense combination of astonishing landscapes, Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise)'s acrobatic/climbing skills, urgent deadlines and countdowns, women/civilians in peril, high speed chases, and martial arts showdowns. *Fallout's* climax intercuts several of these elements: a helicopter chase, a fight between Hunt and August Walker (Henry Cavill) on a clifftop, a scene of hand-to-hand combat as Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg) and Ilse Faust (Rebecca Ferguson) face Solomon Lane (Sean Harris). There is also a tense countdown as Luther Stickle (Ving Rhames) tries to disarm the bomb that would destroy a village and kill Ethan's ex-wife (Michelle Monaghan). Linking all these tense moments, the soundscape fuses mechanical sounds (in this case helicopters) with music and sound effects. As supervising sound editor James Mather notes, the two-minute helicopter chase scene was a sonic challenge: because of all the percussive sounds (helicopter motors, guns, strikes) it was hard to

create sonic differentiation and dynamism, both of which are needed for a sense of momentum for the relatively lengthy scene. To generate energy and anticipation, the sound team worked with the Shepard Tone, an auditory illusion whereby a tone seems to continually rise or fall. Developed by Roger Shepard, it consists of overlapping notes played one octave apart. Because of the sense of rising or falling without any resolution or any real movement, the tone creates anxiety and suspense. As Mather notes, "we wanted to get our helicopter sounds, engine whines, and stress and twisting metal sounds to be part of this Shepard's Tone movement," which had to be achieved by adding tonality to the percussive sounds of gunshots and blade flaps. It also involved distinguishing the helicopter sounds through effects and pitch bending so Hunt's helicopter sounded more like a jet and Walker's sounded more "blade heavy." Working with composer Lorne Balfe, the sound team attempted to ensure that music and effects took turns: "This way the chase would always have momentum, whether it was the music pushing it or the sound design" (Mather in Andersen 2018).

These comments are illustrative of the sound editor's challenges when approaching an action fight scene: how to maintain energy, dynamism, anticipation, suspense, and a sense of movement without turning the soundtrack into a constant, indistinguishable wall of noise? They also point to the subtlety and precision of sounds that might be dismissed as mere noise (the whir of helicopter blades for instance). The shifts from loud to quiet, enclosed area to wide open landscape, musicality to machinic whirs work in concert with modulations of tone and pitch. Sound makes the action clear and energizing and creates suspense, tying the cross-cuts together into a single spectacular action sequence.

From Loud to Quiet: The Sonic Architecture of the Spectacular Fight Scene

As the *Fallout* scene indicates, space and architecture are crucial elements in building an effective soundscape: the move from the openness and altitude of the clifftop fight to the quieter ticking tension of disarming a bomb is key to creating a sonic dynamism that shifts from quiet to loud and back again. *Fallout*'s multivalent intricacy is illustrative of wider post-Dolby trends that prompt us to consider the ways sound works to frame fight scenes within architectural locales. In the section that follows, we zero in on two distinct audio-visual fight categories determined by their sonic architecture: the loud fight in the public performance venue, i.e., arenas, theaters, nightclubs (Figures 2–4), and the quiet fight in semi-private liminal settings, i.e., public bathrooms, elevators, and rented hotel rooms (Figures 5 and 6). Focusing on the opera fight and the bathroom fight, respectively, we argue that the quiet category is often objectively just as loud (contains as many spikes in volume) as its loud counterpart. However, the pattern of dynamics is distinct: moments of silence make spikes of sounds more startling. Although our process of sonic visualization has its limitations, a sense of dynamism and complexity is clearly visible in Figures 1–6, which show schematics of volume, frequency, and rhythm.

