Full-Throttle Franchise

The Culture, Business and Politics of Fast & Furious

Edited by

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Researching *Fast & Furious* in the franchise era of Hollywood

Joshua Gulam, Fraser Elliott and Sarah Feinstein

On 5 July 2021, *F9* (2021), the ninth feature in the *Fast Saga* and the tenth in the *Fast & Furious* franchise overall, surpassed $500 million at the worldwide box office, becoming the first Hollywood film to reach this milestone since the Covid-19 pandemic began. That *F9* was the first to do so didn't come as a huge surprise. After all, each *Fast & Furious* film since *Fast Five* (2011) has earned over $500 million globally.[1] What's more, *F9* was one of the few Hollywood blockbusters in the summer of 2021 to pursue a theatre-only release. Whereas other big titles such as *Black Widow* (2021), the latest film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), were released in cinemas and on streaming platforms simultaneously, Universal's *F9* retained a theatrical window of thirty-one days, meaning that audiences had to visit cinemas if they wished to be among the first to see the film (Mendelson 2021).

Going on to gross $720 million off a production budget of $200 million, *F9* was by no means the franchise's biggest hit, its box office total falling a long way short of the $1.5 billion made by *Furious 7* (2017), a film that cost $10 million less to produce. However, in the context of contemporary theatrical exhibition, where cinemas across the globe were still struggling to adapt to the impacts of Covid-19, the box office performance of *F9* was certainly cause for celebration, providing the clearest sign yet that audiences were still eager to see big-budget franchise movies on the big screen. Writing in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Pamela McClintock (2021) argued that the film's $70 million opening weekend represented 'a major victory for Hollywood and theatres', while *Forbes*' Scott Mendelson (2021) speculated that *F9* might help to kick-start a much-needed theatrical recovery, following one of the most difficult periods in the industry's history. Vin Diesel, the film's biggest star and co-producer, offered an equally bullish account of its record-breaking total in his interviews with the trade press.

Speaking at a charity event, he announced that 'Cinema is back!', before going on to praise Universal Pictures, the studio responsible for distributing the *Fast & Furious* films, for having the foresight to delay *F9* until most movie theatres were ready to open up again (Malkin 2021).

How did *Fast & Furious* become so crucial to Hollywood that its box office performance was being talked about as a barometer of the continuing viability of franchise cinema more generally? What can the journey of this series, from a mid-budget crime thriller about street racing to a multibillion-dollar action-spy franchise, tell us about the contemporary film industry? These questions are two of many we explore across this book which positions the development of *Fast & Furious* alongside broader discussions of the 'franchise era' of Hollywood (Fleury, Hartzheim and Mamber 2019). In his book *The Big Picture*, journalist Ben Fritz (2018: xv) explores the accelerated turn towards franchise filmmaking within post-millennium Hollywood, noting how the explosion of branded content that began in the late-2000s marks 'the most meaningful revolution in the movie business since the studio system ended'. Typified by the activities of media conglomerates like Disney, the contemporary franchise often takes the form of a 'cinematic universe'. In this structure, films are just one element in 'a diversified product range', and their narratives are designed to expand into other media such as TV and games (Maltby 2003: 28). This approach builds on the 'synergistic model' that has long been vital to the industry; but what's different in the current era is the way this model has been honed and extended, helping to restore the type of 'stabilisation of creative form and economic growth that [Hollywood] enjoyed during its golden age' (Lomax 2019). As of April 2022, all but one of the top-30 highest-grossing films at the worldwide box office are part of transmedia franchises, almost all released within the last twenty-five years. The effect of this success on the media landscape has been significant: star vehicles have been reformulated to support the continued development of intellectual property (IP), while the stable production of the type of mid-range films that once found a market on home video has been more or less lost, edged out by the increasing consolidation of media production into a small oligarchy of mega-corporations focused on creating expandable 'storyworlds' (Fleury, Hartzheim and Mamber 2019).

Fast & Furious occupies a curious place in this contemporary Hollywood. As of April 2022, it ranks as the eighth highest-grossing film franchise of all time, appearing in the top-10 alongside mega-properties such as *Star Wars* (Disney), *Harry Potter* (Warner Bros.), *James Bond* (MGM) and the MCU (Disney). With a worldwide box office total of $6.6 billion and counting, *Fast & Furious* has

earned more in cinema ticket sales than the likes of *X-Men* ($6 billion), *Lord of the Rings* ($5.8 billion), *Transformers* ($4.8 billion) and *Mission: Impossible* ($3.5 billion). Unsurprisingly, then, it is often cited as an exemplar of current trends, with a development history that reflects 'the way in which blockbuster filmmaking has shifted and evolved in the twenty-first century', according to one *BBC* writer (Campbell 2021). Hyperbolic phrases like those from *IndieWire*'s David Erlich (2017) tell us that the 'history of the *Fast and the Furious* franchise is nothing less than the story of Hollywood filmmaking in the twenty-first century.'

These readings are certainly tempting, and *Fast & Furious* has, in many ways, come to resemble an archetype of the contemporary franchise. In addition to the nine feature films in its core series, the *Fast Saga*, the franchise also includes: a spin-off film, *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw* (2019), with rumours of many more in the works; an animated television series targeted primarily at children, *Fast & Furious: Spy Racers* (2019–21); nine video games, with *Fast & Furious: Crossroads* (2020) being the most recent; a board game, *Fast & Furious: Highway Heist* (2021); a theme park ride at Universal Studios Florida, *Fast & Furious: Supercharged*; and, perhaps most surprisingly, the *Fast & Furious Live* show. The latter of these – an arena show that cost Universal £25 million and only lasted for around six months – gives an indication, however, of how surprising and often ill-conceived these ventures can be. *The Guardian's* Ryan Gilbey (2018) was one of many to note that the bizarre pairing of a franchise based on high-speed, globe-trotting chases and the confines of a small indoor stage, 'just doesn't work'. Critical responses to most other releases have been similarly negative, from the widely derided video games (Ivan 2022), to the theme park ride dubbed as 'Universal's biggest misstep of the decade' (Gregory 2019).

While seemingly representative of the contemporary franchise through its multiple sequels and spinoffs, vast box office returns and transmedia offshoots, a look under the hood of *Fast & Furious* reveals a vehicle whose continued running is surprising, if not miraculous. The haphazard picture painted by these tie-ins (and, to be honest, the films themselves) suggests a franchise whose journey to box office success has, in fact, been much less straightforward than the other properties listed above. Indeed, unlike many of its closest competitors, *Fast & Furious* did not begin as an adaptation of an ongoing IP; as Diesel himself explains, 'this has never been IP with pre-existing comics and books … it's been built from the ground up' (Lawrence 2021b). The first film in the franchise, *The Fast and The Furious* (2001), was adapted from a 1998 *Vibe* magazine article by Kenneth Li ('Racer X'), which detailed the contemporary, illegal street racing

scene in New York. The project was the collaborative brainchild of producer Neal H. Moritz, director Rob Cohen and star Paul Walker. Moritz was drawn to the cinematic potential of the *Vibe* article, noting: 'it was *Point Break*, it was *Donnie Brasco*, with the thematic values of *The Godfather*, which was family, family, family'; and he took the title from a 1954 Roger Corman film, preferring 'The Fast and the Furious' to the then-working title 'Redline' (Lawrence 2021a). Walker assumed the joint lead role in the film as Brian O'Conner, sharing the screen with Diesel's Dom Toretto, in what became an unanticipated success: *The Fast and the Furious* grossed $207 million worldwide, with $145 million of that in domestic receipts.

This initial release, then, did not bring with it an established fanbase, especially as its stars were mostly B-list names at this point; nor did it bring a set of rules for narrative and character possibility, beyond perhaps expectations determined by genre. This is certainly not true for many of the other top-grossing franchises we have referred to thus far: those based on existing moving image properties (*Star Wars*, *Transformers*, *Mission: Impossible*), for example, or that were adapted from popular literature (*Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter*, the MCU). When developing these types of transmedia universes, meticulous forward planning is required to ensure legibility across their interconnected spaces. Indeed, Shawna Kidman (2021) identifies this type of forward planning as one of the crucial differences between the franchise era and the blockbuster period that preceded it. Kidman notes that while sequels were a consistent feature of the Hollywood economy in the 1990s and 2000s (and long before), they were generally 'greenlit in response to a previous film's success'. Instead, today's franchises are 'preconceived': they are 'planned from the beginning as stories that … unfurl across not only multiple films but also multiple media' (Ibid: 8). This approach is most clear in the work of Disney-owned franchises such as the MCU, where each new film is released as part of a broader slate ('phase') that includes numerous other sequels and spin-off TV shows (Flanagan, Livingstone and McKenny 2016).