These two categories are further delineated by their use of iconic sounds associated with either loud or quiet moments (e.g., labored breathing as quiet and gunfire as loud; classical music as quiet and rock music as loud). Quiet scenes tend to intersperse loud spikes of sound (a single gunshot, an unexpected punch, the smash of glass breaking) with relative silence. This is visible in the sonic visualization of the bathroom fight in *Fallout* (Figure 5)*,* where empty sites are punctuated by strikes, smashes, and vocalizations. *Fallout's* final and loudest fight scene, on the other hand, presents an unbroken, dense strata of sound and music (Figure 1). Thus, loudness may describe the relative difference or similarity between the mountains and valleys of sound, with a louder landscape having less differentiation and greater density of sound.

In an article interrogating race and the key chronotopes of the film noir, Julian Murphet (1998), drawing on Vivian Sobchack, argues that noir locations can be usefully placed in three functional categories: public, domestic, and liminal. While the loud set pieces of action are often found in large public places, contrapuntal examples can be found in transitional areas like bathrooms, hotel rooms, stairwells, kitchens, elevators, and hallways. Like the noir anti-hero who is seen in shabby urban alcoves, action heroes like Jason Bourne and James Bond often fight in rundown hotels. Yet they are equally comfortable fighting in luxury suites and expensive restrooms in high end hotels, such as the iconic Burj Khalifa in *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011) and the Continental, the hotel of choice for assassins in all the *John Wick* films (2014–2019). The design of the fight sequences, in tandem with fight choreography and cinematography, transforms their fights into elaborate set pieces.

Many of the loudest fights in our dataset take place in large scale venues designed to hold crowds: nightclubs, theaters, opera houses, sports stadiums, and combat arenas. These spaces enhance audio-visual spectacle and highlight the fight sequence as a performative event. Key examples include the fight at the Red Circle nightclub in *John Wick* (Chad Stahelski, 2014),[3] the final boxing match in *Creed,* and the battles during opera performances in *Quantum of Solace* and *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation* (Christopher McQuarrie, 2015). A continuum of taste positions some of these locales as “low culture” venues (i.e., the fight/sports arena) and others as “high culture” sites (i.e., the opera house). The glitzy nightclub falls somewhere in between. Despite this spectrum, every fight scene is produced and recorded as a multi-level sonic set piece. Each is staged as a disruptive intervention into, for example, the dance club or the opera

[3] See Coulthard and Steenberg’s (2022) “ Red Circle of Revenge: Anatomy of the Fight Sequence in *John Wick.*”

house. (Martial arts tournaments and boxing matches are exceptions: performances there revolve around fighting.)

What follows is a close analysis of the loud public space of the opera houses visited in *Rogue Nation* and *Quantum of Solace*, then a discussion of the quieter, claustrophobic public bathrooms in *Fallout* and *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006). By focusing on two different ends of the volume spectrum, these sequences allow us to draw out the ways in which loudness and noise are relative, not absolute, categories. They also enable us to investigate the contrastive atmospheres that are key to the dynamism of sound effects and music: corporeal violence is as incompatible with the musical elegance and audience silence of opera as it is with the muted noise, anonymity, and implied etiquette of the upscale public washroom. Of course, contemporary action films attempt to maximize innovation by setting fights in unlikely or unexpected places. These spatial distinctions work sonically, using background music, noise, and relative quiet to intensify the sound of blows, hits, and punches.

The Opera Fight: *Rogue Nation* and *Quantum of Solace*

Fights in performance sites are characterized by backstage secrecy or subterfuge, in which the fighters, or their true motivations, are hidden from the venue's crowd. This echoes the fact that the hero belongs to a secret society, whether that is John Wick's assassin network, Hunt's Impossible Mission Force (IMF) or Bond's MI6. Battles in performance venues have a symbiotic relationship to diegetic music, which often registers the sequences' sound design. Additionally, sounds generated by the crowds onscreen form a kind of wave of noise that ebbs and flows with the movements, range, and speed of the fight choreography and in response to the patterns of the diegetic performance, whether that is a boxing match (*Creed*) or a violent operatic sequence (Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* in *Quantum of Solace*). The fights are rendered dramatic

and “loud” through the filters of sound and music, which cut across the continuum of high and low culture.