This meticulous planning could not be further from the unexpected success of 2001's *The Fast and the Furious* and the sequels and spinoffs that followed. In truth, the story of the making of *Fast & Furious* – its surprise success, circuitous plotting, ill-informed transmedia ventures and approach to audience responses – uncovers a franchise that succeeded without a plan, stumbling onto a winning formula by a mixture of chance and opportunism. In charting the histories of *Fast & Furious* across this chapter, we note how this unique trajectory has allowed it to be particularly responsive to industry and audience shifts, in

ways that have not always been possible for more established, long-running franchises, where there's often a requirement to remain true to 'the canon' or source text (Proctor 2019). We see the effects of this time and again over the course of *Fast & Furious*: from its decision to make sequels starring none of the mainline cast, to resurrect characters who were previously killed off, to largely abandon the domestic audience in favour of pursuing international markets such as China, or to perform a mid-franchise rebrand, transitioning into a series of globe-trotting spy capers from *Fast Five* onward.

It's this haphazard development that we're mapping not only here, but more holistically throughout the book. *Fast & Furious* emerged from a space of possibility that was opened up by an initial lack of expectations and forward planning; and it was steered to its current destination through a collection of individuals that included Diesel, Moritz and Universal's executives, as well as director Justin Lin and screenwriter Chris Morgan. Together, these agents made vital choices, demonstrating a degree of foresight (and luck) in the ways that they reacted to key shifts going on within the industry around them. These choices allowed *Fast & Furious* to reach a position where it now competes with the likes of *Star Wars* and the MCU, at least in box office terms. What emerges across these collected chapters is a story of a franchise that succeeded against the odds, defying its humble origins to ascend the ranks of Hollywood's highest-grossing cinematic properties. If anything, the hectic nature of its development forms a key part of the franchise's appeal. Popular criticism of *Fast & Furious* often remarks that the franchise has an off-the-cuff feel, which distinguishes it from more intricately planned and 'corporatized' properties such as the MCU and *Star Wars* (Campbell 2021). In fact, there's a curious symmetry here between the franchise and the street racers-turned-superspies that it depicts, whereby – much like Dom and his ragtag 'family' – *Fast & Furious* exists as something of an outlier within contemporary Hollywood: an outlaw property that has played by its own rules from the start.

Sequel struggles: Stumbling onto a winning formula in the first four films

After the success of *The Fast and the Furious*, Universal began to make plans for a sequel which would develop the relationship between Brian and Dom. However, the studio failed to convince Diesel to sign on, with the star leaving to pursue

other projects after expressing concerns with the script (Lawrence 2021a). Diesel's exit was the first in a series of cast and crew changes that hampered the production, resulting in a film that's less of a sequel and more of a spinoff. Directed by John Singleton, *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003) keeps Walker's hero but shifts the street racing action to Miami and introduces an entirely new supporting cast, including Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges and Tyrese Gibson as Tej Parker and Roman Pearce, respectively. So disconnected is the sequel from *The Fast and the Furious* that Universal produced an accompanying short to try to bridge the gap: included on special edition home releases of the first film, *The Turbo Charged Prelude to 2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003) details Brian's journey to Miami following his escape from the police.

Due to its disjointedness, *2 Fast 2 Furious* failed to build on the success of *The Fast and the Furious*, earning just $20 million more at the box office ($236 million in total), despite a production budget two times that of the previous film. These underwhelming returns, coupled with the lukewarm response from critics and fans, prompted Universal to ditch Walker from their future plans (Kaufman 2015). Left with a property they were keen to continue, but one without its original stars, the studio changed tack once again for the third film, which represented a near-total relaunch of the franchise. While *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006) retains a strong focus on street racing, its main storyline features no pre-existing characters, and it also abandons the cops-and-criminals dynamic that defined the first two films. Set in and around a Tokyo high school, the film follows Lucas Black's Sean, an American teenager who must adapt to a new way of life (and of driving) when he's sent to live with his father in Japan. Dismissed by critics at the time of release, many of whom bemoaned its lack of connection to the earlier films (Tobias 2006), *Tokyo Drift* marked the franchise's lowest point commercially, grossing $158 million from a production budget of $85 million.

Critics and journalists tend to frame *Tokyo Drift* as a curious failure, a pitstop on the franchise's journey to bigger and better things (Hassenger 2015; Thurm 2015). While there's certainly a degree of truth to this reading, it understates the pivotal role that the film played in the franchise's development. Despite its poor domestic returns, for example, *Tokyo Drift* performed strongly overseas, earning $96 million (61 per cent of its total) in the types of markets that would become increasingly important to *Fast & Furious* as it evolved. Thus, the third instalment set up a pattern whereby each *Fast & Furious* film has grossed significantly more internationally than domestically (see Table 1.1). This growing emphasis on overseas markets reflects broader trends within contemporary Hollywood,

Table 1.1 Box office figures for *Fast & Furious* films (Source: Box Office Mojo).

Film	Production budget	Domestic opening weekend	Domestic	International (% of worldwide total)	Worldwide
The Fast and the Furious (2001)	$38 million	$40,089,015	$144,533,925	$62,750,000 (30.3%)	$207,283,925
2 Fast 2 Furious (2003)	$76 million	$50,472,480	$127,154,901	$109,195,760 (46.2%)	$236,350,661
The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift (2006)	$85 million	$23,973,840	$62,514,415	$96,450,195 (60.7%)	$158,964,610
Fast & Furious (2009)	$85 million	$70,950,500	$155,064,265	$205,302,605 (57%)	$360,366,870
Fast Five (2011)	$125 million	$86,198,765	$209,837,675	$416,300,000 (66.5%)	$626,137,675
Fast & Furious 6 (2013)	$160 million	$97,375,245	$238,679,850	$550,001,118 (69.7%)	$788,680,968
Furious 7 (2015)	$190 million	$147,187,040	$353,007,020	$1,162,334,379 (76.7%)	$1,515,341,399
The Fate of the Furious (2017)	$250 million	$98,786,705	$226,008,385	$1,009,996,733 (81.7%)	$1,236,005,118
Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw (2019)	$200 million	$60,038,950	$173,956,935	$585,100,000 (77.1%)	$759,056,935
F9: The Fast Saga (2021)	$200 million	$70,043,165	$173,005,945	$553,223,556 (76.2%)	$726,229,501
Overall total	**$1.409 billion**	**$745,115,705**	**$1,863,960,151**	**$4,750,675,930 (71.8%)**	**$6,614,439,246**

where there has been an accelerated turn towards international audiences since the turn of the millennium. While Hollywood has a long and storied history of targeting revenues overseas (Balio 1996; Krämer 2022; Trumpbour 2008), the key differences of this contemporary formulation begin with the fact that Hollywood is now largely reliant on international markets, targeting them in the first instance. Crucially, Hollywood's key markets in the franchise era are emerging ones, within mostly non-European locations such as China, and these 'foreign investors' hold larger stakes – both aesthetic and economic – than they did previously (Fleury, Hartzheim and Mamber 2019; Song 2018). According to Kailash Koushik and Jennifer M. Proffitt (2019: 28), America's blockbuster productions are now 'global events', designed from the ground up to 'attract global audiences and increase global investments'.

Tokyo Drift also marked key changes behind the scenes, heralding the arrival of two filmmakers – screenwriter Chris Morgan and director Justin Lin – who would help to oversee the franchise's evolution into a multibillion-dollar property. A relative newcomer to the industry, with just one screenwriting credit prior to 2006, Morgan was hired to write *Tokyo Drift* after Universal issued an open call for screenplays (Lawrence 2019). Morgan recognized that the strengths of the first two films revolved around their strong emphasis on action and family; but he also had the ambition to build a deeper franchise mythology, one which incorporated the types of shocking narrative twists that have lent *Fast & Furious* its distinctive 'soap opera' quality (Ibid). In Morgan, Universal found a screenwriter who was able to mould the franchise's disparate elements into a unified whole, and he would proceed to pen every main saga film until *F9*, as well as the spinoff, *Hobbs & Shaw*.