To unpack this in more detail, we turn to the Bregenz open air theater fight in *Quantum of Solace* and the Vienna State Opera fight in *Rogue Nation*. The former features Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca*, the latter Puccini’s *Turandot.* Like *John Wick*’s multi-level fights in music venues (the concert in the Roman baths of Caracalla or the Red Circle nightclub), *Rogue Nation* and *Quantum of Solace* weave their chases, punch-ups, and orchestrated assassinations in and out of performances, in both cases here written by, arguably, the most cinematic of opera composers: Giacomo Puccini.[4]

Rogue Nation’s opera fight is the high point in a sequence that sees disgraced IMF agent Hunt leading an investigation into an assassination plot. This plot takes Dunn and Hunt, armed with sophisticated surveillance devices and dressed undercover in tuxedos, to Vienna’s opera house where they face off against multiple agents, including a hitman with a flute-shaped gun, another man disguised as a police officer, and the glamorously dressed sniper, Ilse Faust, who is hiding inside a moveable pagoda. While Dunn waits in an electronic control room, Hunt moves unchallenged through the labyrinthine backstage area. His pursuit of the flute-assassin takes him upwards, onto the rigging and gangways above the stage where he and the flautist scuffle in time with the *Turandot* music below. The music of the opera swells, working as film score. It is perfectly paired with the action of Hunt’s fight and, later, with Dunn’s grapple with another of the assassins. Over the powerful music of the well-known *Nessum Dorma* aria, smaller noises are audible: the rip of a curtain, the click of a gun being assembled, the metallic clanking of the

[4] For further discussion on Puccini and his relationship to entertainment culture, see Wilson 2007.

gangway rigging, the thwacks of blows, exhalations, and grunts. The juxtaposition of sound effects and Puccini's music reinforces the immediacy and stakes of the backstage fight.

While so-called classical music is conventionally associated with intellectual or contemplative quiet, it is sometimes used as contrastive accompaniment to stylize the hyper-violent fight sequence. Contrastive music prompts listener attention through unexpected pairings that clash with the emotional valences of the key figures or actions in a scene. Case in point: *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum* (Chad Stahelski, 2019) uses Antonio Vivaldi's "Winter" to accompany the shootout at the Continental hotel, integrating gunshots with the score as percussive elements.

When accompanying scenes of violence, opera's musical elegance, polished composition, and high cultural cachet can be a prominent instance of contrastive scoring. In some cases however, the emotional valences of the music are aligned rather than contrastive with the onscreen action. *Quantum of Solace* and *Rogue Nation* rely on popular perceptions of the Puccini operas as hyper-emotional. Both films thereby yoke emotion to violent action. Nonetheless the sequences have distinctly different emotional valences because the heroes are characterized and played differently: Daniel Craig is a taciturn and brutal James Bond, Tom Cruise a playful and acrobatic Ethan Hunt. Although they obviously hear the music, Bond and Hunt do not truly listen and remain emotionally removed: the opera performances function as echoes of their physical struggles rather than as moments of psychological interiority. The violence of *Tosca* especially resonates with the fight sequence happening backstage, but it is distanced from the emotions of the fighter-protagonist.[5]

[5] This is unlike what happens in, for example, the staging of *Tosca* in *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008), that Marcia J. Citron argues pre-figures the protagonist's murder (2011: 317).

The operatic performances in *Quantum* and *Rogue Nation* signal sonic and architectural set pieces that frame the fights. They are also critical to the narrative. In a nod to *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1956), the camera of *Rogue Nation* lingers on the sheet music as Ilse Faust follows along, an ominous red circle signaling the exact moment of attack. Music is weaponized: it is both a script for murder and literally a weapon: the flute is used as a gun. The instructions on the music: *poco allarg.* (a slight slowing down) to start, played *a tempo* (in time) for the decisive attack and then *affrettando* (picking up speed) are echoed in the rhythm of the backstage fights, confirming the complex choreography of the interconnected sequences on stage (with the opera), in the rigging (with Hunt), in the pagoda (with Faust), and in the control room (with Dunn). In *Quantum,* Bond observes a nefarious deal organized by the shadowy Spectre via an earpiece. The device doubles (or rather, trebles) the process of listening on screen as the spectator hears the opera, the whispered Spectre plot, and the soundtrack of the film. As Bond chases the assassins into the hallway, music and other sounds drop out completely. As he moves through the theater's restaurant/bar and kitchen, the music from *Tosca* takes over, maintaining a unified volume as the scene cross cuts between performance space and bar. The music of *Tosca* dominates the sounds of the fight until distinct gunshots can be heard punctuating Puccini's music. The rapid intercutting of the stabbing in the theatrical performance with a high-octane chase and gunfire sequence decenters Bond as the agent of action, an effect stressed through sound. We do not hear Bond's voice or breathing, only crowd noises, gunfire, and the objects he bangs into. Instead, the operatic performers are emphasized: we hear their

yells, gasps, and breath. The music mutes Bond's violence while highlighting the operatic brutality being performed on stage.[6]

These opera fights are part of a larger category of fight scenes in musical venues, a tradition firmly established in earlier action films and escalated in more recent films (in terms of complexity of staging, musicality, and choreography). The nightclub and concert fights in the *John Wick* series have clear rhythmic patterns determined by the techno/dance music and timed to the sound of gunshots and strikes. In contrast, the opera fights in both *Quantum* and *Rogue Nation* are densely scored (with music playing over the entire sequence) with smaller or quieter sounds spiking noticeably on the sonic visualizer (Figures 2 and 3). They become focal points: the clang of boots on backstage gangways, the turning of pages of sheet music, a dramatic exhalation of breath, etc. This produces the psycho-acoustic effect mentioned by *Transformers* sound designer Aadahl*,* wherein smaller sounds are manipulated to ring louder than big sounds like an operatic performance. What Aadahl terms a "symphony of little sounds" encourages the audience to draw closer here too (Isaza 2010). This more intimate sound design differentiates the opera fight from other fights set in large-scale performance venues.

The bountiful "symphony of little sounds" is part of the doubly staged and hypermediated Puccini operas themselves, amplified through diegetic audio-visual surveillance technology, such as the CCTV in *Rogue Nation* and the earpieces in *Quantum of Solace*. The emotional and spectacular impact of opera as a narrative art form provides prosthetic accompaniment to, or distanciated commentary on, the cinematic fight scenes. *Tosca* and *Turandot* can simultaneously

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[6] Citron argues that the techno-opera production in *Quantum* creates a sense of detachment. *Tosca's* narrative violence and Puccini's populist music work within the Bond context to ensure that "the protagonist and arguably his brand remain aloof from opera's transformative qualities" (2011: 318).

operate as shorthand for a cosmopolitanism often associated with (cinematic representations of) opera attendance while also providing stories that can mirror, comment on, and offer emotional prompts for the fight scenes themselves. While such emotionality might remain impossible for Bond, as a character or brand, we would argue that the operatic stakes of the fight scene exploit the flatness of affect, or detachment, of heroic characters such as Bond, commenting on spectacle, performance, and even the excesses of the action set piece in general.

Both the opera fight and Puccini's diegetic operas themselves mobilize narrative dangers and violent spectacle. *Turandot* is the story of a series of riddles that must be solved if a suitor is to win the hand of Princess Turandot. Those who fail, die. *Tosca* is best described as a political thriller full of deception, revenge, betrayal, and torture. Opera's threats are rendered literal in *Rogue Nation,* where musical instruments become weapons and assassinations are timed to music. Hunt must use his martial arts skills and trademark climbing abilities to disarm assassins hiding in the opera set, keep privileged spectators safe, and navigate the complicated architecture of the opera house. Here *Turandot* becomes a roadmap to an elaborate backstage assassination plot that is as violent as the opera's onstage executions. In *Quantum of Solace, Tosca* largely serves as a backdrop for dangerous criminals making clandestine deals and the spies who are licensed to hunt and kill them.[7]

The opera fights of *Rogue Nation* and *Quantum of Solace* build their impact thanks to Puccini's music and the accompanying "symphony of little sounds." In resonant contrast, we now examine how "small sounds" are used in quieter semi-public areas such as public

[7] In an amusing commentary, one of the audience members observes many of the undercover criminals leaving their seats. He whispers: "Well, *Tosca's* not for everyone."

bathrooms. There we find fights that are often equally loud but oriented in significantly different ways.