Lin was recruited to direct *Tokyo Drift* by Neal Moritz and then-Universal Pictures Chair Stacey Snider; and, like Morgan, he would play a key role going forward, helming the next three sequels, before taking a two-film hiatus and returning to the franchise for *F9*. Prior to *Tokyo Drift*, Lin was best known for his solo directorial debut *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002), a low-budget crime film which received praise for its 'stereotype-shattering' portrayal of East Asian Americans (Ansen 2002). This 'stereotype-shattering' sensibility was something Lin brought to his first big studio film. With *Tokyo Drift*, the director explicitly sought to improve the problematic representational politics of the franchise, having 'disliked the ways in which … non-white characters were portrayed in the original film'; and he did this by making several changes in pre-production, such as cutting some of the more 'stereotypical elements' from Morgan's initial

script (Beltrán 2013: 93). As part of this process, Lin also took the opportunity to incorporate elements directly from his earlier work including Han Seoul-Oh, a character who originally appears in *Better Luck Tomorrow*. Played by Sung Kang, Han performs a key function within the narrative of *Tokyo Drift*, teaching Lucas Black's hero how to 'drift'. In keeping with Lin's aim, he emerges as a figure deserving of the audience's respect: a skilled and courageous driver, Han is not only willing to risk himself (and his car) to protect his friends, but he also embodies a type of cool and sophistication that's rarely associated with East Asian characters in Hollywood action cinema.

While Morgan brought renewed vigour to the page, devising the type of elaborately plotted action scenarios that would soon become *Fast & Furious*' modus operandi, Lin was responsible for translating that energy and ambition to the big screen. The director has described *Tokyo Drift* as 'a big $80-million indie', referring to the lack of studio interference at the production stage. In fact, due to a series of changes within Universal Pictures at the time, including Stacey Snider's impending move to DreamWorks, Lin had something of a free hand when shaping the film's style and tone (Saito 2014); and he used that freedom to begin to bring 'more scope' and experimentation to the franchise's action scenes. This scope is evident in the Shibuya chase sequence, which takes the drivers through Tokyo's iconic Shibuya Crossing and functions as both the action centrepiece of the film and its dramatic apex – given that it results in Han's (apparent) death.[2] The range of camera movements represents a shift from the flat aesthetic of *2 Fast 2 Furious*, culminating in a shot that performs a 360° motion around the bend as the cars zoom past. In order to capture this moment, Lin's stunt coordinators constructed a camera rig out of a high-speed shifter kart. Capable of reaching speeds of 80 mph, this rig allowed Lin to film the cars from close proximity and at ground level, bringing greater emphasis to the drifting motion that was the film's key selling point (Lin 2006). This visual sensibility, partnered with Morgan's penmanship, laid the groundwork for the types of outrageous action we see within the franchise today.

What Lin and Morgan both recognized was the value of bringing back Diesel. When he first met with Universal about writing *Tokyo Drift*, Morgan pitched a version of the film where Dom travels to Japan to solve a friend's murder; and both he and Lin remained keen to pair the likes of Han with characters from the original film (Lawrence 2019). Thus, together with Universal executive Jeffrey Kirschenbaum, Lin met with Diesel in the months prior to production, where they discussed future possibilities for Dom and the franchise (Saito 2014).

Off the back of these conversations, the actor agreed to make an appearance in the film. Diesel took no pay for *Tokyo Drift*, waiving his salary in exchange for greater creative control over any subsequent sequels, as well as the rights to the Riddick character – a deal that allowed him to co-produce and star in the 2013 film *Riddick* (Mendelson 2015a).

Diesel's appearance in *Tokyo Drift* is brief. In a 90-second sequence at the film's close, Dom reminisces with Sean about the recently deceased Han, before challenging the teenager to a race. However brief this moment is, its significance in the *Fast & Furious* production lore is paramount. With Diesel's return, the centrality of Dom had been re-established, giving Universal an avenue through which they could pursue a more conventional sequel arrangement. In the initial screenings, Dom's cameo proved a huge success with fans. It was the first moment of unanimous consensus across the various stakeholders in its production that there was a franchise worth developing in a less scattered way than it had been prior. Adam Fogelson, then-Chair of Universal Pictures, recalls the cameo fondly: 'That last scene when audiences saw him was explosive. All of us sitting in that test screening in Chatsworth realised the franchise wasn't over. We said, "Let's get started"' (Finke 2011a).

In that moment, Universal had stumbled upon a version of the end-credits stinger, anticipating some of the trends that Disney and Marvel would perfect into the 2010s, with the 'post-credits sequence' functioning as a key audience development tool in the MCU (Flanagan, Livingstone and McKenny 2016: 184). While Dom's arrival actually precedes the credits, it works in much the same fashion, adding a post-resolution tease which sets up the possibility of further sequels and spinoffs. In this sense, it's a realization of the type of 'incompleteness' that Chuck Tryon identifies as pivotal to cinema in the age of media convergence, wherein narrative elements are deliberately left dangling in order 'to foster the vast expansion of the story world of major Hollywood franchises, and by extension their marketability' (Tryon 2009: 19; Jenkins 2006). This 'incompleteness' would subsequently help *Fast & Furious* open up into a more expansive, multi-film narrative – what later became known as 'The *Fast Saga*' (Hedash 2020). In the initial instance, though, it consolidated the series and returned it to its roots, by reintegrating the starting roster of characters.

Fast & Furious (2009, hereinafter *Fast Four*) was the sequel that Universal had originally wanted to make with *2 Fast 2 Furious*. Crafted by *Tokyo Drift*'s creative collaborators of Lin and Morgan, *Fast Four* was developed as a franchise reboot – as indicated by its rather confusing 'Fast & Furious' title – and finely

tuned to follow in the footsteps of *The Fast and the Furious*. It reunites Dom with Brian as buddy protagonists and brings back the supporting cast of Letty (Michelle Rodriguez) and Mia (Jordana Brewster) from the first film. The action scenes take on the visual flair that Lin developed in *Tokyo Drift* while consciously referring to set pieces from the original film, with the gang using the same technique to hijack oil trucks as they did for haulage trucks previously. Likewise, the global sensibility that Lin and Morgan brought to the franchise is maintained, with the heroes moving between the Dominican Republic, Panama, Mexico and the United States over the course of the film.

Most crucially, though, amid all of these important changes, was that *Fast Four* resurrected Han (from the dead) to incorporate him into the 'family' proper. On first viewing, it's a surprise to see Han with Dom and his team in *Fast Four*'s opening heist, given his death at the climax of *Tokyo Drift*. We hear later in the film that he plans to move to Tokyo in the future to avoid arrest, meaning that *Fast Four* takes place before the fateful events of *Tokyo Drift*. In truth, this was not a smooth manoeuvre but a clumsy fudge, which Morgan and Lin have laughed about getting away with: 'And nobody asked!' (Ryan 2017). This rejig had significant repercussions, as Morgan gleefully reminds us: 'the timeline is, you know, it's one-two-four-five-six-three-seven, right?' (Ibid). In resurrecting Han, *Fast & Furious* initiated the strange chronology that has gone on to become a part of the franchise's distinctive appeal.

For a franchise finally able to produce a clean sequel to the first film, this seems an oddly convoluted creative decision to bring to the table, but it captures the off-the-cuff feel which is vital to the series. The timeline shift was created entirely out of the desire to accommodate Han, who was not only beloved by Lin and Morgan but also by the vocal *Fast & Furious* fan base. Dubbed the 'greatest *Fast & Furious* character' by *Buzzfeed*, Han is understood to personify the franchise's progressive representational politics (Willmore 2015). In test screenings for *Tokyo Drift*, Han earned a 100 per cent approval rating, the highest for any character in Universal's history (Saito 2014). This transitional moment established a pattern of resurrecting (sometimes quite literally) fan favourites and characters from earlier films. Indeed, it laid the foundations for a deeper *Fast & Furious* mythology that Universal would seek to unify in its most meaningful form in *Fast & Furious 6* (2013), a film which attempts to tie together all the loose threads from the previous instalments into a unified 'family' roster.