The Bathroom Fight: *Fallout* and *Casino Royale*

The structures of the quiet fight sequence throw the big loud fights of mega-franchise films into relief, highlighting the spectacular dimension of the latter. Hotel rooms, bathrooms, and comparable venues are often associated with silence or solitude, but they are only semi-private. This adds a layer of urgency and, particularly in the case of public washrooms, heightens the sense of vulnerability. Public bathrooms demand decorum. Only certain noises are countenanced because random strangers may enter, interrupt, overhear, or interfere. Sonically, moreover, the public bathroom allows for naturally occurring variance. External sounds and/or music from the outside can bleed into the private space every time the door opens and a new patron arrives. Echoey acoustics stress resonance, add reverb, and amplify volume. The sound design of the bathroom fight emphasizes corporeal defenselessness. Bathrooms are places of taboo and abjection, a feature exploited by sequences such as the bathroom massacre in *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) or, more recently, the sewage flood that engulfs the family home in *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019). Even the sounds commonly associated with these areas are unsettling, repugnant.

A truly surprising number of fight scenes are set in bathrooms. To cite only five: *The Warriors* (Walter Hill, 1979) features bathroom set gang warfare. *The Raid 2* (Gareth Evans, 2014) situates a showdown in a bathroom stall. Harry Tasker (Arnold Schwarzenegger) fights terrorists in the bathroom of the Bonaventure Hotel in *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994). Isiah Bone (Michael Jai White) proves his fighting abilities in a prison bathroom in *Blood and Bone* (Ben Ramsey, 2009). Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) ends his frenetic Moroccan chase over a toilet

in *The Bourne Ultimatum.* Common elements are high frequency sounds of breaking glass or porcelain (from mirrors, sinks, and toilets), the gushing and flushing of water, and the echoing reverberations of vocalizations and gunfire. Musical scoring tends to be diegetic and spatially removed, which makes it more muted than in other locations. The music has a nuanced relationship to the violence: it fades in and out when doors open, or subtly rises in the mix when fights occur.

We take *Fallout's* extended bathroom fight as our first illustration. Like the backstage fight, the bathroom brawl takes place in a hidden space, in this case the large men's washroom of a nightclub (The Grand Palais) in Paris. The bathroom is illuminated by bright flat lighting and is framed by white walls, sinks, and mirrors; the muted sound of the dance floor's music is the only musical accompaniment. The fighters are IMF's Hunt, partnered with CIA Agent August Walker, against an enemy operative posing as the illegal arms dealer, Lark (Liang Yang). The fight moves from an open sink area into the cramped interior of a toilet stall (filmed in an overhead shot) where the three combatants must fight at extremely close range. Bodies and sounds bounce off the walls of the stall, adding to the desperate intimacy of the blows. All three characters are equally matched and exceptionally skilled martial artists.[8]

The music is diegetically motivated and often, but not uniformly, muted. It comes from the dancefloor and fades and rises in the mix, depending on spatial perspective but also according to the rhythms of the fight. When Walker stands to fight after being knocked down,