Since *Fast Four*'s sweeping adjustment, Han has remained central to the franchise, appearing in all but two of the subsequent main saga films (we discuss his absence from the seventh and eighth entries below). Moreover, the combination of unusual plot choices and necromancy that brought Han into the family is now key to the *Fast & Furious* brand. These characteristics had their foundations laid in those pivotal moments of *Fast Four* and in the authors of the franchise seeking to mould the films into a unified, sequential series. Such character arcs might not seem as remarkable if the studio had stuck with the tangentially-related sequels approach used in the first three releases, when Universal were unable to secure Diesel's continued involvement. Thus, the seeds for the franchise's later development were sown in the transition between *Tokyo Drift* and *Fast Four*: between Dom's return and the timeline accommodation of Han on screen, and the collaboration of Diesel, Lin and Morgan off screen.

While *Fast Four* was unpopular with critics, it represented a significant upturn in the franchise's commercial fortunes, especially after the disappointing returns of *Tokyo Drift*: the film grossed $360 million worldwide, $205 million of its total coming from locations outside North America. However, if it wasn't for the obstacles surrounding *2 Fast 2 Furious* and *Tokyo Drift*, Universal and the core creative team of Lin, Morgan and Diesel would not have landed on the formula that proved so successful in *Fast Four*. In fact, as Mendelson (2015a) notes, it was precisely 'the "failure" to make a proper sequel for the first eight years', that led the franchise to initiate the 'kind of expanded universe that Hollywood now craves'. By surrendering to what was easy in the moment, the producers of *Fast & Furious* might have sacrificed logical coherence, but in doing so they opened up a strange chronology and a much deeper roster of characters on which to build. And build on it they did, honing the formula into a fine craft in the subsequent sequels and spinoffs. But not before one more pivot: this time at the level of style and genre, with *Fast Five* ushering in new types of spectacular action.

A franchise re-branded: Incorporating new styles of action after *Fast Four*

For the first four films, *Fast & Furious* stuck closely to its genre roots: these were crime pictures set in and around the street racing world, where the stakes rarely extended beyond the lives of the protagonists themselves; and, while each film contained spectacular chases, the action sequences were generally 'grounded in

some sense of … physical reality', meaning the cars and their drivers did things that cars and their drivers 'can actually do' (Suderman 2017). Starting with *Fast Five*, however, the franchise began to shift gears, moving away from a focus on street racing and towards more expansive and high-stakes forms of action. Set in Rio de Janeiro, the fifth film contains just one street race, a four-way contest which functions primarily as a comic interlude. Instead, the spectacular action in *Fast Five* stems from the central heist plot – Dom and his team's plan to steal $100 million from Brazilian drug kingpin, Herman Reyes (Joaquin de Almeida). Although other races are set up and referenced in the film, these take place off screen to allow time for more elaborate and lengthy set pieces such as the climactic robbery, a twelve-minute sequence that features over 200 vehicles and culminates with Dom and Brian using two Dodge Vipers to drag a 9000-lb. bank vault through the streets of Rio. *Fast & Furious 6* continues the pattern established in *Fast Five*. Here, the solitary street race involves Dom and Letty and is more concerned with rekindling their romance than providing thrilling action, while the thirteen-minute finale sees the team tether their vehicles to a cargo plane in order to prevent it from taking off.

The primary motivation for this transition away from street racing was commercial, as the studio behind the franchise sought to broaden its appeal. Speaking with *Deadline* in April 2011, one week after the release of the fifth film, then-Universal Pictures Chair Adam Fogelson (Finke 2011a) explained:

> The question putting *Fast Five* and [*Fast & Furious 6*] together for us was: Can we take it out of being a pure car culture movie and into being a true action franchise in the spirit of those great heist films made 10 or 15 years ago? … if these movies were still about street racing, there was probably a ceiling on how many people would buy tickets. We wanted to see if we could raise it … and make car driving ability just a part of the movie.

After *Fast Four*, then, the franchise sought to up the ante with each new instalment. So, while the cars remained front and centre in the fifth and sixth films, they were tied to more and more elaborate action scenarios and plots, as *Fast & Furious* incorporated elements from not just the heist movie but also the spy thriller subgenre. *Fast & Furious 6* introduced the franchise's first supervillain, for instance, pitting Dom and his team against Luke Evans's Owen Shaw – a former SAS agent who is building a superweapon, 'Nightshade', that can disable the world's power grid. At the close of the film, Dom and his team not only stop Owen Shaw from activating Nightshade, thereby saving the world;

they also successfully reintegrate Letty into the group, helping her to recover from the amnesia that she is shown to have suffered as a result of her apparent death in *Fast Four*.

Between the fifth and sixth films, therefore, *Fast & Furious* underwent a significant evolution, transplanting its street racer heroes into the arenas of international espionage and counterterrorism, while also building a complicated overarching narrative through the frequent use of plot twists – such as the revelation, included in a mid-credits sequence at the end of *Fast & Furious 6*, that Owen Shaw's brother, Deckard (Jason Statham), was responsible for Han's death in *Tokyo Drift*. These plot twists continued the work that began in the third and fourth films, fleshing out character backstories as a way to reward audience investment and produce a deeper mythology. Indeed, *Fast Five* and *Fast & Furious 6* also marked the first consistent use of post-credits scenes within the franchise. Although the original film contains a brief post-credits scene, which shows Dom escaping to Mexico, these only became a recurring feature after *Fast Four*, when the producers began to engage much more systematically with the types of world-building best associated with transmedia mega-properties like the MCU (Flanagan, Livingstone and McKenny 2016).

This evolution paid off commercially. While *Fast Five* and *Fast & Furious 6* cost more to make than the earlier entries, with production budgets over three times that of the first film, they also earned far more at the box office, grossing $626 million and $789 million, respectively. What's more, these two films consolidated the franchise's global appeal, as the shift to over-the-top action and family-based melodrama proved especially popular outside North America. Building on the international success of the third and fourth films, for example, *Fast Five* set records for Universal's biggest opening weekend in multiple overseas markets, including Mexico, Brazil and Russia, and was the seventh highest-grossing film of 2011 worldwide (Finke 2011b; Stewart 2011). Likewise, $550 million (70 per cent) of *Fast & Furious 6*'s total came internationally, with the film placing number one in each of the fifty-nine markets outside of North America where it opened (McClintock 2013). Particularly significant in this regard was the $66 million that *Fast & Furious 6* grossed in Mainland China, a territory that emerged as one of the franchise's major markets in the period after *Fast Four* (see Table 1.1).

Unsurprisingly, Universal continued this bigger is better strategy with the next two sequels, *Furious 7* and *The Fate of the Furious* (2017, hereinafter *Fast Eight*), which cost $190 million and $250 million to produce and grossed

$1.5 billion and $1.2 billion, respectively. The cars in these films, even more so than in the fifth and sixth entries, are 'completely and unapologetically unbound from any real-world understanding of how cars actually work' (Suderman 2017); and the action sequences as a whole make use of a far wider range of vehicles and settings. In *Furious 7*, the first act concludes with a set piece in which the team parachute their cars out of a plane and onto the Caucasus Mountains in Azerbaijan, while a later sequence sees Dom use a supercar to jump between two of Abu Dhabi's tallest skyscrapers (Figure 1.1). *Fast Eight* sought to raise the stakes even higher with the introduction of antagonist Cipher (Charlize Theron), a cyberterrorist who functions as a sort of master villain across the franchise's later films. Early in *Fast Eight*, Cipher is revealed as the architect behind the terrorist plots in the sixth and seventh films; and, here, she forces Dom to betray the team by kidnapping his son, Marcos. Set against the icy backdrop of the Arctic, the film's climactic set piece features a nuclear submarine that's remote-piloted by Theron's villain, one which Dom eventually destroys by redirecting a heat-seeking missile back towards it.

With their growing roster of supervillains and strong emphasis on high-tech weaponry, these later instalments are much closer in style to action-adventure spy franchises such as *James Bond* and *Mission: Impossible*, than the B-movie car and crime pictures from which *Fast & Furious* originally derived. This shift at the level of genre is also reflected in the design of the franchise's cars, which have become more combat-focused in films five through to nine. Writing for *BBC Culture*, Kambole Campbell (2021) observes the sharp contrast between the vehicles in the earlier and later films, noting that while the first three pictures 'set out to convey the allure of street racing' – through the use of bright colours and

Figure 1.1 Abu Dhabi skyscraper jump, *Furious 7* (2015 Universal).

dialogue detailing 'the technical specificity' of the engine parts – the cars from the sixth film onward are 'stripped back, and sometimes even military-looking, in their appearance'. Certain features have remained consistent throughout the franchise, including the dependence on NOS. However, starting with *Fast & Furious 6*, there was a focus on more than just speed, as the franchise moved away from its original, underpinning philosophy of the '10-second car'. Instead, the vehicles in these later sequels are superpowered, kitted out with a growing arsenal of military-grade weapons and gadgets, such as the electromagnets that allow the team to attract and repel other cars in *F9*.

Lisa Purse (2011: 79) points to a 'credibility continuum' in the action film. She notes that within action cinema, 'the relationship of the hero's feats to real-world laws of physics and physiology' differs from film to film, placing anywhere along a continuum 'between highly naturalistic and radically non-naturalistic'. This is evident in *Fast & Furious*, a franchise which becomes progressively less naturalistic as it develops. Indeed, at the same time *Fast & Furious* pivoted towards the spy film, it also began to absorb elements of the nascent superhero movie trend. The first instalment in the MCU, *Iron Man* (2008), was released just three years prior to *Fast Five*, its success leading to an explosion of superhero content that has seen the subgenre dominate the box office in subsequent years (Flanagan, Livingstone and McKenny 2016).[3] The MCU's influence can be seen in the later *Fast & Furious* films, where it's not only the cars that possess superpowers but also the protagonists themselves. A growing proportion of the action after *Fast Four* takes place outside the cars, as fistfights inside abandoned warehouses (*Fast & Furious 6*) or foot chases across rooftops (*Fast Five*). This shift provided more opportunities to incorporate hand-to-hand combat within the franchise, as the team were shown punching and grappling in a manner that far exceeded anything in the earlier films. The gravitation towards spectacular bodily action was partly a result of casting choices, namely, the decision to bring in skilled physical performers such as Dwayne Johnson and Jason Statham. However, these superhuman abilities also extended to the original cast. In *F9*, for example, Dom fights an entire platoon of mercenaries alone, before using his bare hands to tear down a steel bridge.

For a franchise that began in such modest fashion, incorporating this style of action hasn't always been straightforward. Indeed, reviews of the later instalments – even where they express a positive opinion overall – tend to mock the 'ludicrous' idea that the US government would recruit a gang of street racers to prevent terrorist plots (Grierson 2021). One way that *Fast & Furious*

has sought to offset these criticisms is by engaging in a metacommentary on its own absurdity. An example of this is found in *Fast & Furious 6*, when Roman stops to voice his disbelief following the team's first chastening encounter with Owen Shaw: 'This is crazy … So, now we've got cars flying through the air? On some 007-type shit? *This is not what we do!*' The reference to 007 here serves a comic purpose, making light of just how far the franchise and its protagonists have come. This type of knowing humour is central to the brand. On the one hand, it encourages audiences to reflect (like Roman) on what they have just witnessed, to better appreciate the epic scale of *Fast & Furious*' action sequences. On the other, it lends the franchise a sense of playfulness, whereby the films seem to revel in their reputation as 'ludicrous' and over the top. As actor John Cena explains, '*Fast* isn't afraid to occasionally wink [back] at the audience to say, "Thanks for allowing us to do this"' (Lawrence 2021b), a feature that further underlines its offbeat and cultish tone (Mack 2019).

Stardom and performance in *Fast & Furious*

It wasn't just the action that got bigger as the franchise developed; the stars got bigger, too. In *Fast Five*, Dwayne Johnson boarded the cast as Luke Hobbs, a US federal agent who is sent to Rio de Janeiro to arrest Dom and Brian but ends up joining forces with them in the final act. Standing at 6 foot 5 inches tall and weighing 260 lbs., Johnson was a perfect fit for the rebranded *Fast & Furious*, his huge frame embodying the franchise's commitment to more and more spectacular action. Julie Lobalzo Wright (2019: 204–8) argues that Johnson's stardom centres on his 'seemingly impossible' physique, noting how 'even in comparison with other muscle-men, Johnson is enormous'. This is clearly apparent in *Fast Five*, where early scenes underscore his sheer size and power. When Hobbs first appears in Rio, for example, arriving aboard a military cargo plane, he is framed in a two-shot with a much smaller man – the local police chief, João Alameida (Joseph Melendez; Figure 1.2). In the background of the shot, a convoy of armoured cars emerge from the plane, prompting Alameida to ask, 'Is all of this really necessary?' Alameida is referring here to the vast arsenal of high-tech weapons and vehicles Hobbs has brought with him to Rio, and that he will use in his efforts to apprehend the two fugitives. However, as the film cuts to a medium close-up of Hobbs, where his muscular shoulders and square jaw dominate the frame, it's clear that the question applies just as much to the star

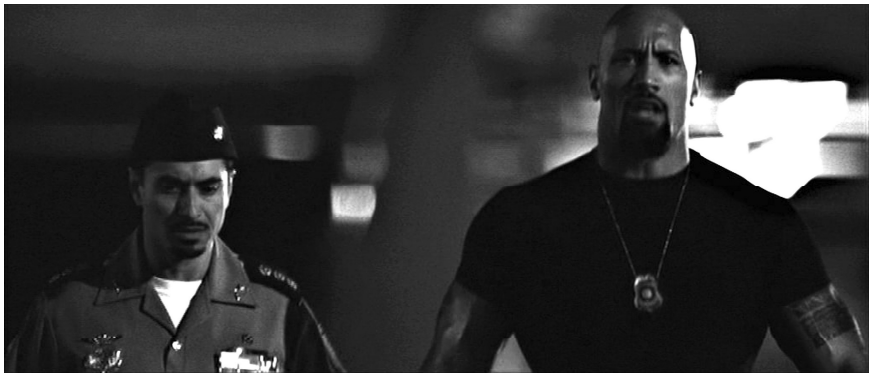

Figure 1.2 Two-shot of Hobbs and Alameida, *Fast Five* (2011 Universal).

himself. Indeed, in the way it offers up Hobbs's body as a source of spectacle – by pairing him with Alameida and drawing a link between his ripped physique and the armoured cars – *Fast Five* suggests that Johnson is precisely what's necessary for the franchise to evolve.

Beyond his physical attributes, Johnson also brought wide name recognition to *Fast & Furious*, in large part due to his earlier career as a World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) star. Prior to *Fast Five*, Johnson had already begun to translate his success as a professional wrestler into theatrical returns, with starring roles in action-adventure blockbusters such as *The Scorpion King* (2002), alongside well-received supporting turns in *Be Cool* (2005) and *The Other Guys* (2010), two crime-comedies which play on his arrogant WWE persona, 'The Rock'. However, it was *Fast & Furious* that elevated Johnson into the Hollywood A-list, with its combination of spectacular action and macho banter providing an ideal vehicle for him to showcase the athleticism and verbal dexterity that were crucial to his popularity in the ring.

Johnson's introduction to the franchise proved to be a hit. Grossing $626 million worldwide, *Fast Five* more than doubled the box office of the previous film, with over $400 million of that total coming from international markets. Moreover, unlike the much-maligned *Fast Four*, the fifth film received generally positive reviews (Eichler 2011), while numerous critics also singled out Johnson for praise. Writing in *Variety*, Robert Koehler (2011) noted how Johnson brought 'a welcome injection of tough-guy vigour' to the franchise, identifying his muscular performance as a 'perfect counter to the easy bond' between the rest of the cast. By assuming the role of Hobbs, then, Johnson established himself as a major box office draw, someone whose larger-than-life

persona appealed to a wide range of audiences both at home and abroad. Indeed, it was in the period immediately after *Fast Five* – when Johnson appeared in a string of lucrative sequels including *Fast & Furious 6*, *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island* (2012), and *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* (2013) – that he earned the nickname 'franchise Viagra', a reference to his capacity to reinvigorate cinematic properties by joining them mid-stream (Mendelson 2015b).