[8] Liang Yang, who plays Hunt and Walker's opponent, the pseudo-Lark, is a martial artist, stunt performer, and choreographer. Although many stunt men and women worked on *Mission Impossible: Fallout*, no one is *credited* as doubling Tom Cruise. Two uncredited stuntmen are listed on IMDb as having doubled Henry Cavill. [perhaps cite to this? https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4912910/fullcredits]

the pulsing bass (like a heartbeat) of Death in Vegas's "The Consequences of Love" comes forward in the mix. After Walker falls the music continues to increase in volume, with the bass beats amplifying as "Lark" points his gun at Hunt. It decreases in volume with the shot from Ilse Faust's gun, then rises slightly with the shot/counter shot editing between Hunt and Faust. The musical dynamism is highlighted by staccato fight sounds, with individual quieter noises (e.g., the rustle of clothing) causing a sound spike equal to much louder noises (e.g., gunfire and glass smashing are no louder than punches). Hits with fists are relatively equal in sound levels to the fake Lark's bashes with a metal pipe, a phenomenon that reinforces our insistence that the human body itself provides sonic anchoring for the violent scale of the fight scene. The sonic visualization here clearly demarcates moments of relative silence, against which sounds stand out in sharp contrast (Figure 5). Hits, impacts, and blocks are crisp and defined, designed to highlight the combatants' skills and—behind the scenes—those of the stunt performers. The fight between Walker, Hunt, and "Lark" abruptly ends when "Lark" is shot by MI6 agent Faust. Significantly, her gunshot is quieter than the punches traded earlier, but registers its impact in the shocked silence and stillness that follows.

A similar bathroom fight reboots the Bond franchise in the opening sequence of *Casino Royale*. However, as the sonic visualizations reveal (Figure 6), the Bond bathroom fight is louder, more sonically dense, and scored with non-diegetic music. Three flashbacks to this fight are intercut with Bond's conversation with a corrupt operative in his office, demonstrating once again the dramatic use of silence to frame violence. Smashes of sinks, vocalizations, and music abruptly interrupt the office quiet. The final click of Bond's gun (even with its silencer) spikes louder than the dense soundscape of the bathroom shots. This is the significant moment when Bond's "00" status is confirmed because of the successful assassination.. The sequence then cuts

back to the bathroom, as Bond's adversary (who had appeared dead) rises from the floor to aim his gun. Bond quickly turns around as his signature musical motif is accompanied by the franchise's iconic gun barrel point of view shot. It is not pushing the point too far to insist that this bathroom fight (with its abject associations and staccato sound design) re-launches the Bond brand with Craig as star as more visceral and brutal than the comic and self-referential films with Pierce Brosnan. Indeed, *Casino Royale's* reinvigoration of the franchise proves that the bathroom fight can realize Chion's supposition regarding the potentialities of digital sound: sound adds weight and materiality to spectacle. Through sonic impact aesthetics neglected liminal spaces such as bathrooms perfectly demonstrate Chion's vision of a newly revivified epic quality of cinema.

Conclusion

We have argued that architectural spaces (e.g., bathrooms or opera houses) and their corresponding sound profiles provide the weightiness and "renewal of the senses" that Chion imagined (1994: 155). This is manifested, firstly, through spatial associations: abjection, privacy, and vulnerability with public bathrooms and luxury, cosmopolitanism, and melodrama with opera houses. Weightiness and haptic impact are staged and realized through sounds and especially through the canny manipulation of sound mix dynamics tied to the violence visited by bodies on one another. The sound of a skilled fist against a muscular torso is as loud as a sniper shot; human heartbeats are audible over (and through) the throb of dance music. The spike of breaking glass that threatens to reveal clandestine combatants grappling in public toilets followed by a reduction in volume is engineered to draw the spectator/auditor in, then push them away. The complex musical layers of opera house sequences may both conceal and showcase backstage assassins. The sensational stories and sounds of opera augment the fights, though the fight

sequences also rely on smaller, bodily focused noises: the thud of a punch, the rip of a curtain, the click of a gun. All, in *Rogue Nation's* case, are literally timed to the music.