Following the success of the fifth film, *Fast & Furious* continued to recruit big-name talent as a way to broaden its appeal. In *Fast & Furious 6*, British actor Jason Statham made his first appearance as Deckard Shaw, a rogue MI6 agent and brother of Owen Shaw. Statham's character would go on to play a major role in the next two sequels: after a mid-credits cameo in the sixth film, Shaw serves as the primary antagonist of *Furious 7*, before teaming up with Dom and the others in *Fast Eight*. Shaw follows a very similar trajectory to Hobbs in this regard, transitioning from adversary to ally in the space of just two films; and his redemption – after appearing to kill Han – once again illustrates the kind of 'unusual, unexpected choices' for which *Fast & Furious* has become known (Mack 2019: 66).

By the time he joined the franchise in 2013, Statham was already a major action star, having appeared in popular films such as *Crank* (2006) and *The Expendables* (2010). Although these early Statham films earned less than his subsequent work on *Fast & Furious*, each was a success in its own right, leading to one or more sequels in which the actor also starred. In casting Statham, therefore, *Fast & Furious* was gaining an international star with a proven track record in the action genre as well as his own loyal fan base, something that contributed significantly to the box office performance of the seventh and eighth films. *Fast Eight*, for example, was specifically marketed as another opportunity to see Statham square off against Johnson, following the positive response to their fight at the start of *Furious 7* (Heritage 2016). In this instance, the trailers not only teased the friction (and spectacular brawls) generated by Shaw's unlikely addition to the team, but also the odd-couple chemistry between Johnson and Statham, which would form the basis of their own 2019 spinoff, *Hobbs & Shaw*.

With the introduction of Johnson and Statham, and other prominent actors such as Charlize Theron, the cast of *Fast & Furious* 'moved from B-list forgettable to formidable' (Thurm 2015). Crucially, this growing emphasis on stardom appears to run up against broader Hollywood trends. Fritz (2018) suggests that 'the dawn of the franchise era' has coincided with a downturn in star power, noting how the involvement of A-list talent no longer provides the

same guarantee of box office success that it did in the early 2000s and before. Fritz's argument echoes wider observations about the emergence of a character-centric economy in post-millennium Hollywood. According to scholars Fleury, Hartzheim and Mamber (2019: 10), for example, 'characters, rather than stars, now dominate the box office', a shift that has led the major studios to redirect much of the money they once spent on star vehicles into developing pre-existing properties and brands. Summarizing these changes, Fritz (2018: 84–5) writes: 'Today, no person has the box-office track record that [Tom] Cruise once did, and it's hard to imagine that anyone will again. But Marvel Studios does. Harry Potter does. Fast & Furious does.'

The accounts of these scholars and journalists are persuasive in showing that for most of Hollywood's mega-franchises, iconic characters are important, but the actors playing them are not. However, far less persuasive is Fritz's idea that *Fast & Furious* fits neatly within this paradigm. Indeed, while other franchises such as *Spider-Man* and *Batman* have enjoyed success when recasting their central characters, it's hard to imagine the same strategy working for *Fast & Furious* – because Dom, Letty, Hobbs and Shaw are so intimately tied to the star images of Diesel, Rodriguez, Johnson and Statham, respectively. Again, this speaks to the unusual nature of the franchise: the fact that *Fast & Furious* wasn't adapted from a long-established IP, and that the vast majority of its revenue still derives overwhelmingly from box office receipts and home video sales. In contrast to the likes of Spider-Man and Batman, then, these *Fast & Furious* characters have a limited presence beyond the actors who currently play them on the big screen, despite recent efforts to expand the franchise into theme park rides and TV shows. Framed against the backdrop of the franchise era, *Fast & Furious* emerges as something of an anachronism, recalling earlier decades of Hollywood filmmaking in its strong emphasis on stardom, including the way in which it became more star-driven during a period when Hollywood was transitioning to a character-centric model.

For all the high-profile additions to the later films, it's an original cast member, Diesel, who still looms largest within the franchise. Indeed, it's not possible to explore the importance of stardom to *Fast & Furious* without looking closely at Diesel's contributions on-screen and off. According to reports, Diesel was pivotal in shaping the style of the films from the outset (Lawrence 2021a), and he sought to exert further control over the franchise when he made a full return for the fourth film. The star did this by combining his acting with a behind-the-scenes role. Via One Race, the company he established in 1995, Diesel has

co-produced each of the *Fast Saga* films since *Fast Four*; and it's a role in which he is said to consult on everything from story structure and the soundtrack, to casting and costume choices (Lin 2009). As such, the actor-producer is often credited with overseeing the franchise's evolution into a multibillion-dollar property (Lawrence 2021b), an idea which he himself has cultivated by claiming the title of 'saga visionary' in interviews (Acuna 2019).

Authorship in a collaborative medium such as film is notoriously difficult to ascertain. This is particularly true in the case of big-budget franchise pictures which are financed by multimedia conglomerates for the purpose of realizing profits in several divisions of the company. In these instances, authorship becomes even more dispersed, spread out across a vast number of individuals working on many different media platforms (Johnson 2012; Kidman 2021). Given the complex nature of authorship in franchise cinema, we certainly don't want to suggest that Diesel is the primary force behind *Fast & Furious*: that argument would ignore the crucial work undertaken not only by the likes of Lin, Morgan and Diesel's fellow cast members, but also by below-the-line crew such as the stunt drivers and coordinators.[4] However, it's clear from the examples above that the actor wields a degree of influence over a major franchise which is largely unrivalled in post-millennium Hollywood (or, at least, Diesel performs such influence through the leverage of his star persona). Indeed, in an era where star power has declined significantly, Diesel is distinctive for the way in which he has helped to steer *Fast & Furious* for such a sustained period of time.

The star has managed to achieve this level of influence through his savvy use of social media. Like Johnson, Diesel is among the most-followed Hollywood actors on Facebook and Instagram, and he regularly uses these platforms to communicate directly with the franchise's fans, a group he addresses as his '*Fast* family'. During pre-production on the tenth film, for example, the actor posted an update to his 80 million Instagram followers, reminding them: 'you all have been a part of this journey. You all have been a part of this family … I hope to make you proud' (Diesel 2022). Across these posts, Diesel emerges as the franchise's custodian, rather than its author: someone who works for the fans, drawing on their feedback and suggestions to deliver what's best for 'the family'. In this sense, he offers an example of what Suzanne Scott (2012: 44) terms the 'fanboy auteur', a mode of authorship where the filmmaker presents themselves as 'simultaneously one of "us" and one of "them"'. Diesel's social media posts are one element within a wider corporate strategy to generate strong audience

investment in the franchise. This is something we turn to in the next section, when we consider the ways in which *Fast & Furious* has positioned itself as a fan-driven franchise.

'Join the *Fast* Family': *Fast & Furious* as a fan-driven franchise

In March 2020, *F9* was among the first Hollywood blockbusters to be postponed because of Covid-19, its release date moving from May 2020 to spring the next year. When announcing the delay, Universal Pictures issued a lengthy press release addressed to the franchise's fans via their Facebook page:

> To our family of Fast fans everywhere, We feel all the love and the anticipation you have for the next chapter in our saga. That's why it's especially tough to let you know that we have to move the release date of the film. It's become clear that it won't be possible for all our fans around the world to see the film this May. We are moving the global release date to April 2021, with North America opening on April 2. While we know there is disappointment in having to wait a little longer, this move is made with the safety of everyone as our foremost consideration. Moving will allow our global family to experience our new chapter together. We'll see you next spring. Much love, Your Fast Family. (The Fast Saga 2020)

Circulated on social media, what stands out most from this statement is its repeated use of the phrase 'family' and its assurance that fans of the franchise will understand and accept the delay as a gesture of solidarity with their 'global family' members. Indicative of the international reach of the franchise, these repeated references to ideas of a global family have been central to *Fast & Furious*' success at cultivating a large, loyal fan base for its films.

Throughout this introduction we have alluded to the use of 'family' as an umbrella term within the films used for the group of Dom and his accomplices. This term functions well as a semantic manoeuvre that allows each film to smooth over the shady morality of its protagonists' actions and accommodate characters (living, dead or resurrected) who flip-flop across lines of 'good' and 'evil' with abandon. However, moving beyond its prominence within the films themselves, we can see through strategies like this Facebook post how 'family' also serves a larger purpose in terms of audience development: it is a concept used to cultivate a large and loyal fan base, engendering modes of appreciation for *Fast & Furious*

that mark the franchise as somewhat distinct from its closest competitors. These modes are multifaceted – at once sincere and ironic, intimate but distanced – and they work to maintain a relationship with audiences in which fans are granted agency in dictating the direction of the characters and their world.

As the March 2020 Facebook post reminds us, this family is a broad church which takes in viewers from a variety of ethnic, class and geographic groups. Excluding the first two releases, each film in the franchise has made more money outside of North America, with both *Furious 7* and *Fast Eight* breaking box office records for international releases in China and elsewhere (Frater 2017). Within the limited *Fast & Furious* scholarship that currently exists, Mary Beltrán (2005, 2013) has explored the relationship between the franchise's audiences and the demographically diverse cast which make up the on-screen family. For Beltrán (2005: 50), *Fast & Furious* is the pinnacle of the 'multiculti' film which embodies through its casting – and Diesel as a star – contemporary concerns in the United States towards race relations: 'with respect to the nation's burgeoning cultural creolization and multiethnic population'. The statistics back up Beltrán's assessment: the theatrical audience for *F9* in the US was made up of 37 per cent Latino, 35 per cent Caucasian, 16 per cent Black, 8 per cent Asian and 4 per cent 'Native American/Other' audiences (McClintock 2021). This signifies the wide-ranging, multi-demographic appeal that has been central to *Fast & Furious* since its inception, and which is articulated through the framework of 'family', with all of its attendant ideas of unconditional love and support. There is an ethics of inclusivity on display throughout *Fast & Furious,* from its rewriting of the initial *Vibe* magazine article adaptation to include better representation of the Latinx community of Los Angeles, to Lin's corrective work on *Tokyo Drift* and its portrayal of East Asian (and Asian American) characters. This approach has helped the franchise navigate, and to some extent pre-empt, the specific character of the turn to global audiences which Hollywood has undertaken in the last decade.

It helps that, within the diegetic world of *Fast & Furious*, 'family' is a wholly positive concept: it signifies a moral code that favours notions of loyalty, respect and camaraderie over those of legality, respectability and competition. As such, it is a welcoming concept that Universal (and Diesel in particular) have managed to successfully leverage in the promotion and marketing of the films. We see this in Diesel's mediation between audiences and Universal through his role of the 'fanboy auteur', discussed above, but also through more formal material shared by the studio itself: when one goes to the official website for the franchise to join

its mailing list, for example, they are invited to 'Join the *Fast* Family' rather than simply 'sign up'. Indeed, when asked how *F9* overcame the obstacle of a twelve-month delay caused by a global pandemic, Universal's President of Domestic Distribution Jim Orr claimed that it was because 'fans consider themselves to be family' (McClintock 2021). It appears, as with many of us during the Covid-19 pandemic, reuniting with family was worth the risks of transmission.

A vital part of this sense of familiarity believed to be felt by audiences of *Fast & Furious* is the sense of ownership it engenders; and fans have good reason to believe their proximity to the franchise is genuine and not just empty marketing platitudes from a Hollywood studio. This is a franchise which has, on more than one occasion, responded directly to fan suggestions in surprising ways, at the often alarming cost of narrative coherence and believability. We see this most clearly in the franchise's treatment of Sung Kang's character, Han, whose circuitous inclusion in the *Fast Saga* shows how reactively the series has worked to accommodate fan suggestion or, in this case, outrage (Acuna 2021). Han, in particular, shows that this is a unique approach through which *Fast & Furious* interacts with its audiences. We have, earlier in this introduction, traced Han's narrative arc (at the time of writing): from his appearance and 'death' in *Tokyo Drift*, through a timeline rejig to support his appearances between the fourth and sixth films, to his resurrection in *F9*. We noted that this was related to Han's rare popularity with audiences, shown by his 100 per cent approval rating at test screenings for *Tokyo Drift*. But this popularity only translated into on-screen changes thanks to Universal's negotiation with a large, vocal group of fans who felt betrayed by the decision to have Han's (then-suspected) murderer, Deckard Shaw, join the core 'family' at the end of *Fast Eight*.

Following the release of *Fast Eight*, a social media movement sprang up demanding 'Justice for Han', claiming that Shaw's rushed redemption pointed to a new 'hypocrisy' in the *Fast Saga* and a sign that the franchise was losing touch with the emotional core that many were invested in (Dumaraog 2021). The movement called for retribution for Shaw, rather than redemption, which they would see as *Fast & Furious* returning to its roots: pulling back from the spurious unravelling of its core themes that occurred as the franchise grew in scale, scope and popularity. Ever keen to accommodate fan requests – especially when they line up with desires of Lin and the creative team – Han was resurrected, again, for *F9*. In this film, we learn that Han did *not* die in Tokyo, actually, but rather, his 'death' was orchestrated by government agent Mr Nobody (Kurt Russell) as a means of getting him out of the spotlight to undertake a secret mission. As we

write this, Han is alive and well on the precipice of *Fast X* and the exhaustingly complex, haphazard and unpredictable plot lines of *Fast & Furious* are common knowledge.

In addition to the #JusticeForHan social media campaign, Lin has said that when he returned to the franchise to direct *F9* after a six-year hiatus, he spoke to numerous audiences who were confused by Han's suspected death at the hands of Shaw. They were particularly upset at the fact that Universal made the decision without Lin's involvement or approval during his absence (Acuna 2021). For Lin, these vocal fans were directly to thank for Han's return to the films, suggesting that if the character's death 'was handled in a way that didn't result in outrage from the fans', then 'it would have been "appropriate" to leave Han dead' (Ibid). The return of Han – in both instances – was driven by this inclination to work with the requests and desires of the franchise's most vocal fans. While his is the most notorious, Han's character arc is not the only one to be shaped this way: Letty was similarly resurrected after her 'death' in *Fast Four*, thanks to fans who lobbied for the change on Diesel's Facebook page (Nobel 2019); and Diesel has claimed that *both* Johnson and Statham were brought into the franchise after he asked fans which actors they'd most like to see join the 'family' (Robinson 2016).

These latter examples again point towards Diesel's important role as broker between the *Fast* fandom and its creatives. While Diesel believes this is just how filmmaking works in the twenty-first century – 'I always say Clark Gable would have made a sequel to *Gone with the Wind* if he had a Facebook page' (Nobel 2019) – the truth is that this is quite specific to *Fast & Furious*. Though there may have been creative decisions made at Disney for, say, the direction of *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) following a negative fan reaction to *The Last Jedi* (2017), few other franchises appear to have responded so directly and collaboratively to fan suggestions as *Fast & Furious*, or with such seismic consequences for their narrative coherence (see Santos and Wilkinson 2019). In this way, *Fast & Furious* cultivates a different kind of shared authorship which is generally perceived as collaborative – instead of combative – with its most invested fans. Like the seemingly slapdash nature of the franchise's development, these interactions with audiences and fans (and critics within them) are vital. They take Scott's (2012) considerations of the 'fanboy auteur' to the extreme, cementing the perception within its broad and heterogeneous fan base that *Fast & Furious* is more 'authentic' (less managed), organic and endearingly chaotic than other franchises.

This carves out a useful niche for *Fast & Furious* in the contemporary franchise era. While successful and hegemonic (enjoying near-total dominance over the marketplace), the explosion of branded franchise content in post-milennium Hollywood also has the potential to engender cynicism within the movie-going public – a so-called 'franchise fatigue' (Proctor 2019: 321). Being able to claim some kind of 'authenticity' in this space is a valuable, distinguishing asset. As Shawna Kidman (2021: 9) explores, a 'sense of integrity in the texts' is exactly what audiences seek out when IP expand through sequels and spinoffs and spread out across multiple media. This sense of integrity is something that *Fast & Furious* cultivates by positioning itself as a fan-driven and cultish property, one which plays by its own rules (just like Dom and his 'family' do in the films). For Kidman (2021: 10), other studios have tried to navigate this space through the development of 'corporate auteurism', where notions of authorship have elevated beyond individual directors and toward executives, producers and brands like the MCU itself. Universal, however, are doing the opposite, working to undercut the visible role of corporate structures through these marketing strategies which, instead, direct attention to the human messiness of the *Fast Saga* 'family'. To this end, Michael Moses, Universal's Co-President for Marketing, encourages the stars to share photos directly from the film sets which would normally be shrouded in secrecy. The aim here is to 'remove the studio filter as much as possible' because he views it to make for more 'authentic and organic interaction with fans' (Barnes 2013).