Fighting and violence are constructed sonically around spatial acoustics. What we are calling sonic impact aesthetics can helpfully begin to refute the notion that action cinema is simply "big and loud." Building on previous work (Coulthard and Steenberg 2022), we have begun theorizing loudness as a critical category that enmeshes violence with sound in ways that are considerably more dynamic, nuanced, narratively motivated, and affectively charged than has been previously acknowledged.

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Visualizations:

Figure 1. *Fallout's* (Paramount Pictures, 2018) Helicopter Fight Sequence

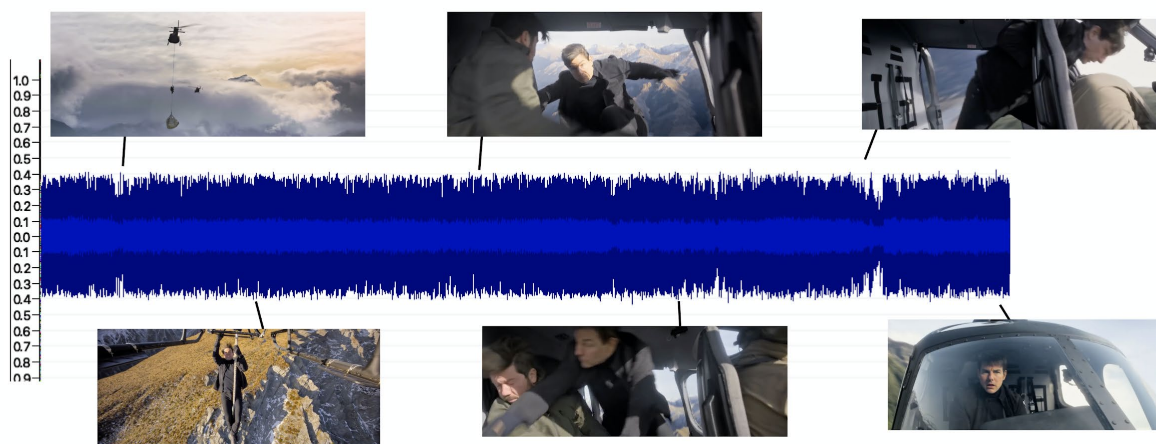

Figure 5. *Fallout's* (Paramount Pictures, 2018) Bathroom Fight Sequence

Figure 6. *Casino Royale's* (Sony Pictures, 2006) Bathroom Fight Sequence

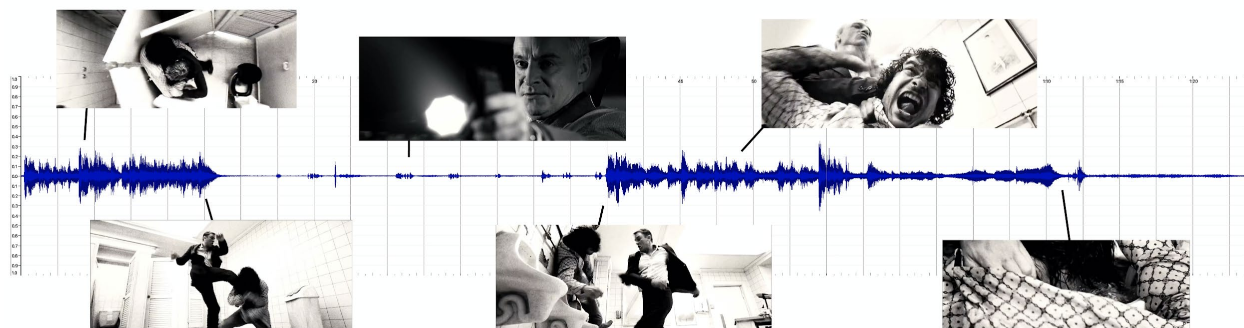

Figure 2. ***Rogue Nation's*** **(Paramount Pictures, 2015) Opera Fight Sequence**

Figure 3. ***Quantum of Solace's*** **(Sony Pictures, 2008) Opera Fight Sequence**

Figure 4. ***John Wick's*** **(Lionsgate, 2014) Red Circle Nightclub Fight Sequence**