Framed in this fashion, 'family' becomes a focal point around which both producer and viewer energies appear to coalesce harmoniously. This returns us again to what's different about *Fast & Furious* in the current space. 'Organic' and 'authentic' are not necessarily words we would associate with the well-oiled and exhaustively-planned world of the contemporary franchise, where Disney's ten-year road maps and the MCU's meticulously prepared 'phases' are commonplace. Yet, through its consistent use of family within the films and extratextually, *Fast & Furious* has crafted such an identity, distinguishing itself in the crowded marketplace of contemporary franchises. Bringing a critical eye to this employment of 'family' by the authorial voices of *Fast & Furious* functions as a kind of code breaker. It provides a way into understanding the franchise and its idiosyncrasies in all their complexity, something that the contributors to this book explore.

About this book

Full-Throttle Franchise is the first book to offer an in-depth analysis of *Fast & Furious*, bringing together a range of scholars to explore the key elements we have set up in this introductory chapter, in addition to many more. Despite its commercial success and wide cultural reach, surprisingly little has been written about *Fast & Furious* from an academic perspective. Mary Beltrán (2005, 2013) has produced the most significant body of work in this regard, publishing two insightful studies of the early films' racial politics – both of which form a key reference point for the chapters that follow. What other scholarship there is can be found in the form of short journal articles, such as Peter Turner's (2019) valuable analysis of the social media posts made by the franchise's actors, or book chapters that refer to *Fast & Furious* as part of broader studies of product placement (Schulze 2022), and the careers of particular stars (Mack 2019; Thomas 2019).[5] It is our hope that *Full-Throttle Franchise* will contribute to this small but important body of literature.

Full-Throttle Franchise contains twelve chapters, each of which examines core aspects of *Fast & Furious*, from the style of the films' action sequences and how they communicate on an ideological level, to the franchise's transmedia offshoots and its links to other prominent entertainment brands. The broader purpose of the book is to introduce readers to a range of perspectives on the franchise and its impact, with a particular focus on how *Fast & Furious* is both representative of wider cultural and industrial forces and curiously out of step with them, too. It was never going to be possible for one book to cover every element of the franchise's strange journey. However, in the chapters assembled here, we hope to have taken a first step towards opening up a wider critical dialogue about what makes *Fast & Furious* so unusual within the franchise era, as well as some of the key reasons behind its enduring popularity.

The first two chapters in the collection explore aesthetic issues (or '*Fast*-thetics'), especially as they relate the franchise's trademark action sequences. Firstly, Lennart Soberon (Chapter 2) combines quantitative and qualitative methods to offer a longitudinal analysis of action sequences in the first nine *Fast & Furious* films, showing some of the key ways in which these sequences have evolved over the course of the franchise's twenty-year history. In Chapter 3, Naja Later explores the technique of temporal deferral in the films' street racing scenes. Drawing on Tom Gunning's 'cinema of attractions', Later extends their

analysis to consider how – through the use of digital effects to render the deceased actor Paul Walker in *Furious 7* – the franchise expands and plays with conventional ideas of time, both aesthetically and narratively.

The next five chapters turn towards broad issues of representation and ideology, paying particular attention to the way in which the films intersect with dominant ideas of race, gender and sexuality. In Chapter 4, Pete Jones and Joshua Gulam explore the franchise's reputation as a model of blockbuster diversity, whereby the films have been praised for utilizing actors and directors from many different racial and ethnic groups. Here, Jones and Gulam develop a 'critical quantitative approach' to analysing race in popular Hollywood cinema, one which allows them to not only measure the *Fast Saga*'s level of diversity against that of other contemporary blockbusters, but to unpack the franchise's deeper racial politics as it appears in the texts. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson (Chapter 5) also look at race in their chapter on Vin Diesel as 'an intersectional auteur'. Focusing on his short film *Los Bandoleros* (2009), produced as a lead-in to *Fast Four*, they argue that Diesel offers up a new perspective on male action heroism through his performance as Dom, which combines traditional ideas of masculinity with a strong emphasis on familial bonding and cooperative action.

Building on Reinhard and Olson, the following three chapters take a deep dive into notions of gender within *Fast & Furious*, by both detailing and critiquing its hyper-masculine logic and themes. Aaron Hunter (Chapter 6) starts us off with a detailed discussion of the central bromance between Dom and Brian. Here, Hunter notes that, despite their close friendship, the pair very rarely touch or embrace; and he considers what this means in terms of the franchise's ambivalent ideas around male affection and sexuality. In Chapter 7, Bianca Batti focuses on the franchise's themes of family, considering how the films re-centre heteronormative familial frameworks through the paternalistic figure of Dom. As part of this discussion, Batti also offers a valuable insight into some of the franchise's key female characters, noting the way in which the potentially transgressive elements of Mia, Elena and Letty are undermined by their transition into various forms of motherhood. Rebecca Feasey (Chapter 8) rounds off this mini-section with a detailed examination of the hierarchy of masculinity that exists within the films. Here, Feasey considers the tensions generated by performing male heroism within the ensemble action film, focusing on the revelation that stars such as Diesel, Johnson and Statham have 'no loss' clauses in their contracts which prevent their characters from losing fights.

The remaining chapters move beyond the big screen to examine the franchise's extratextual dimensions and transmedia offshoots. In Chapter 9, Jackie Raphael and Celia Lam examine the way that the on-screen bromance between Brian and Dom is continued off screen in the promotional and publicity work of Diesel. Drawing on various frameworks from celebrity studies, they examine the way in which Diesel legitimates his bromance with Walker via social media and interviews, with a particular focus on how this process has continued after Walker's death. Fraser Elliott, in Chapter 10, looks at the franchise's success internationally, focusing on its box office performance within Mainland China. Framing his analysis in terms of the growing importance of the Chinese market for Hollywood more generally, Elliott notes how, from the fifth film onward, *Fast & Furious* has been specifically geared towards maximizing its profits in Mainland China.

This theme of industry and adaptation continues with the next two chapters. In Chapter 11, Sam Summers examines one of the films' transmedia offshoots – the DreamWorks Animation TV show, *Fast & Furious: Spy Racers*. Framing his analysis against a much longer history of film-to-TV animated adaptations, Summers considers the various ways in which *Spy Racers* adapts the films' core styles and themes 'in order to satisfy, and take advantage of, the unique conditions of television, animation, and children's media'. Finally, in Chapter 12, Robert Watts addresses the commonalities and convergences that the franchise shares with WWE, noting the multiple times in which WWE stars have crossed over into the world of *Fast & Furious*. Crucial here is Dwayne Johnson as Hobbs. Through close analysis of films such as *Hobbs & Shaw*, Watts argues that Johnson's performances in the franchise draw heavily on his earlier career as a professional wrestler, to the point where he directly reproduces 'signature wrestling moves and taunts' within the action sequences. Taken together, these twelve chapters will help to fill an important gap in scholarship on contemporary Hollywood cinema, whereby one of the biggest movie franchises of the last twenty years has been largely ignored.

Notes

1 Throughout this book, box office is listed in US dollars, and, unless otherwise stated, all figures are sourced from Box Office Mojo (n.d.).

2 Prohibited from filming in central Tokyo, Lin and his team recreated Shibuya Crossing in a car park in Burbank, CA (Lin 2006).

3 The recent growth of the superhero movie can also be viewed as part of a larger trend where, from the late-1970s onwards, most of Hollywood's biggest hits have been sci-fi and/or fantasy pictures with a 'special emphasis on … global threats and devastation' (Krämer 2022: 571).

4 Stunt coordinators and drivers such as Terry Leonard and Rhys Millen were pivotal to the action sequences in *Tokyo Drift*, for instance, helping to realize the trademark drifting sequences through both their driving expertise and their development of specialist camera rigs (Lin 2006).

5 At the time of writing, though, several other pieces of work are in progress that take *Fast & Furious* as a point of focus, including book chapters on the representation of the US-Mexico border in *Fast Four* (Llamas-Rodriguez, forthcoming) and a journal special issue on the *Fast Saga* (Boyd, forthcoming).

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